

Christmas crackers

Get ahead of the game with festive cruises for this year and next, writes Jane Archer

FESTIVE CRUISES

It's that time of year you either love or hate: yes, the countdown to the festive season has begun. The TV is full of perfume ads, families are worrying over what size turkey to order and shops are blasting Slade out to remind everyone – as if we could forget – that it's Christmas.

It doesn't have to be like that. Whether clients are signed-up members of the bah humbug brigade or Wizzard fans who really do wish it could be Christmas every day, there is a cruise to suit.

Pick the right itinerary and the former can escape the madness and simply enjoy a holiday afloat, while the latter can go full-on festive, with familiar Christmas traditions from the likes of Marella Cruises and P&O Cruises. Either way, they can enjoy roast turkey, Christmas pudding, mince pies, carol singing and even a visit from Santa – but with no cooking, cleaning or washing-up to worry about, because the crew do it all.

Festive cruises are most popular with couples and those travelling alone; Riviera Travel even has new solo Christmas markets river cruises on the Danube and Rhine this year. But they also appeal to families, particularly those with grown-up offspring, who can all get time off together over the holiday.

MARKET FORCES

For most people, Christmas cruises mean visits to the festive markets that open across the continent – most famously in Germany and Austria – in late November.

These are colourful affairs packed with wooden chalets and decorated with twinkly lights, which come alive as the light fades, selling everything from handmade Christmas decorations and scented candles to spiced gingerbread. There are also baked potatoes, roasted chestnuts, beer and plenty of glühwein to help keep the spirits up.

A few markets remain open until the new year, but most close on December 23, so if that's the focus, clients need to choose a Christmas markets cruise – either a river or no-fly ocean cruise from the UK – rather than a sailing over the festive period.

CHRISTMAS EVERY DAY

If a getaway over Christmas or New Year's Eve – or both – is calling, the choice is huge. Clients can stick with Europe's rivers, which have a festive flavour even if the markets are shut because most lines have decorated trees and festive flourishes on board, and the weather is chilly enough to feel like winter.

These cruises almost all have a port call on Christmas Day, with tours for those who want them, so passengers can spend time ashore. Shops are shut, but there are always one or two cafes or restaurants open, especially in the cities.

Alternatively, opt for an ocean voyage, which can go in search of sun – in the Caribbean, Asia or Canary Islands – or snow, with seasonal sailings in northern Europe. Saga Cruises has a 16-night Festive Traditions of Scandinavia cruise round-trip that overnights in Copenhagen on New Year's Eve so passengers can join the local celebrations welcoming in 2027. The cruise departs from Portsmouth on *Spirit of Adventure* on December 22, 2026, from £6,722.

For a guaranteed white Christmas, this is also the season for Antarctic expeditions. Scenic has a 16-day voyage to Antarctica in December 2027 from £19,262 with flights. "Our guests tend to be 50-plus, are 'over' the same type of Christmas celebrations every year and want something different," says Scenic's head of sales, Jonathan Davies. ➔

Budapest, Hungary

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Kurka Gerd Corey

FESTIVE CRUISES



“

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FESTIVE FIRSTS

Festive river cruises have traditionally focused on the Rhine and Danube, which are still the most popular waterways, but a few lines are now branching out. CroisiEurope has Christmas cruises on the Elbe from Prague to Berlin and New Year voyages on the Guadalquivir in Spain and the Venice Lagoon.

New for 2025, Uniworld River Cruises has resurrected its seven-night

Magical Parisian Holiday Christmas markets cruises on the Seine that first ran pre-Covid. Riviera Travel has five-day Magical Paris & Festive Seine cruises sailing round-trip from the French capital that will be new in December 2026.

Starting this year, AmaWaterways has a range of Festive Delights cruises in Bordeaux in November and December and over Christmas on the Douro. “[These] are great for clients who want to get into the Christmas spirit, but are looking for an itinerary that allows them to explore more of the destinations they visit along the way,” says sales director Andrea Stafford.

Agent advice



Rachel Liversidge,
assistant store manager,
Tui Holiday Store, The Moor, Sheffield

“If you have customers who enjoy visiting Christmas markets, recommend a river cruise. One five-night itinerary I suggested last year visited a different market each day; my clients loved it so much, they’ve already rebooked for this year. Asking the right questions can uncover the perfect holiday experience.”

ABOVE: P&O Cruises’ *Iona* decorated for the festive season; CroisiEurope’s *La Belle de Cadix* on the Guadalquivir in Spain

PICTURE: P&O Cruises/Mark Bolton Photography

LIMITED SPACE

Whatever appeals, clients need to book early because space is limited, particularly on Christmas sailings. At the time of going to press, there was availability on Marella Cruises’ Canary Islands sailings, Tui River Cruises’ Rhine and Danube departures and Viking’s Danube Christmas Markets trips – but 2026 dates were already filling up, so clients who have missed out this year should nab their spots now for 2026.

Cunard associate vice-president of sales UK and EMEA, Iain Baillie, said: “We encourage guests to book early because festive voyages are among the most popular in our calendar and we wouldn’t want anyone to miss out.” ●