

Cruise calendar

From springtime sailings through Dutch bulbfields to winter sun on the water, there's a river cruise for every season, says **Jeannine Williamson**

A river cruise isn't just for Christmas (markets) nor, for that matter, is it just a summer fling. Whether you're thinking of Europe's most popular waterways or exotic far-flung places, there's a river cruise destination to sell year-round.

While the UK is shivering, passengers can bask in welcome sunshine on the Mekong or Nile, and as the year moves through spring, summer and autumn, there are places that come into their own in every month. From the purple sweep of lavender fields in Provence, wine festivals on the Rhine or the kaleidoscope of fall foliage across the pond, seasonal river cruises offer natural beauty, cultural discoveries and unforgettable experiences. Here are the best river cruise destinations for you to suggest to your clients throughout the year.

JANUARY: MEKONG

Coinciding with the middle of the dry season, January is a sweet spot for sailing through Vietnam and Cambodia on southeast Asia's largest river. The warm weather is perfect for exploring temples and riverside villages and relaxing on deck as the ship sails through timeless landscapes of paddy fields. Rising at dawn to watch the sun come up over Angkor Wat, the world's largest religious complex, is a must-do experience. New ships to look out for are *AmaMaya*, *AmaWaterways'* second vessel on the Mekong, launching this autumn, and *Riviera Alba*, *Riviera Travel's* first ship outside Europe, debuting in 2027.

FEBRUARY: NILE

The long-awaited Grand Egyptian Museum has finally opened its doors and is a compelling reason to visit Cairo. All mainstream river cruises from Luxor to Aswan feature a Cairo stay to see the museum – with the entire contents of Tutankhamun's tomb displayed together for the first time – and the wonders of the Pyramids and Sphinx. Avoiding the summer heat, February is pleasantly warm and ideal for visiting the Valley of the Kings, the burial ground of pharaohs, and the vast temple complex of Karnak. Viking expands its Egyptian fleet this year with the addition of *Viking Ptah* and *Viking Sekhmet*, while *Travelmarvel* launches *Travelmarvel Sirius*.

MARCH: DANUBE

With budding spring scenery and fewer crowds, March is a particularly pretty time to sail the Danube, with the added bonus of shoulder-season pricing. From late March to early April, blossoming apricot trees line the Unesco-listed Wachau Valley creating a spectacle of white and pink blooms. Along with the Rhine, the Danube is Europe's most popular river and always bursting with new product. This year, escorted tour operator *Trafalgar* enters the river cruise market with *Trafalgar Reverie*, chartered from *Uniworld* and previously sailing as *River Princess*, while *Uniworld* launches the sumptuous *Emilie*. Also new are *Amadeus River Cruises'* *Amadeus Aurea* and *AmaWaterways'* *AmaSofia*.

APRIL: DUTCH WATERWAYS

Nothing says springtime like the season's first blooms, and nowhere does spring flowers like the Netherlands. April is the best time to see the Dutch bulbfields at their best, when the fields are transformed into a patchwork quilt of vibrant colours stretching as far as the eye can see. All sailings include a visit to Keukenhof, the world's largest flower garden, where seven million tulips, daffodils, hyacinths and other bulbs are planted each year. For clients who prefer not to fly, *Riviera Travel*, *Great Rail Journeys*, *Shearings* and *Leger Holidays* offer transport by train. And for 2027, *Riviera's* new ship, *Riviera Resplendence*, will sail on the Dutch waterways at tulip time. Book ahead, because the short window for these cruises means they often sell out a year in advance.

MAY: CHOBE AND ZAMBEZI

As the dry season starts and animals come together around scarcer water sources, May is an excellent time for game viewing on a thrilling waterborne safari in southern Africa. Unlike traditional river cruises, the sailing schedule is entirely dictated by the best wildlife-spotting opportunities along the Chobe and Zambezi rivers, which meet in Botswana. There are also land-based safari drives in Chobe National Park. *CroisiEurope* is the only line to combine the Chobe with a sailing on Lake Kariba, the world's largest man-made lake, aboard the intimate 16-passenger *African Dream* and *Zimbabwean Dream*. Meanwhile, an *AmaWaterways* cruise on luxury ➔

Amadeus River Cruises in the Wachau Valley, Danube

PICTURE: Florian Schulte

RIVER CRUISE



FROM LEFT: Amazon boat safari with A&K Sanctuary; Riviera Travel will sail Portugal's 'River of Gold' in September PICTURES: A&K Tom Griffiths; Riviera Travel

houseboat *Zambezi Queen* offers opportunities to upsell extensions in Johannesburg and Rwanda.

JUNE: RHÔNE AND SAÔNE

Soak up early summer sunshine on the Rhône, the only major European river flowing into the Mediterranean and taking in picture-perfect Provence along the way. From mid-June, the region's lavender fields create a vast, fragrant purple sea across the landscape as ships meander down to the coast past historic Avignon and the Ardeche Gorges, known as the Grand Canyon of Europe. The foodie city of Lyon, where the Rhône meets the Saône, celebrates these scenic waterways at the *Entre Rhône et Saône* festival. This year's event is from June 26–28, when the streets alongside the riverbanks will be filled with street entertainment and food stands.

JULY: AMAZON

The dry season provides perfect conditions to discover the world's largest tropical rainforest. Although the forest owes its lush appearance to short bursts of rain, even in July water levels are low – providing a good view of the banks – mozzies are few and far between and the ground is less slippery, allowing for deeper exploration into the depths of the jungle to search for wildlife and visit

remote villages. River cruises focus on the Peruvian Amazon, where the newest ship is A&K Sanctuary's plush *Pure Amazon*. However, in 2027 pioneering line CroisiEurope is launching 32-passenger catamaran *Brasilian Dream* on the Brazilian side of the river, which is the largest by volume in the world.

AUGUST: RHINE

With its fairytale castles – more than any other river – wine-growing villages and vine-clad slopes, the Rhine is popular at any time of year. Nevertheless, it turns things up an extra notch for the dazzling Rhine in *Flames* festival celebrating the wine harvest. Towns and villages lining the river are lit up by dazzling fireworks and flares that illuminate the sky, castles and historic buildings. The tradition started in Koblenz in 1756, and companies including Amadeus River Cruises and Great Rail Journeys organise special departures to dovetail with the extravaganza. This August, Amadeus will provide a front-row seat to the Koblenz display from the top deck of *Amadeus Star*.

SEPTEMBER: DOURO

Portugal's aptly named River of Gold glows even more when it's washed in the burnished colours of autumn, the summer heat has cooled to an

agreeable warmth and the grape harvest – known as *vindima* – is underway in the vineyards overlooking each side of the river valley. Costumed parades and traditional celebrations are held in towns and villages as grapes are picked for the famous port wine. New ships to book include AmaWaterways' *AmaSintra*, Tui River Cruises' *Tui Alma*, Viva Cruises' *Porto Mirante* (formerly operated by Riviera) and Riviera Travel's *Riviera Rose*. In 2027, *São Rafael* will join Uniworld's Douro fleet and *Tui Luzia* will debut with Tui River Cruises.

OCTOBER: HUDSON VALLEY

The Hudson Valley region of New York State is known for its dramatic autumn colours, drawing 'leaf peepers' to marvel at trees ablaze with shades of red, orange and gold. American Cruise Lines has dedicated fall foliage cruises along the Hudson River between New York and Albany that offer a prime vantage point to see Mother Nature's stunning seasonal show, and no traffic jams to contend with. Book an October cruise to coincide with another great American tradition, Halloween, and a visit to spooky *Sleepy Hollow*, immortalised in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Washington Irving's Gothic short story and the 1999 film starring Christopher Walken as the headless horseman. Guests walk →

RIVER CRUISE



FROM LEFT: Pandaw has a new itinerary combining the Ganges and Hooghly rivers; Christmas Market, Salzburg PICTURES: Pandaw/David Van Driessche, AmaWaterways

Best of the rest



- ☀ Colombia is a rising river-cruise star thanks to its rich culture, welcoming communities and abundant birdlife. Visit during January to March to spot some of its 2,000 bird species from AmaWaterways' two Magdalena River ships.
- ☀ Recommend a February Mississippi cruise to coincide with Mardi Gras, the biggest festival in New Orleans, which is also celebrated with colourful parades and events in towns lining America's mighty waterway.
- ☀ As cafe terraces open and flowers bloom, spring is a lovely time to sail on the Seine. The beautiful light of this season inspired Claude Monet to paint *Spring by the Seine*, and his gardens at Giverny open in April.
- ☀ Avoid Seville's sizzling summer heat with a spring or autumn sailing on the Guadalquivir with CroisiEurope, the only line offering sailings on the Spanish waterway.

through the graveyard where Irving is buried, before visiting the elaborately decorated namesake town.

NOVEMBER: GANGES

A cruise on the sacred Ganges provides a floating window on the fireworks on the day of Diwali, the Festival of Lights, on November 8, 2026, plus the festivities in the days before and after. Indian crew members invite guests to join in and float *diyas*, clay oil lamps, along the river. Small-ship Asia specialist Pandaw has a new itinerary combining the Ganges and its major distributary, the Hooghly, featuring a two-night stay in Kolkata, former capital of British India (see pages 40–42). November sailings can also be booked with Uniworld on the premium, all-suite *Ganges Voyager II*.

DECEMBER: CHRISTMAS MARKETS

A Christmas markets cruise is guaranteed to fill your clients with festive cheer. Although Germany is the traditional heartland of yuletide markets, they also have deep-rooted traditions in other countries including Austria, France and Hungary. All of the major river cruise lines offer seasonal sailings on the Rhine and Danube, and some – including Riviera Travel, Uniworld, Viking and Tauck – also operate sailings on the Seine. Running throughout December to Christmas Eve – with options to sail over Christmas – cruises range from short breaks to week-long itineraries, providing plenty of voyages to recommend to customers seeking festive joy and bountiful gift-buying opportunities. ●

BOOK IT

Spring: A four-night *Amsterdam, Kinderdijk and the Dutch Bulbfields* round-trip on Riviera Resplendence starts at £1,874, departing April 8, 2027, with flights. rivieratravel.co.uk

Summer: A seven-night *Rhine in Flames* cruise from Basel to Amsterdam on Amadeus Star is from £2,726, departing August 5, 2026, including flights. amadeus-rivercruises.co.uk

Autumn: A six-night *Hudson River Fall Foliage* sailing from New York to Albany on American Eagle is from £5,611, departing October 20, 2026, excluding flights. fredholidays.co.uk

Winter: A seven-night *Classic Christmas Markets* cruise from Nuremberg to Frankfurt on Emilie costs from £4,599, departing December 15, 2026, including flights. uniworld.com