

The Main attraction

With medieval towns and 21st-century cities, Germany's Main is an underrated river cruising option, writes Jane Archer



DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | GERMANY



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Smoked beer; Fairytale-like Rothenberg; River Princess dining room; Lobby on board River Princess **PREVIOUS PAGE:** Bamberg old town. **PICTURES:** SCStock/

Shutterstock; Francesco Carovillano; Andreas Hub/Uniwold River Cruises

They say you should never talk about religion and politics with people you've just met, but it's difficult to avoid either as we walk around Bamberg, a historic town in Bavaria with 40 churches and cathedrals. Bamberg was once ruled by prince-bishops, who had little to do with royalty but were elected by the church.

"Just like Rome, we are built on seven hills," says our guide Stefanie, as we puff our way up one of them to the top of the town, where a grand cathedral sits opposite a vast Renaissance-cum-Baroque palace. The then prince-bishop started building the Neue Residenz palace in 1603 and his successors enhanced it over the next century by adding wings and splashing out on gold, stucco and fresco decoration inside.

No penitent sackcloth and ashes for these guys, clearly; instead, they lived the high life on medieval taxpayers' money. "They dined in

"The towns and cities along the Main's banks are steeped in enough history, culture and quirky stories to fill volumes

there on four-course lunches and 14-course dinners," Stefanie tells us.

BEER CAPITAL

You can't visit Bamberg and not talk beer. With 14 breweries, its inhabitants quaff more of the hoppy amber nectar than other Germans do, especially their own unique-tasting smoked beer. "It's like drinking ham," Stefanie says.

We're in Bamberg on day three of a seven-night Uniwold cruise on the Main River (say it like 'mine') and Main-Danube Canal – two

waterways that meet outside town and are the unsung heroes of the world of river cruising. That's because they not only connect the Rhine and Danube rivers, enabling cruisers to sail from the North Sea to the Black Sea, but the towns and cities along their banks are steeped in enough history, culture and quirky stories to fill volumes.

Our voyage from Nuremberg to Frankfurt on Uniwold River Cruises' *River Princess* takes us through 38 locks (there are 50 in total, if you travel the full length of the river and canal) and to Bamberg, Würzburg and Wertheim. We're also stopping off at Kitzingen for an excursion to the storybook town of Rothenburg, a 40-minute drive away. Plus, there's time to explore Nuremberg and Frankfurt at the start and end.

All the stops on this cruise have medieval old towns lined with half-timbered houses, turreted castles and thousand-year-old churches. They also have more of those profligate prince-bishops, ➤

RIVER PRINCESS

Launched in 2001 and with room for just 128 passengers, *River Princess* is one of Uniwold River Cruises' stalwart ships. The vessel's green, black and white décor is bold and stunning, while its small size makes it intimate and friendly. Cabins have fixed windows (lower deck) or French balconies. Suite passengers get more space, a butler, free minibar and never-ending supply of complimentary spirits. There is one restaurant, open for buffet breakfast, and lunch plus a served dinner, a lounge/bar, a 'patio' with a coffee/tea station and early breakfast pastries, plus a gym and massage room.

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | GERMANY



ABOVE: The opulent interior of the Würzburg Residence

as we discover on a tour inside an even grander Baroque pile – the Würzburg Residence.

Modelled on Versailles, the palace has an entrance big enough for a carriage and six horses to pass through and 360 rooms decorated with mirrors, marble pillars and spectacular frescos.

No wonder the locals didn't shed many tears when Napoleon invaded in 1803 and handed this part of Germany over to the newly formed Kingdom of Bavaria, separating church and state and bringing an end to the prince-bishop system of governing.

HIDDEN TREASURES

In Nuremberg we join a tour of the rock-cut cellars beneath the town, where the Nazis hid priceless treasures from all over Germany, including artworks looted from their Jewish owners. Discovered after the war, the stash included Imperial Regalia from the days when Nuremberg was one of the capitals of the Holy Roman Empire, as well as the oldest globe in existence,

“ In Nuremberg we join a tour of the rock-cut cellars, where the Nazis hid priceless treasures from all over Germany

dating back to about 1492.

The next stop, Frankfurt, has a skyscraper city sheen on the surface, but head to the cathedral (Dom-Römer) district and it's like being transported back to medieval Germany. Or at least, it will be in a few years when the recently reconstructed old town (completed in 2018 with cobbled streets and half-timbered houses) doesn't look so quite shiny.

For the real thing, Rothenburg is hard to beat. A poster boy for medieval Germany – it featured in the 1968 movie *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* – Rothenburg is enclosed to

this day by 900-year-old city walls.

Not that they helped when the Catholic League forces, led by one General Tilly, came calling in the Thirty Years' War (1618-48) and threatened to burn the place down. According to local lore, Rothenburg's brave mayor stepped forward to save his town by taking on an unusual bet: to drink a gallon of wine in one go if the troops left it alone. He did, and Tilly's troops left.

I promised you quirky stories, and on this cruise, there are plenty more to come. **TW**

BOOK IT

A seven-night **Classic Christmas Markets** cruise from Nuremberg to Frankfurt, departing December 23 on *River Princess*, costs from £3,699 including flights, transfers, excursions, drinks, tips and Wi-Fi. The cruise runs through December. Note that Nuremberg Christmas Market closes at 2pm on December 24. Others shut on December 23. uniworld.com

FOOD & DRINKS



Bratwurst

• Nuremberg's sausages are said to be the best of Germany's wurst. Grab a table at the Bratwursthäusle near the main square and decide for yourself.

• Rothenburg's *Schneeballen* (snowballs) are balls of shortcrust pastry, deep fried and coated in sugar or chocolate. Pop one in your mouth for a sweet pick-me-up.

• Apple wine (known as *Ebbelwei*) is bigger than beer in Frankfurt. Choose between sweet or sour. An Ebbelwei-Express sightseeing tram trundles around town; the ticket price includes a small bottle of apple wine.



Ebbelwei-Express

PICTURE: Congress & Tourismus Zentrale Nürnberg/Angela Dilze