

Ostara is born

A pair of new sister ships are raising the bar on Europe's rivers, writes **Jane Archer**



APT OSTARA

If, like me, you thought pretzels were an American invention, sorry but we've all got it wrong. "They were invented in the 7th century by German monks. The cross in the middle represents the way they fold their arms to pray," says tour guide Dorothea. Apocryphal? Maybe. But I'm going with it.

We're in Miltenberg, a pretty medieval town on the Main River (pronounced 'mine') where half-timbered houses date back to the 1300s. We're part way through a river cruise on APT Ostara, one of two new river ships (alongside sister vessel Solara), that APT has launched on the Rhine, Main and Danube this year.

These are not only the first APT-branded vessels in Europe

– until the end of last year, its cruises were on overbranded AmaWaterways vessels – but they have also raised the bar on the rivers in more ways than one.

DINING IN STYLE

The luxurious finish and spectacular design might be the first things guests see when they get on board, but the food and drink options are the real standout. There are six places to eat – seven if you include room service – far more than on other river ships this size.

Plus it has a nifty bar that really does rise: when Ostara is sailing, the Grüner Bar & Dining is accessed from the back ➤

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | MAIN & RHINE



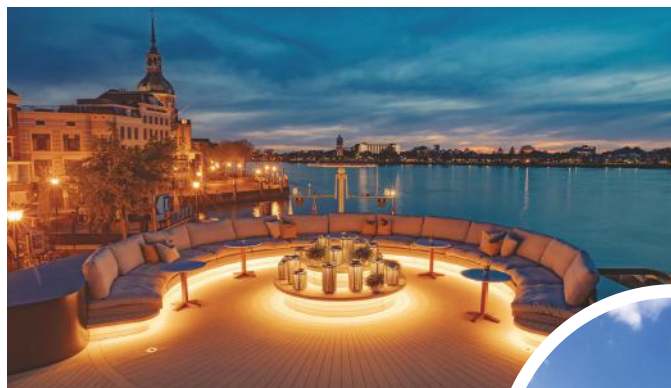
☼ The Owner's Cellar (above) is an exclusive evening-only restaurant for 16 people that kicks off with champagne and serves a five-course tasting menu with a different wine to match.

☼ Annie's Table (below) opens in The Salon every evening. It's more casual, with a three-course French-inspired menu including cold meats, cheese, olives, mushroom quiche, duck and crème brûlée.



BOOK IT

APT's *Ostara* and *Solara* are sailing 15-day Magnificent Europe cruises between Amsterdam and Budapest from £2,895 per person, departing November 21, including flights, transfers, drinks, tips, excursions and Wi-Fi. Shorter Highlights of the Rhine and Main cruises between Amsterdam and Nuremberg (flights from Munich) are also available, priced from £2,645 per person for eight days based on a November 21 departure. aptouring.co.uk



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Conversation Lounge, lobby and an Owner's Suite, all on APT *Solara* and *Ostara*; inset, Würzburg Residence PICTURES: APT; Shutterstock/Aliaxandr Antanovich



of deck three. But in port, the crew can press a button and the whole restaurant – galley, bar, tables, the lot – is hydraulically lifted onto the sun deck.

It's not just an amazing feat of engineering, but also a lovely spot to dine and is open for lunch and dinner, though guests will need an invitation for either (APT's way of managing speciality dining, so everyone gets a turn). Invitations are also needed for the Owner's Cellar and Annie's Table (see box, left).

Once on the sun deck, Grüner doubles as a walk-up bar where passengers can refuel with their favourite tipple – which is included, along with everything from flights and transfers to tips.

At other times, guests can take their pick from Bistro Saison, which is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner; or The Salon, which serves a light breakfast and lunch.

Venue number six is on the Daystar Deck (the area in front of the wheelhouse) where, in a nod to APT's Australian roots, there's a lunchtime barbecue twice per cruise, weather permitting. It wasn't looking very permitting for us, but just as we returned to *Ostara* after a morning of excursions in the wine village of Rüdesheim, the clouds cleared, the sun came out and we feasted on steak, kebabs, German sausages, baked potatoes and more.

DECK DETAILS

Most of our fellow passengers (predominantly Australian) are on a 15-day voyage from Budapest to Amsterdam. We joined them part-way through, in Nuremberg, for a one-week Highlights of the Rhine and Main cruise ending in the Dutch capital. On the Main leg, we pass through countless locks, see Bamberg's

fresco-filled town halls and Little Venice quarter, visit the spectacular Versailles-like Würzburg Residence and learn about medieval life in Miltenberg.

By the time we reach Rüdesheim, we've moved to the Rhine and still to come is castle-spotting as we transit the Rhine Gorge; a meeting with a princess in her castle, one of three APT Signature Experiences on the full 15-day cruise; and a day in Amsterdam with a canal cruise and bike ride among tour options.

The dining is just one of many things that add to the wow factor on *Ostara*. There's the nautical look, exemplified by white-wood panelling, rope sculptures and beechwood banisters; the excellent service; and solar-powered lanterns that light up a Conversation Lounge.

Then there is the fabulous all-suite accommodation, also with a nautical look, which feels very spacious. Most have a French balcony, with a wall-to-wall window that opens half-way at the touch of a button, lots of storage and large bathrooms with butler-style marble sinks and showers. For more room, eight Owner's Suites have sitting and dining areas.

For the lower deck cabins, the Australian company behind the interior design went for teak-like panelling reminiscent of a ship's cabin of old. Instead of curtains, the windows (two fixed windows in each room) have elegant slatted wood-effect blinds.

For now, *Ostara* and *Solara* are in a two-ship class of their own (APT and Travelmarvel also launched *Estrela* on the Douro this year, but it is a very different style) but that won't last long if APT Travel Group chief executive David Cox has his way. He'd like another two vessels in the next three years and promises: "There will be more." **TW**