



Mekong Serenity

Uniworld

Second time lucky

Keeping customers coming back is a no-brainer in business, so **Alice Barnes-Brown** gets advice on how to sell repeat river cruises

River cruising offers a novel way to holiday without the hassle of getting from A to B. But for clients who think one sailing is much like another – similar ports, cookie-cutter ships or less-than-exciting activities – now's the time to highlight how much is changing in the river cruise world.

This year sees the introduction of itineraries on lesser-known waterways and active or themed sailings along more familiar routes. Ships are changing too, with more restaurants, unique sports and wellness facilities and spacious cabins with balconies. With new players such as Celebrity River Cruises entering the market, there's even more excitement in store – so here are four ways to ensure clients keep coming back for more.

SELL A SEQUEL

If second-timers are sceptical about retracing their steps, remind them there's always more to see in Europe's culture-rich cities. Pick a line that doesn't include excursions in the fare so they can spend their money on

shore exactly as they want, seeing sights they missed the first time.

Amadeus River Cruises doesn't include excursions, but provides free e-bikes on its Rhine and Danube sailings and standard cycles across the fleet. Emerald Cruises also offers opportunities to explore. Head of sales Jonathan Davies says: "Onboard bikes allow active guests to take to each destination at their own pace and enjoy independent exploration."

For those who prefer to be guided, Lloyd Morris, key account manager at Riviera Travel, suggests selling themed itineraries to seasoned river cruisers who have already done the route before. He says: "Your customers can explore their love of art, music, gardens, history or food. For example, they could enjoy live musical performances in the birthplace of classical music or taste wine in the Douro Valley."

SWITCH IT UP

For cruisers who enjoyed their first river sailing but want something different, switch-sell to some of Europe's smaller



REPEAT RIVER CRUISERS

Riverside Mozart

waterways or upgrade to a luxury line for a new experience. Jon Knight, Riverside Luxury Cruises' head of sales for UK and Ireland, says: "After clients have sailed the Rhine or Danube, try the south of France, with an abundance of adventures from kayaking to bike tours and, of course, wine tasting. Look at the different ship profiles; the double-width *Riverside Mozart* offers a different aspect to river cruising [on the Danube]. Guests can enjoy the indoor pool or dine in one of five venues."

Likewise, AmaWaterways – which has announced plans to build a second double-width ship by 2027 – offers an alternative for ocean-going guests who like the variety and facilities of a bigger ship. Sales director Andrea Stafford says: "*AmaMagna* is double the width of traditional river ships, but with only 20% more guests, leaving space for a cinema room, wellness centre, four restaurants and a full-sized pickleball court. A few years ago, those didn't exist on river ships. Having that option can be a game-changer for some clients."

EMBRACE ADVENTURE

One river cruise does not fit all, so for adventurous clients, focus on places that are harder to reach and journeys that would be logistically challenging on land. From the Mekong in Cambodia to the Magdalena in Colombia, don't be afraid to highlight far-flung rivers.



Satisfied customers are agents' warmest sales leads, so include other destinations and ships for them to try next

Joseph Grimley, head of sales for Pandaw, says: "For the adventurous, look beyond European waterways. Pandaw has just released a new itinerary on the Hooghly River [which branches off the Ganges]. With two nights docked in Kolkata, guests can enjoy two full days of sightseeing in the former capital of the British Raj."

APT reports bookings to Vietnam and Cambodia have seen a "massive boost" following the launch of *Mekong Serenity* in 2023. New ships debuting on the Mekong this year include *Viking Tonle* and the 14-suite *Tonle Pandaw*, while the Amazon plays host to Abercrombie & Kent's new *Pure Amazon* and AmaWaterways has increased capacity on the Chobe River for 2026.

FOLLOW UP FAST

"Satisfied customers are, without a doubt, agents' warmest sales leads, so we strongly recommend our partners include details of other destinations, ships and travel styles for customers to

try next, in their post-trip follow up," says Paul Melinis, managing director UK & Europe for APT and Travelmarvel. "We have worked hard to create a rich and diverse portfolio of travel experiences, so there will always be something to pique clients' interest and something new to try."

Remind regular customers they could stack up savings via cruise line loyalty programmes. Avalon Waterways' Welcome Back Credit grants up to £225 per person towards their next sailing, if claimed within two years, which can be booked through their preferred agent. The Scenic Club and EmeraldExplorer programme operate a tier system so clients get advance notice of new itineraries and vouchers towards their next sailing.

Another common barrier putting off potential repeaters is wanting to travel with family, but a handful of lines pride themselves on child-friendly facilities. *A-Rosa Sena* features a sizeable kids' club and children's pool plus cabins sleeping up to five; Uniworld's Generations Collection offers special sailings with excursions and onboard activities suitable for children; while CroisiEurope has free sailings for under-16s on the Douro, Guadalquivir and Rhine, plus no cabin supplement for single-parent families.

Maybe you'll even inspire a new generation of river cruisers. ●