



# On the rails

Let the train take the strain on a Rhine cruise with a transport twist, writes **Katie McGonagle**



As the funicular railway carriage creaked and sighed its way up the sheer slopes of Königstuhl, the steep hill that towers high above the German city of Heidelberg, the driver pointed to something through the windows.

To the right, emerging moodily from the fog, was the counterpart to our original 1920s railway car, making its way slowly down the hill as we continued our ascent. First built in 1907, these twin tracks draw their vintage carriages up and down the hillside on a system of ropes and pulleys, bringing the lofty summit into easy reach of the university town below. ➤

## HELPING *hands*



"[Having a tour manager] is about peace of mind, from the minute

you leave to the minute you get home. It makes the beginning of the journey that little bit easier – making sure people have their tickets and they're on the right carriage. I love the fact that I've helped customers who would never do the trip on their own."

**Tracey Fitzsimonspell,**  
tour manager,  
Great Rail Journeys



"A lot of our demographic don't want to fly anymore, so to be able

to get on a train and be fully escorted is ideal. We get to know the clients and take the time to talk to them, and when I'm talking about the activities each day, I always point out the alternatives because it's not one size fits all. We can go the extra mile because we have the time to do it."

**Kate Leigh, cruise manager,**  
Great Rail Journeys



"We make the connection between the hotel managers

and the tour leaders. We speak different languages, and I help with excursions and entertainment. This is a beautiful place to work and the Rhine is a very easy route to travel."

**Mercedes Ojeda,**  
cruise director,  
Amadeus River Cruises



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Hoor vintage railway station; steam engine; Amadeus Imperial **PREVIOUS PAGE:** Castle Katz, overlooking the Rhine

**PICTURES:** Shutterstock/Leonid Andronov; Katie McGonagle



Sadly, the sweeping views over the Neckar River were obscured by a blanket of fog and drizzle carpeting the river valley, but even without the views, the experience of riding these historic rails was worthwhile.

In fact, it was just one of many modes of transport making up this week-long Rhine cruise with Great Rail Journeys, appealing to fans of engineering and mechanics as well as those who simply want to avoid airports. We had already ticked off a Eurostar journey from St Pancras, a heritage steam train, Germany's oldest cog railway and scenic cable car rides at Koblenz and Rudesheim – not to mention our leisurely cruise on Austrian-owned ship *Amadeus Imperial* – proving the joy of this Rhine sailing was in the journey itself.

### STEAMING AHEAD

Our first unusual ride came courtesy of a vintage steam train from Hoor to Medemblik. After a scenic coach transfer from Amsterdam – our departure point for this Rhine cruise – via acres of fields, farmlands and the cheese-producing town of Edam, we reached Hoor, where a small museum tells the story of the heritage railway first established in 1887.

We boarded the century-old stock to find carriages decked out in the style of different decades, from 1920s art deco to time-worn wooden benches from the 1950s, along with inspectors in traditional uniforms. They sounded the 'all aboard' whistle and the train whisked us away, rattling across wildflower-filled meadows and past heritage stations – with a short stop to get a

“Between Koblenz and Rudesheim, more than 40 medieval castles dot the hillsides along the Rhine Gorge

closer look at the vintage engine – before the much-photographed thatched windmill known as The Shepherd came into view on our approach to Medemblik.

### HERE BE DRAGONS

Next came another kind of rail adventure, as we arrived in the picture-perfect town of Konigswinter for a journey on the oldest rack railway still in operation in Germany. The sinister-sounding Drachenfels – literally 'dragon's rock' – is covered in forest so dense, it's easy to see why medieval villagers conjured up fairytales of mystical creatures lurking ominously amid the thickets.

Luckily, our gentle journey to the top doesn't reveal anything more than the ruins of a 12th-century castle and panoramic views across the river. It's good preparation for the scenic stretch between Koblenz and Rudesheim, where more than 40 medieval castles dot the hillsides along the riverbanks of the Rhine Gorge, each occupying the best vantage points to spy invading forces.

They stand like gloomy grey-stone sentinels above the candy-coloured houses and half-timbered



ABOVE: Astronomical clock in Notre Dame Cathedral, Strasbourg PICTURE: Katie McGonagle

buildings along the water's edge, set between neat rows of grapevines planted almost vertically along the hillsides.

### IMPERIAL TASTES

This scenic section of the journey is even more spectacular when enjoyed from the sun deck – and with just 98 passengers on board our Great Rail Journeys departure, there was plenty of space to spread out.

*Amadeus Imperial* launched in 2020 and holds up to 164 passengers, with fixed windows in lower-deck cabins, panoramic windows and French balconies on decks two and three, and a dozen suites featuring a full balcony to admire those riverside views. Cabins offer plenty of storage including a walk-in wardrobe, decor in muted tones with the occasional splash of bright turquoise and generously sized bathrooms featuring Rituals toiletries.

The Panorama Lounge is the ship's social hub, but the addition of the Amadeus Club at the rear – replacing the indoor pool seen on

previous vessels – offers a quieter space to enjoy free tea and coffee in the mornings or a peaceful spot after lunch. There's also a massage room and 24-hour fitness centre, while the sun deck is home to shuffleboard and chess.

With local wines included at dinner (chargeable at other times, from €6.50 for wine by the glass and beer from €3.90), there are plenty of opportunities to discover why the southern Rhine is such a renowned winemaking region. The daily changing menu in the restaurant also reflects local tastes, with Dutch *bitterballen* (meatballs), French duck à l'orange or German *spätzle* (egg noodles), depending on where the ship is sailing, along with international favourites.

### WALK THIS WAY

With so much food on offer, it's a good thing that river cruising lives up to its reputation for exploring on foot, offering the chance to burn a few calories as we walked the cities and towns along the Rhine. We explored cities from Cologne

– with its famous cathedral, one of few buildings to survive Second World War bombing – to Koblenz, where we spent a pleasant morning strolling through the cobbled arcades of a city at the confluence of the Rhine and Moselle. In the pretty town of Rudesheim, we opted for a bird's-eye view over the vineyards with a cable car ride.

The highlights were yet to come, however. The small city of Speyer proved a stunner with its charming historic centre, bookended by the cathedral to one side and Altportel (historic gate) at the other, plus the impressive Lutheran history on show in the Gedächtniskirche der Protestation.

There were more sacred sights across the border in France, where Strasbourg's incredible Notre Dame Cathedral – once the tallest in the world – took four centuries to build. Step inside to admire its medieval stained-glass windows, a 13th-century 'pillar of the angels' intricately carved from a single piece of rock, the grand organ and 500-year-old sandstone pulpit,

plus the mind-blowingly beautiful astronomical clock, which charts not only the time but also the position of planets and stars – making it so much more than a simple timepiece.

After a journey across borders, going from river to rail by steam, sail and more in between, it seemed fitting to end by staring at the stars, dreaming of the next adventure. **TW**

### BOOK IT

#### Great Rail Journeys'

eight-day itinerary The Majestic Rhine includes a week-long cruise on *Amadeus Star* or *Amadeus Imperial*, starting at £1,895 per person based on a June 17 departure. The price includes Wi-Fi, gala dinner and drinks with dinner each night, return rail travel from London St Pancras, guided excursions, rail and coach travel throughout and inclusive luggage service. [greatrail.com](http://greatrail.com)