

Passengers on board
Fred Olsen Cruise Lines'
Bolette enjoy New Year's
Eve fireworks in Funchal
PICTURE: Fred Olsen Cruise Lines

FESTIVE CRUISES

Seasonal sailings

Spend Christmas or
New Year on the water
and you're guaranteed
to celebrate in style,
writes **Jane Archer**

As the clock struck midnight, the riverbank in Cologne exploded – literally – in a riot of noise and colours as fireworks filled the skies to welcome in 2025.

The anticipation had been building for a few hours as New Year's Eve revellers started to gather by the river in search of the best view. I had no need to worry about finding a spot, I was watching from the top deck of Tui River Cruises' *Tui Isla*, which was docked in a prime position right in front of the city's iconic cathedral.

You can only have fireworks in Germany and the Netherlands on New Year's Eve, so the locals do make the most of it; luckily I spotted a hose at hand in case any went astray. ➤



FROM LEFT: Disney Cruise Line's Very Merrytime; Regent Seven Seas Cruises' decorations on board Seven Seas Explorer; American Cruise Lines paddlewheeler on the Mississippi; Seabourn festivities

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MOST MAGICAL TIME

What started for me as a love of river cruising over Christmas has expanded into a love of river cruising over New Year as well. Why not? I get to spend New Year's Eve with people instead of my TV, plus I'm in the thick of the local celebrations. And once the festivities are over, there's the rest of the river cruise to enjoy. On this *Tui Isla* cruise, that meant another six wonderful days to see in the start of the year.

On board we enjoyed good food, friendly service and fun quizzes, plus shows with, unusually for a river ship, a three-strong entertainment team. Ashore it was chilly, but the pay-off came in seeing places without the crowds. There were no queues for canal rides in Ghent, we didn't need to pre-book a table for dinner in Cologne on December 31, and even Amsterdam, where the cruise ended, was quieter than usual.

Then there was the additional bonus on a very chilly January 1 of watching brave souls jump into a pool set up in the main square in Dutch city Nijmegen. A bizarre New Year's Day ritual, no doubt, made even stranger by the fact that the MC running the show was dressed in a Roman toga. Thanks to my shaky grasp of the Dutch language, I never worked out why.

REVELRY BY RIVER

Tui River Cruises has more festive sailings lined up this year, including a one-week Festive Fairy Tale round-trip cruise from Cologne on *Tui Skyla*, departing December 23. It's followed immediately by a one-week New Year on the Rhine cruise from Cologne to Frankfurt, including an overnight stay in Cologne for the fireworks and New Year's Day in Nijmegen. Prices start from £1,434 and £1,514 respectively, including flights, transfers, drinks with meals and tips, and the two can be bolted together for a 14-night festive extravaganza.

There are plenty more festive river trips for clients to consider, including Travelmarvel's first cruise over Christmas. The seven-night sailing, from Budapest to Nuremberg, departs on December 22 and calls in at Vienna, Passau and Regensburg, and is in Durnstein and Melk on Christmas Day. It's priced from £1,795 including flights, drinks with lunch and dinner and tips.

Viva Cruises' 2025 festive sailings are full, but 2026 is on sale. Options include a seven-night Europe's Sleigh cruise round-trip from Passau departing December 21, which will be in Budapest and Esztergom in Hungary on Christmas Day. From £2,775 including drinks, tips and Wi-Fi.



FESTIVE CRUISES

Scenic has two 15-day cruises from Amsterdam to Budapest departing December 22 and 23 that, unusually, don't have a port call on Christmas Day and spend New Year's Eve in Linz and Regensburg respectively. Prices start from £5,392 including flights, transfers, shore excursions, drinks, tips and Wi-Fi.

For something a bit different, clients can get a taste of the US 'holiday season' on eight-night Lower Mississippi journeys between Memphis and New Orleans with American Cruise Lines. Space is tight for 2025, but 2026 sailings are on sale with prices from \$5,275, including a pre-cruise hotel night in Memphis or New Orleans, selected excursions, drinks, tips and Wi-Fi.

YULE TIDE

There is almost no end to the options for where to go on an ocean voyage over Christmas and New Year, particularly for those keen to splash out on a present to themselves.

Regent Seven Seas Cruises, for instance, has festive cruises in South America in 2025, while Silversea has voyages in Australia, New Zealand and Antarctica in 2026. Seabourn has a 14-day Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam cruise from Singapore

to Hong Kong departing December 21, 2026, with a Caviar in the Surf beach party on Christmas Day. Prices are from £6,034 including drinks, tips and Wi-Fi.

But it's the Caribbean that steals the festive cruising show. At the time of going to press, Oceania Cruises still had availability on new ship Oceania Allura's 14-day Holiday Havens sailing departing Miami on December 21, 2025. It spends Christmas Day in Curacao, where snorkelling and beach trips are among the excursions. Prices are from £4,108 including speciality dining, tips and Wi-Fi.

Seabourn has availability in the Caribbean for 2025 but says flights there, and to other long-haul destinations, are a challenge so close to departure, and recommends steering customers to 2026 instead. "Book clients early so they get the best flight availability, especially with the Caribbean and Asia," says UK and EMEA vice-president Lynn Narraway.

Its 16-night Leeward Island Holiday round-trip from Miami departing December 20, 2026, with another of those caviar-fuelled parties in the surf to mark Christmas Day, is from £4,759 with drinks, tips and Wi-Fi.

For families, Disney Cruise Line has a seven-night Very Merrytime Eastern

Caribbean cruise from Port Canaveral departing December 20, 2026, which spends Christmas Day at sea.

For British-style festivities in the sun, P&O Cruises offers a 14-night voyage from Barbados departing December 19, 2026, priced from £2,899 including flights and tips.

SeaDream Yacht Club highlights its New Year 2026 offering – namely its two luxury vessels meeting and overnighting in Gustavia, St Barts, on December 31, so passengers on both can enjoy the island's fireworks.

Closer to home, Windstar Cruises has a new-for-2026 10-day Hidden Gems of the Canary Islands and Madeira voyage, which sails round-trip from Tenerife on December 27 and reaches Funchal for the city's New Year firework display.

The Canaries are a long-time no-fly festive favourite with the likes of Cunard, Marella Cruises, Fred Olsen Cruise Lines, Saga and P&O Cruises. "Everything is taken care of, from decorations to dinner, [with] entertainment and seasonal extras all part of the package," says P&O Cruises' senior manager of trade sales, Paul Moran.

You don't get that by staying at home and ringing in the New Year by watching Jools' Annual Hootenanny. ●