

Debut performance

Crystal Cruises' first foray into river cruising hits all the right notes, finds Jeannine Williamson

TRIED & TESTED

Crystal Mozart

With its sheer size, wide choice of dining venues, techy gadgets and gizmos, cigar lounge and James Bond-style speedboat, Crystal Cruises' first river ship is set to shake, if not stir, the European river cruise market.

The majority of river ships look the same on the outside, restricted by size limitations of locks and low bridges. Not so

Crystal Mozart. The vessel, which started life in 1987 as the *River Mozart* sailing for Peter Deilmann, holds the record as Europe's largest riverboat. At 22.9m wide, it's double the width of some European vessels, yet carries just 154 passengers alongside a higher-than-average crew of 92.

That size means it's restricted to sailing between Budapest and Passau as it can't squeeze into locks further along the river, but that's unlikely to worry passengers as they sail in style along one of the prettiest

stretches of the Danube, passing through the Unesco-listed Wachau Valley.

▶ EXTREME MAKEOVER

Christened in Vienna in July, the four-deck *Crystal Mozart* won't win any prizes for looks alone. But in this case beauty is more than skin deep, and you need to step inside to appreciate the amazing top-to-toe facelift carried out by Crystal Cruises.

When it announced its move into the river sector, with the debut of two new vessels →



PICTURE: IAN SCHEMPER

→ in 2017, demand was so great the company decided to take the plunge and enter the river market earlier than planned by purchasing an existing vessel.

Crystal Mozart's interior is beautiful, with facilities akin to a scaled-down ocean ship. Indeed, *Crystal's* existing clients will quickly feel at home as *Mozart* boasts the Palm Court and Bistro Mozart, both inspired by venues on its seagoing ships.

Although it's not the only high-end vessel around, it certainly defines a new era of luxury for river cruising with amenities you won't find elsewhere. It leaves other lines in its wake with the *Wider* speedboat, opening the way for movie-star moments like setting off on an exhilarating high-speed ride along the Vienna waterfront. The speedboat is an optional excursion, available for VIP Champagne trips at €180 for an hour.

INNER BEAUTY

Back inside, *Crystal Mozart* has 77 cabins in four categories, all with butler service and king-sized beds. The majority are standard suites, with a fixed window or French balcony, but there are 12 penthouse suites and a pair of huge two-bedroom *Crystal* suites, sleeping up to five. Each cabin is packed with high-end amenities, including an iPad and generous-sized toiletries in marble bathrooms. High-tech



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touches include variable lighting, a TV in the bathroom mirror and Toto toilet with its automatic lid, heated seat and remote-controlled 'wash and dry' options.

With its wide girth, *Crystal Mozart* can accommodate facilities that are generally tiny or non-existent on other river ships. There's a spa, with indoor pool, gym, changing rooms, steam room and sauna, tranquil treatment rooms and a relaxation area with plush loungers.

It also has multiple dining areas with 'farm-to-table' menus showcasing seasonal, locally sourced ingredients. In addition to the main Waterside Restaurant, there's the informal Mozart Bistro, Blue Bar and Grill in a lovely position at the back of the ship, and the Pantry for all-day self-service drinks and snacks. The Vintage Room seats 12 for tasting menus (for a fee). All drinks, except for the upmarket wine list, are included in the fare and there's 24-hour room service.



Aside from the main Palm Court lounge and bar, there's the intimate Cove and Piano Bar, Connoisseur Club cigar bar and novel 'pop-up' Vista Bar on the sun deck, which is lowered below deck when *Crystal Mozart* navigates low bridges.

BOOK IT: *Crystal Mozart* operates 10 to 13-day round-trip itineraries from Vienna, with ports of call including Durstein, Melk, Linz, Passau, Bratislava and Budapest. A 10-day cruise starts from £3,295 based on a March 2017 departure. crystalcruises.co.uk

River cruise news

This year has seen a raft of new river ships making a splash in the market.

Viking welcomed six Longships to its mainland European fleet, plus the smaller *Viking Osfrid*, specifically built for the Douro.

Scenic Amber is Scenic's latest 'space-ship' on the Rhine. Main and Danube, while a smaller version, *Scenic Azure*, has been added on the Douro.

Amadeus Silver III has set sail on the Rhine: all 168 cabins have expansive walk-in wardrobes and, from this year, complimentary wine is served with lunch as well as dinner.

Avalon's newest all-suite ships with river-facing beds, the 104-passenger *Avalon Imagery II* and 134-passenger *Avalon Passion* are cruising on the Rhine and Danube. On the same rivers are AmaWaterways' 158-passenger sister ships *AmaViola* and *AmaStella*, with new features including connecting cabins

for groups and families.

American company Vantage Deluxe Travel has launched to the UK trade and its latest vessel, the 176-passenger jazz-themed *River Voyager*, is a good choice for solo passengers with its eight single cabins. Tauck, another US-based line, has launched *Grace* and *Joy*, where 130 passengers are well looked after by a cruise manager and three cruise directors.

New for CroisiEurope on the Loire is the 80-passenger *Elbe Princesse*, its second vessel powered by modern paddlewheel technology. On a smaller scale, European Waterways has brought in eight-passenger hotel barge *Finesse* in Burgundy, with a chef's demonstration galley and some of the largest cabins in the fleet.

Set to have been launched in April, Emerald's latest new-build *Emerald Belle* was irreparably damaged by a shipyard fire in January and will now be replaced by *Emerald Destiny* in 2017.



The spa on *Crystal Mozart*