

### WHAT'S NEW IN RIVER CRUISE?

• **AmaWaterways** has expanded its no-fly river cruise programme for 2021, with 11 more itineraries now reachable by rail from the UK. The line is offering free return rail travel on selected 2021 departures to celebrate the launch of the expanded programme, which covers the Rhine, Moselle, French rivers and beyond.

• **Titan Travel** has launched its 2021 Europe brochure with 15 river cruises plus ocean sailings, as well as new escorted tours in Sardinia, Austria and Croatia.

• **Viva Cruises** is adding newly renovated ship *Swiss Diamond* to its fleet for 2021, and returning to the Baltic with two new itineraries departing from the German city of Stralsund. Prices for a Baltic Islands cruise start at €1,395 per person, based on a two-bed cabin.

• **Tui River Cruises** has added Christmas and New Year itineraries to its winter 2021-22 programme on *Tui Isla* and *Tui Maya*. Festive sailings include Christmas Day dinner and carols or a gala dinner on New Year's Eve, plus visits to Christmas markets along the Rhine.



FROM FAR LEFT: A-Rosa Stella; Avignon; Lyon; lavender field in France; sun deck on A-Rosa Stella PICTURE: Shutterstock



**Mike Sullivan, owner of Shropshire-based agency Professional Travel, sets sail on the Rhone aboard A-Rosa Stella**



### A-ROSA STELLA

My wife and I have done a few river cruises before and this was definitely up there with the top ships we've been on. The food and drink was excellent and the cabin was lovely – a generous size with double beds, TV and a Juliet balcony so we could slide the door wide open and see the sights. Everyone on board was really friendly, and there was a decent-sized swimming pool, which had strict capacity control so no more than four people were allowed in at a time. The sun deck was also very nice with lots of tables shaded by canopies. This is a quality product from a company that really goes out of its way, and for those who want a relaxed, enjoyable trip, it's a great option – they will get their money's worth.



### REVIEWED BY Mike Sullivan

I'd never sailed on the Rhone before or been to that part of France, but I'd always wanted to – partly because of my love of red wine – so I had high expectations. I pictured it being green and lush with vineyards everywhere, which of course is one of the draws of a cruise here, and it didn't disappoint. We sailed from Lyon through Viviers, Avignon, Arles, Port St Louis and Tain L'Hermitage – travelling before the Foreign Office advice changed and a quarantine requirement was imposed for France – and it was absolutely beautiful.

### ALL ABOARD

We weren't sure what to expect travelling on a cruise in the current climate, but from the minute we actually saw the ship to the moment we got off it a week later, everything ran smoothly. The effort that was put into making sure the Covid protocols were applied was impressive. But it was all done with sensitivity, and it wasn't in any way imposing or intrusive.

In terms of the arrival process, it was all very easy. We had to fill in a 'Fit for Travel' form before travelling, which we handed over on arrival at the ship. Once at the port, we all had to wear masks and have a temperature check, and they also very handily sanitised our suitcases.

On the ship itself, you had to wear a face covering in the indoor public areas, but once you were sitting at a table in the restaurant or in the lounge, you could take them off. We didn't have to wear them on the sun deck either, we just had to socially distance. There were also markings in the reception area and around the ship directing you to walk clockwise.

I noticed that cleaning had really been ramped up. As soon as you left your table, a member of the crew would be there cleaning it thoroughly, and the handrails and reception area seemed to get sanitised about 150 times a day! The cabins were also cleaned daily and they gave you an

approximate time so you could make sure you weren't in at the same time.

In terms of food, it was table service for every meal, so there were no buffets. In the lounge and on the sun deck, you could sit with people from outside your cabin or household if you wanted – you just had to complete a track and trace form with your name and cabin number. Tables were all at least two metres apart, and the ship as a whole felt really spacious. Capacity has been reduced to 70%-80% to help with keeping your distance, and it worked really well.

### PORTS OF CALL

When it came to shore excursions, groups were smaller than usual. The guided bike tours were especially popular with those sufficiently youthful and athletic. They're such a good way to see a place and ideal for maintaining social distancing. The excursion at Tain L'Hermitage was particularly popular, taking guests up on a miniature train past scenic emerald vineyards, with wine-tasting at the top.

Most of the ports seemed quieter than they normally would be, so it was a great time to see them. Avignon was fairly busy, but Viviers was spookily quiet – we probably only saw about 10 other people. It was so tranquil, with a tree-lined avenue leading into the centre and a cathedral at the top of a steep hill. We just

wandered around for a while, taking it all in, and it was my favourite place on the trip.

I also loved Lyon. We moored overnight there and had a full day in the Old Town, which is beautiful with its huge cathedral and medieval cobbled streets; you can spend hours over a coffee just watching the world go by.

That's really my favourite thing about being on a river cruise – you get to see somewhere new every day, and you can wander around at your own pace. You can get off the ship, then get on again for lunch, then have another amble in the afternoon if you feel like it, and that's all part of the beauty of it.

My advice to clients would be to book, to enjoy it and to relax. Reassure them they aren't going to be in huge crowds, and if they don't fancy going somewhere when the ship is moored, they can just sit on the sun deck and enjoy the scenery. It will in all likelihood be one of the nicest holidays they've had. If I could go on it again tomorrow, I would! **TW**

### BOOK IT

**Newmarket Holidays** offers an eight-day Rhone, Burgundy and Provence cruise on *A-Rosa Stella*, departing May 8, 2021, from £1,669 for bookings made by September 30, or £1,719 thereafter. The price includes seven nights' full-board accommodation, a premium inclusive drinks package, flights from Luton and transfers. [newmarketholidays.co.uk](http://newmarketholidays.co.uk)