

# Changing tides

River cruising is back on the agenda, but what changes can clients expect on board? We get the lowdown from two European sailings with CroisiEurope and A-Rosa

Travel Weekly cruise reporter **Harry Kemble** sets sail on CroisiEurope's premium-level ship *Gil Eanes* for a trip along the Douro



**T**he captain cleverly manoeuvres the *Gil Eanes* into the vast lock, so narrow the towering walls are just a coat of paint away from the 80-metre-long ship's hull.

On the top deck, passengers who were chatting excitedly just moments ago are now quiet as they watch the drama unfold. They strain their necks to see the small patch of perfectly blue Portuguese sky above the high walls of the lock at the Carrapatelo Dam.

Gallons of water from the river now pour down into what is one of the tallest locks in Europe and the *Gil Eanes* is carried up 36 metres towards the warm September sun like a phoenix from the ashes. At the top of the lock, the ship's engines roar into life and we are soon sailing again through the heart of Portugal.

Almost all of the 60 passengers on our reduced-capacity cruise take their seats on the sun deck for the ship's next act, played out against a breathtaking backdrop of rolling, lush green hills. Many have a glass of something in their hand and their laughter rings out across a valley dotted with picturesque properties, enjoying all the things we took for granted just five months ago and can now appreciate all the more.

## DOURO ADVENTURE

This was the sixth voyage on the Douro for the CroisiEurope vessel after a summer devastated by Covid-19, and took place while mainland Portugal was exempt from the UK quarantine and the Foreign Office advisory against travel.

*Gil Eanes*, named after the 15th-century Portuguese explorer, is one of four CroisiEurope ships currently sailing on the river. The line plans to bring a fifth vessel back into service within the next few weeks, clearly hoping to dominate the popular Portuguese waterway as Europe finds its feet in these tricky times.

A lot of work has gone on behind the scenes to make passengers feel safe while still enjoying the sailing. The fact that crew offered to carry our luggage during the low-key embarkation shows how the line has not abandoned good service.

Masks had to be worn when moving around the ship – a tangible reminder that we were enjoying a river cruise during a pandemic. If a passenger forgot, the crew gently reminded them and often made a joke of the mishap. In our cabin, we found two masks had been provided just in case we'd forgotten ours. ➤



## DESTINATIONS

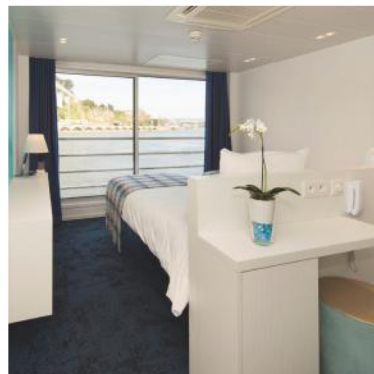
### CRUISE | RESTARTING RIVER



## top tip

River cruising is exempt from the current Foreign Office advice against cruise, but country-by-country restrictions still apply.

Check the latest advice before booking or travelling



## GETTING THERE

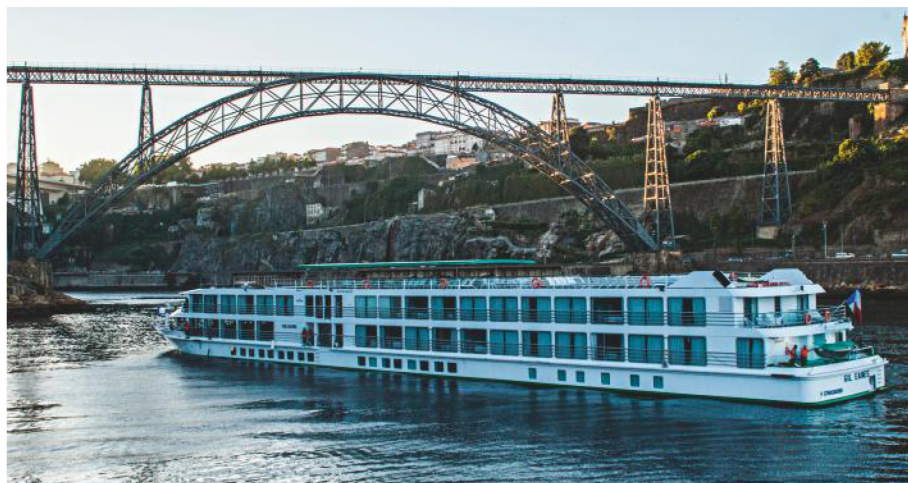
**TAP Air Portugal** is flying once a day from Heathrow to Porto until October 24, with twice-daily departures from Gatwick scheduled from October 25. Prices start at £67 return including taxes. [agents.flytap.com](https://agents.flytap.com)

## BOOK IT

**CroisiEurope** offers a six-night Douro cruise on board *Gil Eanes* starting at £833 per person based on travel in November 2021, including meals, drinks, excursions as specified and onboard entertainment. Flights not included. [croisieurope.co.uk](https://croisieurope.co.uk)

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: *Gil Eanes* on the Douro in Porto; Lamego; a cabin on *Gil Eanes*

PICTURES: CroisiEurope/Denis Merck



## COVID PROTOCOLS

Other tweaks to onboard life became apparent during our sailing. Each passenger 'bubble' had been assigned a dining table to be used at each mealtime. No food – apart from basic nibbles – was served on the sun deck, and the pool was closed.

All meals were taken in the main dining room, which crew in personal protective equipment deep-cleaned afterwards. For more than an hour three times a day, the room was stripped and every item, right down to the salt and pepper grinders, was disinfected. During meals, crew members took the opportunity to wipe every door handle so they didn't disturb passengers at other times.

Some of the passengers I spoke to, many of whom had sailed with CroisiEurope before, commented that pre-Covid cruises had been livelier – understandable given that capacity across the fleet has been capped at 75%.

A spare cabin on the bottom deck is kept vacant in case a passenger develops Covid symptoms and is forced to self-isolate; fortunately, it hadn't been required on this year's shortened season.

Reflecting on *Gil Eanes'* successful summer so far, cruise director Susana Melo says: "I am surprised by how passengers have reacted. The only thing that's different really is that they're now wearing masks."

## LIFE ASHORE

Shore excursions were as enjoyable as ever, bar the obligatory face masks. Once, passengers could expect



## GIL EANES CroisiEurope

This 66-cabin ship would normally hold 132 passengers, but capacity has been capped at 75% due to Covid restrictions.

It may not have multiple dining venues, a gym or, temporarily, a pool, but the ship more than makes up for this with style and space.

Cabins have a bright, contemporary feel and delightful blue colour scheme. Outdoor spaces can be found at the bow and on the top deck, where there is a huge parasol for passengers to sit under when the sun is high. Sunloungers also line the impressive outdoor deck.

The dining room, located on the main deck, has large windows to maximise the light and allow passengers to marvel at the passing sights along the Douro.

## REVIEWED BY Harry Kemble

to travel on a single coach – now 51-seat buses are laid on and no more than 30 passengers occupy each one to ensure they can socially distance.

Fortunately, passengers can still explore destinations such as the delightful towns of Régua and Pinhão on their own when they leave the protective rules on the ship.

"You can go by yourself," says Melo. "You can catch a taxi. But you must wear a mask at the monuments and inside restaurants. We must make sure passengers respect the [Portuguese] protocols. I am responsible for that."

CroisiEurope really should be applauded. All changes have been implemented sensitively and, despite remaining in a bubble at meals and being asked to wear a mask onboard, you still feel firmly 'on holiday'. The river cruise sector may have faced a bleak future just a few months ago, but the operator is leading the way for other lines plotting their comebacks. ➤