

# Rhine Siller

A wine-themed sailing is the ideal opportunity to tempt cruisers back onto Europe's great rivers, writes Amie Keeley



I am Brian MONSTERI," bellowed our captain. "Please, don't be afraid. I am a monster in name only!"

Our young and burly captain had made quite the entrance – jogging into the ship's lounge to thumping music and grabbing a mic en route – so I was half expecting him to break into song.

Sadly, there was no performance, but it was the first night of our river cruise and Captain Monster's energetic arrival had got all of us excited for the week ahead. Champagne in hand, we toasted to our health and set sail along the Rhine for our seven-day wine tasting cruise.

Joining us on board was Michael Keenan, our wine host. He runs the Keenan Winery in California's Napa Valley. Several of the American guests were members of his wine club and had heard about the cruise, which took place prior to the pandemic, through him.

## RISE OF RIESLING

As we sailed towards Strasbourg, Keenan hosted our first wine tasting in the ship's lounge. This introduced us to the wines of the Alsace region we were about to explore, which is best known for its "bright, high-acid cellar" whites, according to our daily cruise planner. A far cry from the sweet rieslings that were popular in

the 1980s (remember Blue Nun?), these wines were dry, sharp and citrusy.

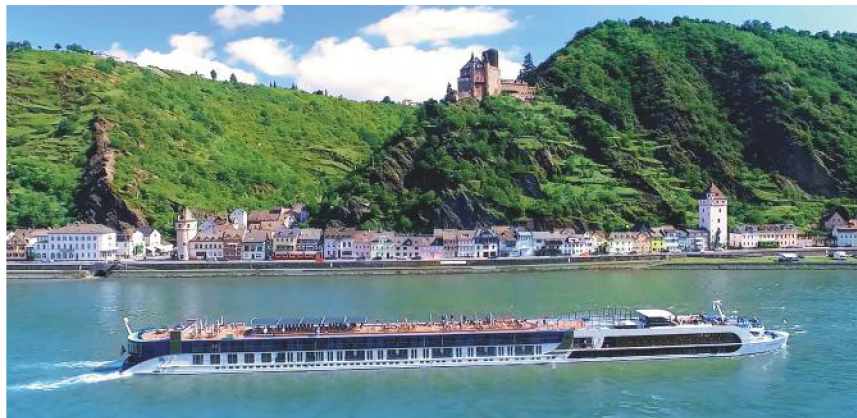
After docking in the winemaking town of Rudesheim, we made our way to nearby Mainz and its historic Bassenheimer Hof building, where steps led us into its dark wine cellars that date back to 1480.

Our host, Adolf, gave us a humorous history of winemaking in the region as we sat in the dimly lit cellar sipping samples of speciality riesling wines.

Rudesheim is home to sprawling vineyards overlooking the Rhine. A hike through row after row of vines blew away the cobwebs from the previous night's overindulgence and provided stunning views of the river and town below. A Roman bridge over the Nahe River marks the beginning of the Rhine Valley and is a notable reminder of the history of the region and its 1,000 years of winemaking.

When the Romans settled here, they brought their winemaking knowledge with them, cultivating vines on the hillsides and building cellars to store the fruits of their labour. The fertile soil and proximity to the Rhine made for ideal wine production, which continues to this day and has helped make Rudesheim one of Germany's most popular tourist destinations.

However, wine is not the only drink that the town is known for. No walk along its winding lanes and ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: AmaWaterways' *AmaMora* on the Rhine; wine tasting in a German vineyard; Würzburg; Amie Keeley (right) samples wine in the Bassenheimer Hof building in Mainz PICTURES: Shutterstock



taverns would be complete without a visit to a local cafe to try a traditional Rudesheim coffee. Packed with sugar, brandy, whipped cream and hot black coffee, it was the perfect antidote to a long hike through the vineyards on a cold November day.

Back on board, it was time for more wine tasting. This time, our host had prepared a game for guests, comparing old world and new world wines.

When asked for my preference, I had to confess I favoured the French and Italian reds we had sampled over our host's Californian varieties. He didn't seem too offended and I promised to try one of his reds for our paired wine dinner that evening, which he had designed along with our onboard chef.

### FINE DINING

Like all of AmaWaterways' fleet, our ship, the *AmaDante*, had been inducted into the prestigious La Chaînes des Rôtisseurs culinary guild in recognition of its fine food. In addition to the main dining room, the Chef's Table speciality restaurant also offers a tasting menu prepared right in front of you at the aft of the ship.

This focus on culinary excellence extended to our daily list of excursions. A highlight was the Flavours of Miltenberg tour.

Our guide took us through the medieval streets of this charming town, which looked like it had stepped out of a fairytale. Along the way, we sampled regional treats from speciality shops, including sausages, marzipan and German cheesecake.

As we continued our journey east, we stopped at Würzburg, the capital of Franconian wine country. Adorned with baroque and rococo architecture, the city is also home to Germany's second-largest winery. Set up in 1576, the Juliuspital wine estate was originally a hospital, which still functions today, and includes a vast winery. Huge wine barrels lined the long corridors of the cellar where riesling, Müller-Thurgau and the region's prized silvaner can be sampled.

### RIVERSIDE RIDES

Like many river cruise lines, AmaWaterways offers more active excursions for those up to the challenge, and carries bikes on board so guests can explore on two wheels.

I took the opportunity to pedal along the south bank of the Main River from Eltmann to Bamberg, sampling the area's famous speciality – smoked beer.

It seemed inappropriate to conclude my trip in an ale house, as cosy as it was, so I returned to a cold glass of riesling back on board as our journey came to an end.

Following a partnership with Kent winery Chapel Down, AmaWaterways' UK guests will now be able to combine and compare some of the best German wines with those made a little closer to home. A wine expert from the Chapel Down estate is due to join a seven-day sailing, *Melodies of the Danube*, departing on November 13 this year, as part of the line's Celebration of Wine cruise programme.

As for Captain Brian Monster, he is rumoured to be working on a new entrance routine (with singing) ahead of a return to cruising. **TW**

### BOOK IT

**AmaWaterways** is due to operate 60 Celebration of Wine river cruises through Europe this year, hosted by a range of wine experts, certified sommeliers and vineyard owners, and featuring lectures and tastings in addition to shore excursions. Normandy and Burgundy are among the new itineraries on offer. A Captivating Rhine Wine Cruise on *AmaMora* starts at £3,257 for a seven-night sailing from Amsterdam to Basel, including flights from selected UK gateways and overseas transfers, departing on November 11. [amawaterways.co.uk](http://amawaterways.co.uk)