

Rolling on a river

Travel Weekly boards three ships on the Rhine to find cruises to suit every budget

If there were a buzzword of the moment in the cruising world, it might just be 'river'. The sector grew by 11% in 2016, according to the latest Clia figures, and it's not hard to see why. No-fly options, the ability to dock in the heart of the city, and short, weekend-friendly itineraries make it a no-brainer for clients wanting to explore less-frequented towns and villages without the hassle of organising it themselves.

Among the best-selling destinations in Europe is, of course, the Rhine. "We've found it to be particularly popular with new-to-river customers because of its combination of accessibility and beautiful rolling scenery,"

says Jasmin Brady, trade marketing executive at Scenic.

Operators across the board are boosting what they offer in the region in response to demand. Emerald Waterways and AmaWaterways have both added three Rhine itineraries for 2018, while Uniworld's new U brand will offer something for the younger crowd next year with its Rolling on the Rhine trip, combining cocktail-making and cheese-tasting with biking and nightlife.

Riviera Travel, meanwhile, has introduced a Christmas markets itinerary for this December, joining the likes of Titan Travel, Avalon and A-Rosa, which offer their own festive sailings in the region.

It's easy to see what's driving interest. From the fairytale castles of the Rhine Gorge to the sprawling vineyards of the Moselle region, the landscapes are spectacular and the cities – spanning Cologne, Strasbourg, Frankfurt, Basel, Amsterdam and beyond – are among Europe's most entrancing.

River cruises here offer the chance to explore it all while kicking back with a cocktail on the sundeck and indulging in good food. And with high-value packages on the table, they should be on your radar. To help you line up the right trip with the right client, we review three ships now sailing the region.

SAVE

Serenity

The River Cruise Line

First-time sailors wanting to test the waters without breaking the bank should look to The River Cruise Line – specifically its three-night Delights of Amsterdam and the Dutch Bulbfields cruise.

As stated by many of the passengers I joined on board the 190-passenger *Serenity* – one of two ships chartered by the cruise line – this river sailing came as a welcome change and suitable transition for travellers who have already done rail and coach holidays and are looking for



→ something different. With travel by Eurostar to Amsterdam, it also offers a no-fly holiday likely to appeal to older guests (most on our ship were over 65).

Staying in a Panorama Deck cabin, the pleasant twin room came with an en-suite bathroom, television, radio, safe and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the waterways.

For its size, storage in the cabin was surprisingly generous, largely helped by the fold-up beds, and its location on the upper deck allowed for an unspoilt view of the Rhine and IJsselmeer Lake. On board the atmosphere was friendly and relaxed, and furnishings were bright and contemporary thanks to a refurbishment this spring.

At the hub of the ship is the lounge area, which offers almost 360-degree views, plus a popular 24/7 tea and coffee station and quieter library and games area.

The food was a highlight. Breakfast and lunch comprised a cooked buffet and cold selection, while the three-course farewell meal concluded with a three-foot-long baked Alaska being paraded through the main dining room, sparklers included.

The round trip from Amsterdam took in some of Holland's most iconic river scenery, crossing the vast IJsselmeer and passing the historic fishing village of Hoorn.

Our first stop was at Kampen, where we boarded a coach to travel to the stunning 17th-century Het Loo Palace in Apeldoorn. The Dutch Baroque architecture of the palace was spectacular, and winding corridors led out to a sprawling estate of manicured, designed gardens.

Next up were the Keukenhof Gardens, complete with vibrant tulip displays rolling into the distance and meticulously



ABOVE: The River Cruise Line's *Serenity*

cared-for flower-beds and houses. The final night we transferred to a smaller vessel to spend the evening traversing the Amsterdam canals with cheese and wine.

The River Cruise Line may have been pulled back from the brink in March following the collapse of Diamond Holidays, but it now

looks set for a plain-sailing future.

Book it: The four-day itinerary starts at £439 per person, based on two sharing an en-suite cabin (full-board), including return coach travel and ferry from Dover and a cruise director (departures on April 21 and 28, 2018).

rivercruiseline.co.uk

Reviewed by Natasha Salmon →

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SPEND

Serenade 1

Titan Travel

It might have been my first time cruising, but it didn't take me long to get into the swing of things on Titan's first exclusively chartered ship – food, stroll, food, drink, nap, food, drink (with added culture). Why hadn't I discovered this before?

Day one alone had me converted – and not just because of the six-course Captain's Gala Dinner. This swanky affair included 'vol au vent with guinea fowl salpicon' and was polished off with a melting chocolate lava cake.

But it was the relaxed feel of the whole thing that really charmed me, from the friendliness of the staff and the laid-back ambience to the casual lounge area, complete with cocktail-stocked bar, cosy sofas and floor-to-ceiling windows.

Titan chose the four-star ship for its "personal, family feel", according to managing director Andy Squirrel, and it shows; with 68 cabins, you get to know everyone after a couple of days, which makes it a wise choice

for sociable types. It's also a good option for first-timers who might be intimidated by anything too extravagant.

Agents on board seemed to agree.

"If clients have never river cruised before, they'd feel comfortable on this, because you don't have to dress up all the time but you still get the lovely surroundings," says Sarah Holden of Carrick Travel.

The decor is classic and comfortable, with interiors tastefully designed for its client base (generally aged 60-plus); think dark blue sofas, patterned carpets and colourful cushions.

Cabins, spread across three decks, are airy, homely and relatively spacious for a river ship, with twin beds that can be pushed together, a TV, well-stocked mini fridge, kettle and en-suite bathrooms featuring separate bathtubs (quite the rarity).

French balconies are found on all of the upper and middle deck cabins, providing expansive views over the water, and clients after added space can opt for a suite with a full private balcony and handy outside seating area.

Elsewhere there's a small fitness room and sauna for those wanting



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to sweat out the lava cake calories, and a handy 24-hour tea and coffee machine for those in need of a caffeine fix. Wi-Fi isn't available in the rooms, which makes connectivity a little tricky, but for those wanting to switch off it might come as a welcome surprise.

My favourite part was the sun deck, where we managed to catch plenty of rays alongside pretty sunsets and, at night, twinkling lights from nearby towns and cities.

That, and the food. Breakfast was a buffet spread, while lunch and dinner were four-course, à la carte affairs featuring traditional British dishes served at long, eight-seat tables with complimentary wine and beer. It was all followed up with light entertainment

in the lounge each evening, including a pianist and saxophone soloist on one occasion.

Sailing from Cologne to Amsterdam showed us the likes of Hoorn, a 17th-century harbour city home to quintessentially Dutch canal houses. Once a base for the Dutch East India Company, it has an intriguing history which we learnt about on a gentle walking tour with a local guide (available as an optional extra for £12 on certain itineraries).

It was topped off with an afternoon at leisure in Amsterdam, where wandering the labyrinth of canals and sipping a waterside coffee al fresco seemed an apt end to a relaxing trip along one of Europe's most scenic rivers.

Serenade 1 will be sailing 18 itineraries on the Rhine, Main, Danube and Dutch waterways in 2017 and 2018.

Book it: Titan offers a 12-day Classical Journey from Cologne to Amsterdam from £1,899 per person, based on an October 16 departure and including coach travel, most meals, four excursions, a tour manager and a VIP door-to-door travel service.

titanagents.co.uk

Reviewed by Laura French



LEFT AND ABOVE:
Serenade 1's sundeck and restaurant

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LEFT:
Suite on
AmaKristina

RIGHT:
Chef's Table
restaurant

BELOW:
AmaKristina
on the
Rhine in
Germany



PICTURES: MIKE LOUAGIE, MIROSLAV PETRASKO, MICHAEL DONNE

➔ SPLURGE

AmaKristina

AmaWaterways

AmaWaterways' newest ship, *AmaKristina*, feels more like a contemporary, luxury hotel than your typical five-star river vessel.

Launched in May and named after Kristin Karst, the line's executive vice-president and godmother, the ship's decor is modern throughout, from the unfussy curtains to the stylish, low-hanging light at the Chef's Table.

There are splashes of colour but the overall feel is understated luxury, with not a gaudy chandelier in sight. There are 79 staterooms, spread over three decks, and four suites, with a total passenger capacity of 158. All cabins on the second and top decks come with the line's signature twin balconies (French balcony and outside balcony) and an Apple Mac, which serves as an entertainment system.

The ship is home to three



All cabins on the second and top decks come with twin balconies and an Apple Mac

dining venues including the Chef's Table, which offers a stunning tasting menu with wine pairings, and the Main Restaurant, which features stylish fixed-booth seating and tables. The Main Lounge and Bar is more casual with lighter, tapas-style food available.

AmaWaterways is the only major river cruise line to be a member of the Chaîne Des Rôtisseurs – an international gastronomic society founded in Paris and dedicated to fine cuisine. Unsurprisingly, the food, and service, is exceptional.

The evening menu changes

daily on its Basel to Amsterdam voyage, but there are some staples – such as steak, salmon and chicken – which are always available. Breakfast and lunch is buffet service with some menu options, and wine, beer and soft drinks are all included with lunch and dinner.

The Sun Deck upstairs has a heated pool with a swim-up bar, walking track and obligatory giant chess set, and there is lots of seating with comfortable lounge chairs and blankets.

On the activity front there's plenty to amuse. AmaWaterways prides itself on its active options – it lays claim to being the first line to include bikes on board as standard – with all main tours designed to show guests the top sights and landmarks.

Other options include biking and hiking tours, which require a minimum level of fitness; walking and city tours for smaller groups, led by a local guide; and Limited Edition tours, ideal if clients have already visited the city and want

to see something a little off the tourist trail.

Each activity is categorised into either regular, active or gentle, so guests can choose the tour that best suits their level of fitness. Entertainment is provided every night in the Main Lounge and Bar, with the schedule covering everything from live classical music to an Abba tribute band.

AmaKristina offers seven-day Rhine itineraries departing from Amsterdam and Basel.

Book it: A seven-night Enchanting Rhine cruise, visiting Basel, Breisach, Strasbourg, Mannheim, Rudesheim, Rhine-Gorge, Koblenz, Cologne and Amsterdam, costs from £1,667 per person, including a £500 discount for bookings made by July 31 (normal price £2,167). The price is based on a Category D cabin and includes all meals, complimentary daily tours and use of onboard bicycles, departing November 18.

amawaterways.co.uk

Reviewed by Amie Keeley **TW**

