

Tulips and Taittinger

Enjoy a blooming marvellous sailing – even when water levels are low, writes **Olly Beckett**

Amsterdam's canals are fed by the waters of the Rhine, where my cruise on board *Riverside Debussy* began. Just like the gentle piano in *Clair de Lune*, a piece by the ship's namesake composer, these waterways are serene and reflective – a welcome contrast to the Dutch capital's busy streets.

On my first evening on Riverside Luxury Cruises' Romantic Rhine itinerary – one of the line's most popular routes – we were welcomed into Amsterdam with an evening excursion on a traditional canal boat. Delectable desserts and seemingly bottomless flutes of Taittinger were served as we sailed, while a guide pointed out the sights, an accordion player ➤



RIVERSIDE DEBUSSY

Originally built in 2018 for Crystal Cruises, *Debussy* entered service for Riverside in spring 2024. The majority of its UK sales are driven by the trade – up to 90%, according to the line – and the ship is sure to please luxury-loving clients. A total of 55 suites – from Melody at 182sq ft to the Owner's Suite at four times the size – give uninterrupted river views with floor-to-ceiling windows. Amenities abound, including butlers, a heated and enclosed swimming pool, a well-stocked fitness suite and a spa.

Large areas are dedicated to dining, with the Waterside serving the day's three meals plus Bistro, a coffee bar stocked with sweet snacks all day. Up to 12 passengers can book the Vintage Room for special Chef's Table dinners, while in the Palm Court lounge, clients can enjoy gentle piano music as they sip cocktails.

Sister ships *Riverside Bach* and *Mahler*, currently chartered by Uniworld, are also due to rejoin the fleet in 2027 and 2028 respectively.



The Vintage Room



kept the mood lively and the dozens of bridges we passed beneath lit up as dusk descended.

The line makes a point of serving local produce, so the canal boat briefly stopped to collect *bitterballen*, delicious Dutch meaty croquettes that taste best when dipped in sweet mustard. Having missed dinner, I impressed the guide with my appetite.

FLOWER POWER

As enticing as Amsterdam's nightlife might be, our alarms were set for a 7.30am departure to see Keukenhof, a former aristocratic hunting ground turned into a 79-acre tulip garden. Thanks to our comfy coach transfer, we arrived shortly after the 8am opening, so the gardens were peaceful and quiet.

"The tulip originally comes from Central Asia," said our guide, Bert. "There are over 3,000 varieties of tulips, and the bulbs at Keukenhof are hand-planted."

That's quite a task, considering Keukenhof gardeners plant around seven million tulip bulbs every year. The gardens are open from March to May, but the best time to see the tulips is the middle of April, Bert explained. Spring departures get booked up far in advance, so clients wanting to see this next year would do well to book sooner rather than later.

For just over an hour, I roamed the dazzling gardens before people started streaming in. I found a sense of tranquillity on long, winding gravel paths

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Palm Court on board *Riverside Debussy*; Taittinger; Cochem on the Moselle River

PICTURES: Ian Schemper; Shutterstock/Page Frederique; Florian Trykowski/Nordic Music Photography



“Blossom drifted from the trees like snow and all around there were bursts of colour set against fresh spring grass

that offered plenty of photo stops, including a windmill embraced by bright beds of tulips. Blossom drifted from the trees like snow and all around there were bursts of colour set against fresh spring grass.

WINE ON THE RHINE

Back on *Debussy*, there was an itinerary change afoot as we sailed slowly towards Germany. After the driest March on record in Germany, water levels in the Rhine dropped to half their usual level, so we skipped a planned stop in Utrecht to make a beeline for Dusseldorf.

The journey was 21 hours, non-stop, but the blissful onboard experience reminded me of the joys of staying on a river ship. I indulged in a tasting of local wines from the Rhine Valley, gawped at liveaboard cargo ships and eye-catching industrial buildings along the banks, and worked my way through the extensive cocktail menu – with delights such as the lavender-infused 'residencia' or my favourite, 'the owner', with its tantalising mix of rum, cinnamon syrup and mango puree. ➤

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | RHINE



ABOVE: Cologne's Gothic cathedral PICTURE: Shutterstock/engel.ac.com

SWEET CITY

In Düsseldorf, the coaches were back to take us on to Cologne while *Debussy* navigated a series of busy locks. When booking a Riverside cruise, shore excursions can either be included in the fare or removed to reduce the cost. The latter option also offers extra independence – particularly for seasoned river cruisers who have ticked off the key sights covered on city tours. There are bikes and hiking poles to borrow for those keen to explore.

In Cologne, I was presented with two excursion options: visit a chocolate museum or embark on a city tour. Despite my chocoholic tendencies, I chose the latter, having never visited Cologne and feeling intrigued by its imposing skyline. First, guide Benny showed us to the city's star attraction, the Unesco-listed 13th-century cathedral, which is visited by up to 20,000 people per day – some of whom pay €8 to clamber 533 steps up one of the enormous, soot-blackened Gothic towers.

Diverting my gaze from the soaring spires, Benny pointed to adjacent streets fanning off the city square and told the story of a tank battle that occurred there during the final days of the Second World War. It's in stark contrast to the jovial atmosphere that surrounded me that spring day, with people drinking petite glasses of the local beer, *kölsch*.

"My uncle always looks disappointed when they bring these small glasses," Benny mused. "But then as soon as the glass empties, the waiters bring another without asking. They'll keep bringing them too, unless you put a beer mat on your glass."

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CHANGING PLACES

While we got an education in Cologne's culture and beer mat etiquette, *Debussy* sailed onwards to meet us in a quiet location in the city. Here, the unusual shallowness of the Rhine was particularly notable. Unable to travel to Basel due to low water levels, the captain opted to change course at Koblenz and cruise down the Moselle instead.

I didn't hear complaints from the guests. In fact, compared with the busy Rhine, the Moselle was a balm of scenic beauty, where forested hills shelter castles either side of the river. In place of the planned excursions, the Riverside team offered a tour of 900-year-old Eltz Castle, 30 minutes from where we docked in ancient Cochem. Turreted, tall and overlooking the hilly forests from a 70-metre promontory, Eltz is every bit the fairytale castle, with most of it open to the public and some parts still occupied by its aristocratic owners. With generously sized rooms, large windows and breathtaking views, it's not all that different to life aboard *Debussy* – although lacking its butlers, more's the pity. **TW**

BOOK IT

Riverside Luxury Cruises' seven-night Romantic Rhine Southbound starts at £3,168 per person, full-board, based on two sharing a Melody Suite and including flights. A Seahorse Suite costs from £5,372 per person all-inclusive, based on two sharing, with flights, plus included drinks and excursions. riverside-cruises.com