

Viva on the Rhine

As Viva Cruises looks to put itself on the European river cruise map, Alex Spencer takes a trip through Germany



Viva Tiara moored in Düsseldorf

“Welcome on board,” smiles cruise director Anita as we arrive in the bright lobby of our ship and crew members step across the shining marble floor to show us to our cabins. Later we gather in the lounge for a welcome cocktail before tucking into a four-course dinner accompanied by free-flowing wine.

So far so normal as premium river cruise experiences go, but in this case we’re sailing with a line that few agents will have heard about, despite knowing many of its ships. That is all set to change with a 2022 campaign to put Viva Cruises on the European river cruise map. The tour operator arm of Swiss shipping company Scylla – which builds and charters vessels for companies including UK favourite Riviera Travel and upmarket US line Tauck – was launched in 2019 but hit by the onset of Covid-19 and put on hold. Now, though, it’s back in action.

MEET THE FLEET

I’m on board the newly refurbished 153-passenger Viva Tiara, which previously sailed as Swiss Tiara for Riviera. With Viva Moments – formerly Riviera’s Robert Burns – and new-builds Viva One and Viva Two launching this year, it is one of four vessels that will be sailing exclusively for Viva Cruises.

During the 2022 season, which spans all the main waterways including the Danube, Moselle, Rhone and Seine, Viva will also operate Viva Voyage, Viva Gloria, Swiss Ruby and Swiss Diamond, and they will all get the line’s bright branding for the duration.

Additionally, Viva is breaking the mould by offering year-round cruising, with wellness and culinary-themed sailings during the January to March period when other river ships are moored up for winter.

Our cruise along the Rhine happened to be a festive one, focused on Christmas markets. And ➤



ABOVE: Viva Tiara prides itself on its flexibility, with no set mealtimes in the restaurant (top) PICTURES: Rob Nijhuis

Viva is the only river line based in Düsseldorf, where we embarked. Sailings can be packaged with flights and transfers, and for independent cruise-only clients it's an easy train ride from the airport into the city.

Many of the English-speaking itineraries are round-trips from Düsseldorf and we had time to explore the atmospheric old town, stopping for a glass of copper-coloured 'old beer', denoting the traditional brewing style for which Düsseldorf is famous. Some braver souls tried the renowned Killepitsch, a fiery local herb liqueur.

DO AS YOU PLEASE

Back on board we didn't go thirsty: Viva is an all-inclusive line with an open bar, a welcome bottle of fizz on arrival and minibars restocked daily in all cabins.

Our leisurely voyage to Koblenz, Königswinter and Cologne was even more relaxed due to Viva's flexible approach. There are no set mealtimes and I liked the freedom of being able to head down to the restaurant for a later lunch or dinner. Similarly, all excursions are optional and bookable as extras rather than included in the fare. As well as providing value for money, I didn't feel I was 'missing out' by choosing not to go on all of them. Instead I took a dip in the sun deck hot tub and reserved a slot in the small private sauna.

Ever-helpful crew members add to the friendly onboard vibe. Viva Cruises has adopted the tagline 'Enjoy the Moment' and the line won't disappoint clients who relish all-inclusive value and flexibility, and who appreciate the opportunity to sail year-round. **TW**

ASK THE EXPERT



"We attended WTM in 2021 and we're actively setting up partnerships with UK travel agents with standard commission rates starting at 10%. Future plans include roadshows, online training, having an agent portal on the newly designed website and hosting fam trips. We also offer group rates and organise special excursions for groups with specific interests.

"Viva Cruises is all about flexibility and we see that as our USP. Dining is not at a set time, so guests can eat later if they wish, and excursions are not included, so passengers can choose exactly what they want to do. We are aiming for a younger target group and we know they won't be interested in standard walking tours as they can just look at Google Maps on their phones. The excursions we offer will always have an extra twist, such as having lunch or dinner at places where locals go, or including a wine tasting along the way."

Patrick Ell, head of marketing and digital, Viva Cruises

BOOK IT

The four-night **Rhine Magical Christmas** round-trip Frankfurt sailing on *Viva Tiara*, departing on December 22, 2022, and calling at Mannheim, Speyer, Strasbourg and Mainz, leads in at €695 cruise-only including all meals, snacks, drinks, minibar, Wi-Fi and gratuities. viva-cruises.com/en



VIVA TIARA

Any agents familiar with *Swiss Tiara* wouldn't recognise the ship in its new guise, which belies the fact the vessel was built in 2006. Dark wood and traditional trappings were stripped away in the 2020 stern-to-bow makeover and *Viva Tiara* has emerged as a vessel that looks brand new.

A majority of the 76 cabins spread across three decks have French balconies and the 12 lower-deck cabins have large fixed windows. Furnishings now have a contemporary blue and cream theme, and the modern bathrooms, with innovative push-button showers, include robes and slippers (available on request for passengers not in one of the five suites) and upmarket Rituals toiletries.

The former small lounge at the back has been transformed into the chic Bistro with an open-plan kitchen. Passengers can book and dine here at least once a week at no extra cost and the space is also used for light lunches and as a quiet sitting area at other times.

Reviewed by ALEX SPENCER

