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The River Cruise Revolution

No doubt about it. Those European riverboats that slowly—very slowly—make their way down the Continent's most iconic waterways are picking up speed. A wave of stylish new vessels are entering service, upending the traditional notion of a river cruise as one big snooze. **Wendy Perrin** reports on the changes afloat

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Our second annual roundup of the best ocean and river voyages. *p. 46*

p. 33 **ALL-STAR STRETCHES**
Europe's most scenic waterways.

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Our no-holds-barred reviews of six riverboats from the top cruise lines.

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A paddle wheeler returns to the Mississippi.

Aboard the trendsetting
S.S. Antoinette, sailing
down the Rhine in Germany.

I AWOKE IN A HANDMADE canopy bed fit for Marie Antoinette, peered across the room—past the gilded mirrors and the velvet Louis XV chairs with matching footstools and the cloche of marzipan brought by my Romanian butler, Valentin—and, through a lavishly draped balcony, spied a medieval German castle rising in the morning mist. No, I had not died and come back as an eighteenth-century princess. I was simply aboard one of the new generation of European river ships. It was hard to believe that a river ship cabin could be more spacious and regal than any of the staterooms I had slept in on ocean liners. Traditionally river-ship rooms have been small and spartan, and balconies rare, since the vessels must be built narrow enough to fit through locks and low enough to pass under old-world bridges. But proof that I was on a river ship lay just outside my floor-to-ceiling window: Each time I gazed out, we were drifting past another medieval castle.

The S.S. *Antoinette* is not your grandmother's river ship. As if gliding down the Rhine isn't entertainment enough, the vessel has an indoor pool—with walls of glass on three sides and a current you can swim against—and a vintage Hollywood-style theater screening 3-D movies. Every room has a flat-screen TV, DVD player, iPod dock, and Nespresso machine. Competition in the river cruise category is so heated that, remarkably, the *Antoinette* is no longer sailing the leading edge even though it launched only last year. River cruise companies will have introduced 11 new European river ships by the end of 2012 and will roll out a dozen more next year, spending fortunes to outdo one another with innovative architecture. Uniworld, which built the *Antoinette*, broke the mold when it designed an elegant rooftop restaurant and nightclub whose ceilings can be lowered to fit under bridges, as well as staterooms with glass-walled "observatories" that convert into open-air balconies at the touch of a button. This year, Viking River Cruises has reinvented the observation lounge, launching six new ships with indoor/outdoor terraces at the bow whose retractable floor-to-ceiling glass doors allow for alfresco dining. It has also built river cruising's first set of true suites: cabins with a separate living room and bedroom, some with wrap-around balconies yielding 270-degree views. Other companies are adding bells and whistles such as staterooms for singles and sundecks with putting greens. AmaWaterways' new *AmaCerto* has a swim-up bar in its tiny pool.

River cruising has become the fastest-growing segment of the cruise industry, especially among American baby boomers. *Condé Nast Traveler* readers are fans too: They rate river ships more highly than they do seagoing ones, citing better itineraries, shore excursions, service, facilities, and design—although they still prefer the cabins and food on traditional cruise

ships. That could change soon, however, with river-ship builders pouring billions of dollars into enlarging cabins, adding balconies, and introducing epicurean and outdoor dining venues.

What sort of passenger is best suited to a river cruise? To find out, I took to three European rivers—the Rhine, the Danube, and the Seine—on three of the cruise lines that *Condé Nast Traveler* readers rate highest. I compared them with what I've experienced on ocean cruises as well as by driving along these same rivers and staying in hotels. What I found is that compared with a Mediterranean cruise, for example, you tend to stop in more places (often more than one per day) and dock right in town or within easy walking distance. The view out your window changes more often: Rather than a vast expanse of uninterrupted sea, you see a riverbank—which is sometimes scenic, sometimes industrial—or the wall of a lock. What I also learned is that you're really on a group tour that happens to be going by boat rather than by bus, which means you spend far more hours a day socializing both in port and on board. Of course, a river cruise does not allow the freedom of sightseeing by car because you're bound to the ship's schedule. Traveling by car, you're free to stop in charming towns that the boats skip, can spend more time in the places you like best, and are able to work around the weather: If your Rhine cruise stops in Cologne for only three hours and it's raining, you're out of luck, whereas if you're on your own timetable, you can stay till the sun is shining again.

Who are your fellow passengers on a river cruise? Usually people in their 60s and 70s, typically Americans or those from other English-speaking countries who want to relax and enjoy themselves and not have to worry about planning their own itinerary and finding their way around. They like the ease of traveling by ship ("You only have to unpack once") but are turned off by big-ship ocean cruising ("You have to walk miles to get to your cabin, and there are always so many people in your way").

ALL-STAR STRETCHES

Europe's most scenic waterways



1 DANUBE

The second-longest river on the Continent and one of its busiest, the Danube begins in the mountains of Germany's Black Forest and weaves 1,770 miles southeast through eight other countries and four capital cities to the Black Sea.

Most scenic stretch: Between the Austrian towns of Melk and Krems (23 miles).

Don't miss:

Vineyards and monasteries line both banks in the storybook-lovely Wachau Valley. In charming Dürnstein, a steep 25-minute hike from the water's edge leads to the ruins of medieval Kuenringer Castle and fine river views.

The Rhine is especially scenic near Rüdesheim, a German wine village.



▼ ALL-STAR STRETCHES



2 MAIN

One of the Rhine's largest tributaries, the Main flows through the forests of Germany's enchanting southwest. The water turns terra-cotta as it passes through the mineral-rich Spessart hills. Foxes, boars, and other wildlife are easily spotted beneath the towering oaks onshore.

Most scenic stretch: Between Miltenberg and Wertheim (20 miles).

Don't miss: Zum Riesen, Germany's oldest tavern, is in the walled town of Miltenberg. Order a locally brewed Faust beer or a local red wine (Miltenberg's sandstone turns out velvety reds, including the worthy Portugieser and Spätburgunder).

They feel safer on a river than at sea ("If our boat started to sink, we could get to shore"), like the fact that there's no chance of getting seasick, and relish the personal attention they receive on a small ship. "The staff make you feel special," said Sara, a passenger from Charleston on the *Antoinette*. "We mentioned to our butler that we were traveling for our fortieth wedding anniversary, and when we got back to the room that night, there were rose petals all over the bed and a beautiful porcelain tray on it with chocolates, a bottle of champagne, and a card from the hotel director wishing us a happy anniversary. I felt like a queen."

On my three cruises, the only person I could find who wasn't an instant river-cruising convert was . . . me. I love seeing Europe from the perspective of its waterways—it was hard to pry myself away from the top deck, where I could watch history unfold as we breezed along—but otherwise I felt trapped in a group-tour bubble. When I'm abroad, I want to eat where the locals eat and socialize with them, not with my fellow Americans. On river cruises, however, you eat nearly every meal onboard, with the other passengers, and you're in port so briefly that it's hard to meet the locals. Sure, you could opt to dine off the ship when it's in port, and you could skip the group shore excursions in favor of exploring on your own, but few passengers do since the excursions and meals are included in the cruise price.

Still, on all three cruises I heard far fewer complaints than I do on big seagoing ships. "We're seasoned travelers, and we've never had better service," said Jim from Canberra, Australia, who was traveling on the Danube with his wife, Liz, on AmaWaterways' *AmaBella*. "We're in our mid- and late-60s, and we want somebody else to handle the logistics. True, you don't meet locals and you're in a bubble, but you can be as vigorous or as lazy, as social or as unsocial, as you wish. Best of all, you're never at sea for a day. Every day you're off the ship in a new place." Kaycee, a 34-year-old from Las Ve-

Uniworld, which built the *Antoinette*, broke the mold when it designed an elegant rooftop restaurant and nightclub whose ceilings can be lowered to fit under bridges

gas accompanying her mom on the *Antoinette*, put it this way: "It's a tasting menu. It's Europe Lite. If you want to experience the actual culture, you'll need to come back another time and stay longer. It's like visiting the zoo versus visiting the Serengeti. But we're loving every minute of it."

Thanks to the expansion and innovation in river cruising, there will eventually be a ship to suit everyone, including me. **The cruise I enjoyed most, on the Seine, was ironically the least fancy. Grand Circle Cruise Line's M.S. *Bizet* had the smallest cabins and the most limited in-room movie selection, but it had the people I liked best—meaning extroverted,**

intellectually curious passengers and the highest-caliber guides. "These are the most stimulating and well-traveled people we've ever met on a cruise," said Betsy, a worldly traveler in her 70s from Asheville, North Carolina, and I had to agree. They included a Navy admiral, a legendary football coach, college professors, and E.R. doctors. The passengers were almost exclusively retired Americans, but they were the best conversationalists I've found on a ship. Personally, I didn't need an indoor pool or a movie theater: I preferred to spend my time onshore or on the top deck near the wheelhouse. Truth be told, I never used my balcony: Who wants to see only one side of a river? I chose to sit up top where I could see both. I found that the fancier the ship, the more time its passengers spent on board rather than onshore, and I prefer when my destination is not the ship itself but the destination. So the next time I take a river cruise, I might not opt for the latest, greatest ship: I'll choose an affordable one so I don't feel bad about buying meals onshore and skipping the group tours. But that's just me. If what you want most is to feel like a queen (or king), there's a cruise for you too. □



1. The *Antoinette*'s Baccarat crystal and sapphire chandelier used to hang in New York City's Tavern on the Green. 2. Suites on the *Antoinette* come with butler service, a bottle of wine upon arrival, an evening *amuse-bouche*, and free shoe-shine services.

DO YOU BELONG ON A RIVERBOAT, AN OCEAN LINER, OR NO SHIP AT ALL? TO FIND OUT, DOWNLOAD OUR DIGITAL EDITION TO TAKE OUR RIVER CRUISE QUIZ. FOR MORE CRUISE ADVICE, VISIT CONDENAST TRAVELER.COM/CRUISES.