

RIVER cruise control

BY GEMMA PRICE

*With new ships, ever-more exclusive itineraries
and increasingly specialised on-board and on-shore
experiences, there's never been a better time to
try river cruising.*



Cruising is big business – the number of Australian cruise passengers has more than doubled over the past four years, with some three percent of Australians taking a cruise last year.

“Cruise vacations are more affordable than other land-based alternatives, including transport, accommodation, meals and entertainment in the final price,” says Tomas Matesanz, Director of European Region Communications for Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) Europe. “Operators expect demand to grow.”

WHY RIVER CRUISING?

River cruising can take you to hard-to-reach towns and beautiful scenery in countries all over the world in an up-close and unhurried way. While ocean-going cruises might list Berlin and Paris as ports of call, they usually have to dock a good distance away, which makes for a long day trip. River cruisers are taken to the heart of the action, especially in cities like Vienna, Amsterdam and Budapest, all established on waterway trade and all destinations where rivers remain at the scenic and spiritual heart of the city.

You’ll also be saved from struggling with a foreign language or picking up a guidebook as most river cruises incorporate tours in all-inclusive packages, allowing guests to experience more cities and attractions than they could on an ocean cruise or bus tour. Travelling by riverboat ensures a smooth, safe and motion-sickness free journey, and the size and configuration of river vessels mean that all staterooms have a water view. While ocean-going ships have been getting bigger, river cruisers are becoming smaller and more intimate. And, as with all cruises, you need only unpack once.

“Our vessels have an average of 130 guests so there’s a level of intimacy and personalised hospitality that you won’t find on large ships – the staff knows you by name and bartenders and waiters know your preferences and dislikes after the first day,” says John Molinaro, General Manager of cruise specialist company Uniworld.

WHAT’S NEW?

In 2013, AmaWaterways launched *AmaPrima* and *AmaVida*. In July 2013, Orient Express added a sister ship to their Myanmar-based *Road To Mandalay: Orcaella*, a luxurious 50-passenger

river cruiser that offers seven- and 11-night journeys along the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers.

After launching six new ships last year, the world’s largest river cruise operator, Viking River Cruises, launched a fleet of 10 new longships last March, breaking a world record for the most ships christened on one date. By 2014, Avalon Waterways will have 14 ships sailing Europe’s waters (the oldest ship was launched in 2007) as well as ships on the Mekong, Yangtze, Amazon and Nile.

The on-board experience is also markedly more upscale. River cruisers used to get a bad rap for being smaller and more spartan than their ocean-going counterparts, but no more – enlarged cabins, queen-sized beds, fleur-de-lys bedspreads and balconies of a size befitting a Bavarian princess have become *de rigueur*, with operators continually one-upping each other in the luxury of accommodations offered. Vessels still have to be narrow and low enough to negotiate locks and bridges, but operators are coming up with innovative solutions to overcome the constraints of the climate and surroundings.

Ceilings of the rooftop restaurant and nightclub of Uniworld’s regally appointed *Antoinette* can be lowered to fit under bridges; AmaWaterways’ new, deluxe 164-passenger



ROOM WITH A VIEW

Right, from top: Views of the river from the Panorama Suite on *Avalon Expression*; a luxurious cabin on Orient Express’ new *Orcaella* in Myanmar.

Opening spread: *Avalon Vista* cruising the Danube in Budapest.

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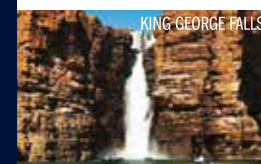
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AmaCerto, which debuted alongside its twin sister AmaSonata in Europe in 2014, has a heated pool with swim-up bar; and other companies are adding extra draws like sundecks with putting greens and lectures by local experts for when the weather misbehaves.

Outstanding amenities and gourmand-curated dining experiences that take full advantage of organic, locally sourced ingredients along the itinerary are now standard

rather than added extras. There has also been a marked move towards all-inclusive itineraries so that guests can enjoy themselves on board without having to dip into their wallets during their trip or be nickel and dined for every indulgence on disembarkation.

AmaWaterways is running a series of wine-themed itineraries in 2013, each hosted by special-guest European and American wine experts and built around lectures and tastings,



CIAO, BELLA

Clockwise from left: APT's AmaBella in Europe; a Royal Suite on Scenic Crystal.

vineyard visits, and themed dinners with wine pairings. And complimentary and unlimited fine wines, beer and soft drinks are now served with every lunch and dinner aboard the company's European fleet, with a Viennese-style Mozart Café and an intimate Erlebnis Chef's Table Restaurant offered on new ships and select ships currently in operation around the region. Guided shore excursions and a greater diversity of specialist immersion cruises and excursions are also included.

Uniworld is set to introduce two new boutique ships, the S.S. Alexandra and the S.S. Catherine, to European waterways for 2014 – Alexandra will sail along the Rhine, Main and Danube rivers while the Catherine, fashioned after Uniworld's River Royale, will sail in France. In Asia, the company has added River Orchid to its new fleet on the Mekong River, while Century Legend and Century Paragon are the latest additions to China. In 2014, Uniworld is also introducing an all-inclusive price structure on European cruises for the first time.

"For our active guests we have complimentary bikes and Nordic walking sticks and as part of the "Go Active" programme our staff can recommend the best places to cycle along river paths or through a neighbouring village," says Molinaro. "For our guests who prefer a more relaxed pace we offer gentle walking tours in select cities that allow more time to linger in a shop, cathedral or museum. We also have an exclusive "Epicurean Adventurer Program" so food and wine connoisseurs can delve into the local culinary traditions with food-and-wine pairing dinners, culinary demonstrations and private wine tastings."

Connecticut-based tour company Tauck World Discovery's river cruising arm will launch its new Inspiration Class in 2014 with its two new builds, the MS Inspire and MS Savor, each of which will carry just 130 passengers.

Avalon Cruises will float more suites that staterooms on Europe's waterways when it launches three new "Suite Ships" in 2014 – the Avalon Poetry II, Avalon Illumination and Avalon Impression, each featuring two full decks of 61- and 91-square-metre Panorama and Royal Suites.

Viking will launch 14 new vessels in 2014, with equally

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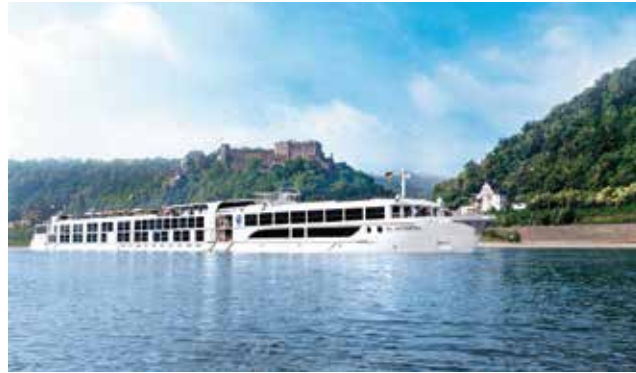
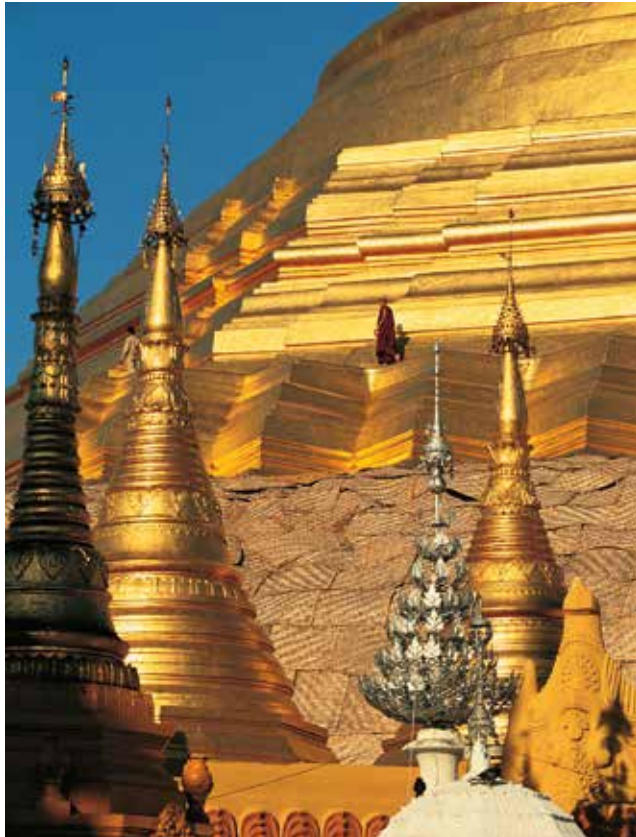
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RHINE ON TIME

Clockwise from above: Uniworld's *Antoinette* on the Rhine; Avalon Vista's Observation Lounge; cruising on *Orcaella* takes you to some of Myanmar's most stunning temples.



ambitious plans for 2015. And after introducing luxury river cruising to the Peruvian Amazon, in 2014 Aqua Expeditions will open the fabled Mekong River to a new generation of explorers aboard the MV *Aqua Mekong*, linking Vietnam and Cambodia through a series of otherwise impossible interludes with Buddhist monks, river-dwelling communities and lingering vestiges of the French empire.

WHERE TO GO?

Come Christmas, many operators are running holiday cruises. Passengers can board the 190-passenger *Viking Freya* or *Viking Odin* to explore festive Germany on the seven-night "Rhine Getaway," "Danube Waltz" or "Romantic Danube" cruises.

Next year, Avalon is increasing its complement of "special interest" cruises by 30 percent to meet the growing demand for passion travel. In 2014, beer tasting, golf, wellness and World War I history cruises will be added to the company's already diverse line-up of art and Impressionist-themed cruises, with excursions to Vincent van Gogh's Auvers-sur-Oise or Napoleon and Josephine's elegant Château de Malmaison. There are jazz and wine cruises, and a 13-day "Jewish Heritage Cruise" from Budapest to Prague along the Danube with guest lecturer Dr. Inge Auerbacher.

AmaWaterways' 2014 cruise-and-land safari programs include a 15-day "Rivers & Rails of Africa" itinerary with two nights aboard the *Rovos Rail* luxury train. Cruisers can also opt for a second land extension on the "Provence & Spain" itinerary in 2014 – two nights in Marseille or three nights in Barcelona.

Scenic Tours launched their 2014 Europe river cruising program in April this year with the addition of two Scenic "Space-Ships," named for their cavernous cabin dimensions rather than capacity for extra-planetary travel potential – the



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“In 2014, beer tasting, golf, wellness and World War I history cruises will be added to Avalon’s already diverse line-up of art and Impressionist-themed cruises, with excursions to Vincent van Gogh’s Auvers-sur-Oise or Napoleon and Josephine’s elegant Château de Malmaison.”

ANIMAL INSTINCT

Clockwise from below: Bar du Leopard on Uniworld’s Antoinette; Viking Freya.



Scenic Gem will launch on the Seine and the Scenic Jade will travel the Rhine, Main and Danube rivers. The company has also extended their most popular cruise, the 15-day “Jewels of Europe” from Amsterdam to Budapest, adding four days with an itinerary that includes Hoorn, Edam and Volendam in the Netherlands.

APT’s all-inclusive cruise offerings extend from Europe to Asia, covering shore excursions, on-board meals and signature experiences. The company will take things up a notch in 2014 with its new “Royal Experience,” an exclusive and entirely indulgent style of European river cruising. A focus on exceptional sightseeing discoveries, exquisite cuisine and personal and attentive service will be offered across its exclusive collection of cruises – think, invitations to visit fairytale castles, private opera recitals, Michelin-starred dinners, truffle hunting, personal butlers and brand new river ships. APT has also expanded its destinations with the new addition of “Highlights of the Danube and Rhine & Moselle Discoveries” cruise; a land journey through Spain to complement the Douro River cruise in Portugal; and Greece and the British Isles adding to the diversity of its luxury land journeys.

On a more intimate scale, Outdoor Travel offers bike-and-



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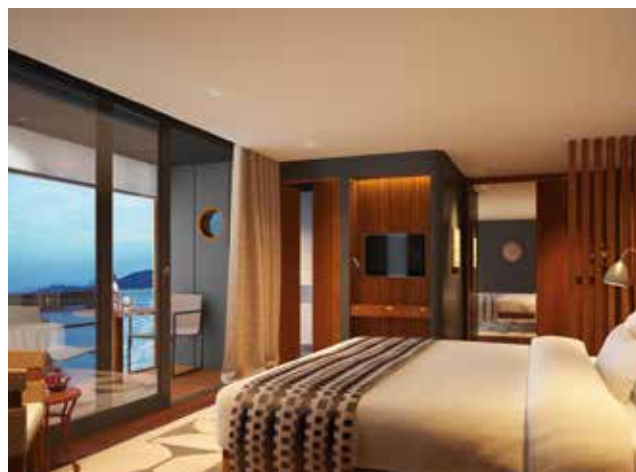
barge tours through Europe that take you to destinations such as Italy, Holland and France with itineraries that incorporate cycling through postcard-perfect scenery with extremely comfortable cabins and communal spaces to unwind and relax.

In Asia, China's Yangtze River has continued to prove popular; more trips through Vietnam and Cambodia along the Mekong River are on offer than ever before; and after years of being an ocean cruise itinerary fixture, South America is on the river cruise radar. Africa and Portugal have also been added to many cruising catalogues in 2013 and 2014.

"Our ports of call have increased 16 percent, growing from 67 to 79 in Europe," says Avalon's Managing Director, Patrick Clark. "We have also increased our fleet exponentially. In 2013, we unveiled two new Suite Ships: the Avalon Expression and Avalon Vista. In 2014, we will unveil three more."

LIGHT OF MY LIFE

Clockwise from below: A Baccarat chandelier is just one of the luxuries on Uniworld's Antoinette; a guest room aboard Aqua Mekong; Uniworld's Orchid on the Mekong.



"A focus on exceptional sightseeing discoveries, exquisite cuisine and personal and attentive service will be offered across its exclusive collection of cruises – think, invitations to visit fairytale castles, private opera recitals, Michelin-starred dinners, truffle hunting, personal butlers and brand new river ships."



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ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Clockwise from below: A stateroom on Uniworld's Antoinette; the same company serves local specialties, such as Peking duck, on cruises through China; on the Irrawaddy in Myanmar.



WHO'S GOING?

While river ships tend to have a lower proportion of families than to ocean-going ships – largely because cabins are generally designed for two and there's a lack of playing space and children's entertainment onboard – if you think that river cruises are the exclusive domain of "grey nomads," think again.

"Our guests seek soft adventure from dawn to dusk, then want to return to chilled cocktails and hot rain showers," says Aqua Expeditions founder and CEO Francesco Galli Zugaro. "This unparalleled access to rare pink dolphins, spider monkeys and toucans on the Amazon increasingly attracts younger international travellers who did not previously consider cruising. This in turn shifts the business to more charters as multi-generational families and groups of like-minded adventuresome friends take advantage of the private memories to be made aboard these smaller vessels."

So what are you waiting for? There's never been a better time for messing around in boats. •

Photographs courtesy of respective establishments.



travel facts

- AmaWaterways. amawaterways.com
- APT Touring. 1300-336-932; apttouring.com.au
- Aqua Expeditions. 51-1/434-5544; aquaexpeditions.com
- Avalon. 1300-230-234; avalonwaterways.com.au
- Barge Vacations. 1800-679-365; bargevacations.com.au
- Bentours. 1800-221-712; bentours.com.au
- Greece Med Travel. 61-2/8338-6900; grecemedtravel.com.au
- Helen Wong's Tours. 1300-788-328; helenwongstours.com
- The Moorings. 1800-553-720; themoorings.com.au
- Orient Express. 1800-000-395; orient-express.com
- Orion Expedition Cruises. 1300 361 012; orionexpeditions.com
- Outdoor Travel. 1800-331-582; outdoortravel.com.au
- Scenic Tours. 1300-723-642; scenictours.com.au
- Tauck World Discovery. 1800-122-048; tauck.com
- Tempo Holidays. 1300-558-987; tempoholidays.com
- Travel Indochina. 1300-365-355; travelindochina.com.au
- Toujours France. 61-3/9889-1885; toujoursfrance.com.au
- Uniworld. 1300-780-231; uniworldcruises.com.au
- Victoria Cruises. victoriacruises.com
- Viking River Cruises. 1800-131-744; vikingrivercruises.com.au



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