

Cruises

More Millennials, Strong Dollar to Drive River Cruises in 2017

by Susan Young | Feb 15, 2017 9:25am



The Panorama Suite of Avalon Artistry II addresses the trend of clients seeking larger windows for better views.

River cruising is probably the most relaxing way to travel, according to **Mary Jean Thompson** of **TravelDesigns by Campbell**, a **Virtuoso** agency in Dallas, TX. “The pace of ‘rolling down the river’ is good for the soul and the heart,” she says. Perhaps that’s one reason why a new AAA survey indicates that four in 10 Americans say they would consider a river cruise for their upcoming vacation. **Travel Agent** asked Thompson and other travel advisors for their intel on top trends for the segment heading into 2017. Here are the highlights.

Slight Europe Uptick Driven by Value: “We have seen an uptick in river cruise bookings over the last few months, but still not the strength in bookings of two to three years ago,” observes **Alan Rosen**, president, **Sand & C Travel**, Boynton Beach, FL. But demand is heading in the right direction. His agency is seeing more interest in European rivers compared to a year ago when most of his retiree clients would not even consider it after the events in France and Belgium. So “if things stay relatively quiet in central Europe, I am cautiously optimistic that it will continue to improve, particularly if the lines continue with the strong promotions such as free or drastically reduced air pricing,” he believes.

For **Mark Comfort**, owner, **Cruise Holidays of Kansas City, KS**, “the value for river cruising in 2017 is driving in new customers who have not tried river cruising due to what they perceive as [it being] too expensive in years past.” Similarly, **Michael Consoli**, franchise owner, **Cruise Planners**, Roswell, GA, says river lines are helping his business by offering more value-adds or incentives such as a choice of gratuities, onboard credits, beverage packages and significantly reduced air fare.

For bookings made by March 31, **Emerald Waterways** is offering free roundtrip airfare from major U.S. and Canadian gateways for those booking a Balcony Suite (including Panorama Balcony Suite, Riverview Suite, Grand Balcony Suite and Owner’s One-Bedroom Suite), on any 2017 Europe voyage. Those booking a stateroom cabin category on a Europe itinerary can receive a reduced airfare of \$795 US / CAD per person. Guests booking their own air flights will receive air credits of \$1,000 (for Balcony Suite guests) and \$600 (for stateroom guests).

Looking for Rooms with a View: Clients are increasingly seeking out “the view.” **Candie Steinman**, franchise owner, **Dream Vacations**, Fort Myers, FL, says, “The trend I am seeing is requests for ‘rooms with a view’ on river cruises.” Her returning passengers want the large windows of **Avalon Waterways**, French balcony and veranda staterooms on **Viking River Cruises’** Longships, or **AmaWaterways’** balconies. “Customers are requesting the newer ships with these features,” she adds.

Broader Demographic, More Active Psychographic: Agents report that more families and active cruisers are now sailing global rivers. **Tauck** has family sailings, while **AmaWaterways** has expanded its European biking and hiking tours. “Health, wellness and active travel is a trend that we first embraced in 2006 when we decided to carry 25 bicycles onboard our European ships. We are seeing this trend continue in 2017 throughout the river cruise industry,” remarks **Kristin Karst**, executive vice president and co-owner of **AmaWaterways**.

And yes, there is an indication that even Millennials are now more seriously considering river cruising, and lines are working to make them feel welcome. Earlier this year, **Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection** announced its new “U By Uniworld” sailings, designed to appeal to youthful adventure seekers; sales begin next month with the first sailings sometime early next year.



The boutique American Duchess will be the first all-suite paddlewheeler on U.S. rivers. Seen here is the lobby of the vessel.

Ellen Bettridge, Uniworld's president and CEO, says her line is "targeting active travelers between the ages of 18 and 40, with everything from the decor, dining and cocktail service to the land activities curated to appeal to, and meet the needs of, this audience."

River Baroness and *River Ambassador* will undergo extensive renovations and design changes tailoring the ships to be completely dedicated to the U by Uniworld experiences starting in early 2018. Ships will feature a more contemporary look in public areas and open spaces.

Other highlights include communal tables, a new culinary program, creative mixologists and international DJs. In such cities as Amsterdam or Budapest, younger travelers will head out to meet locals, enjoy restaurants and bars ashore, and set out on independent or adventurous excursions. Check out the social media campaign, #AllAboutU on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

Spending More Time in Port: Now seeing river cruise clients who want to spend more time in ports along the rivers — a trend similar to what has happened in the past several years for ocean voyages — **Rodney George**, franchise owner, **Cruise Planners**, Naples, FL, observes: “Look for the river cruise industry to slow down the pace of port hopping and give their passengers more time to explore the historic cities and towns along the way.”

More Repeaters, More Referrals: “What I’m seeing are repeat river cruisers and river cruise referrals,” **Jim Carey** of **Cruise Holidays** in Kennewick, WA, notes. “I’m finding that first-time river cruisers are coming home after a great experience and telling all of their friends and family about river cruising.” Thus, most of his new river bookings are referrals from guests who have already done a river cruise.

“Additionally, I’m getting repeat river cruisers,” Carey continues. “A few years ago everyone was on their first river cruise, and now those people are coming back to try a different river.”

Layering within the Portfolio: Repeat cruisers are seeking something fresh on the continent. “We see our clients looking for more than the typical Danube river cruise,” Consoli says. River lines are enticing guests with new itineraries that are a bit different. Consoli points to Viking River Cruises’ “Paris to the Swiss Alps” itinerary, a Rhine river cruise experience with hotel stays and tours in Paris and Zurich or “Rhineland Discovery,” which lets the guest explore Bruges and Ghent on a Rhine river cruise.

The lines have also added sailings on other rivers, such as the Elbe. **CroisiEurope** just began construction on the *MS Elbe Princesse II*, its third paddle-wheel riverboat. Like the *MS Elbe Princesse I*, it will cruise roundtrip between Berlin, Germany and Prague, Czech Republic, with opportunities to explore Sanssouci Palace’s gardens in Potsdam; Lutherstadt Wittenberg; Meissen and its famous porcelain; and Litomerice.

In North America too, lines are “layering” their portfolios to entice repeaters and new-to-cruise guests. “I am seeing rising interest in cruising American rivers for 2017 and beyond, as some of my clients want to stay closer to home,” **Muffett Grubb**, owner, **Cruise Holidays** in Knoxville, TN, notes. **American Queen Steamboat Company** will launch the boutique, all-suite *American Duchess* this summer; the 166-passenger vessel will sail the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Itineraries will include overnight Nashville stays, shorter roundtrip sailings from Memphis and New Orleans, and, for the first time in company history, departures from Chicago (Ottawa, IL).

Expanding Globally: Mary Jean Thompson emphasizes, “My clients who have experienced river cruises in Europe are now wanting to explore the exotic itineraries like the Amazon and the Mekong.” Concurring on repeat guests’ shift to the exotic is **Michael Graham**, franchise owner, **Cruise Planners**, Myrtle Beach, SC: “We are seeing past guests from European river cruises moving to more adventurous itineraries such as Russia, Portugal and Asia.”

A recent **CruiseCompete.com** booking trends survey also found that exotic options are gaining in popularity. It cited **Pandaw**’s new Borneo cruises this year; new African voyages by Croisi-Europe; and a focus on India with **AmaWaterways** building a new ship to sail in fall 2018 on the Ganges between Patna and Kolkata.



Several Viking River Cruises itineraries were cited by one agent as examples of fulfilling clients' desires for something "more than the typical Danube River cruise."

Inclusiveness Is Expanding: For 2017, **American Cruise Lines** is offering all guests traveling on its Mississippi River and Columbia River a complimentary pre-cruise package, which includes a premium hotel stay and transportation to the ship. Packages are offered, for example, in New Orleans, Memphis, St. Louis, St. Paul, Nashville and Pittsburgh. Other lines too are adding inclusions.

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For 2017 and beyond, "the biggest trend I see is that river cruises are actually getting to be a true luxury cruise possibility," asserts **Ruth Turpin**, owner, **Cruises Etc.**, a Virtuoso agency in Fort Worth, TX. **Crystal River Cruises** launched a luxury experience last year on the Danube, as *Crystal Mozart* began sailing as the largest vessel on European rivers. Two new vessels, *Crystal Bach* and *Crystal Mahler* will also debut in Europe this summer, and steel was just cut for two additional Rhine Class luxury river yachts, *Crystal Debussy* and *Crystal Ravel*, launching in 2018.

“With Uniworld, Tauck and Crystal being all-inclusive, this is going to bring a lot of interest from our ‘true luxury traveler,’” Turpin explains, adding that some new luxury products are bigger boats with larger cabins and more amenities. “I think this market is going to be big, because the true luxury cruiser will love to explore a different part of the world when they can go in the style they are used to,” Turpin reports.

More Customization & Smaller Groups: According to Consoli, his clients are increasingly asking his agency to add private tours, personalized pre- or post-cruise packages, or customized experiences. With the growth of European river cruising and the burgeoning portfolio of guest choices, **A&K USA** is seeing demand for a much more personal, intimate experience, stresses **Liam Dunch**, that firm’s Europe product manager. Its river experience is a small-group cruising option with a maximum of 24 guests.

And the ships themselves are also becoming more intimate. For example, **Scenic Cruises’** new *Scenic Spirit*, launched in 2016, sails the Mekong River in Southeast Asia. Offering a boutique experience, the vessel has just 34 balcony suites and nearly a 1:1 guest-to-staff ratio.

Themes, Themes, Themes: Dunch also says A&K’s small-group experiences are coupled with themes such as art, music, flowers, Christmas markets and New Year celebrations. Theming has blossomed over the past several years. AmaWaterways will offer more than 50 wine cruise itineraries in 2017, while Uniworld’s “The Monarch Collection” focuses on highlighting Europe’s royal heritage.

Avalon Waterways’ World War II-themed cruises include the 11-day “Paris to Normandy with London,” itinerary, which departs on July 11. For classical music buffs, a 12-day “Musical Magic along the Blue Danube” cruise by Tauck includes a seven-night cruise, exploration of such cities as Prague, Vienna, Salzburg, Bratislava and Budapest, plus a chance to visit the former homes of Mozart, Beethoven, Bartók or Liszt, and concert halls and palaces where these classical music legends performed.

Shift from Ocean Travel: “We are seeing a rather dramatic shift from ocean to river cruises with seasoned travelers,” Rodney George emphasizes. “Seems as though clients who have been traveling for [years] have seen the majority of the seaports around the world and are now in search of new destinations, especially the historic destinations lying along European rivers.”