

# Going Off The Beaten Path



*Executives offer tips and strategies on how to grow your exotic river cruise sales*

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*PHOTO: Avalon Waterways' Avalon Myanmar exclusively traverses the Upper Irrawaddy River.*

With river cruising fast becoming a mainstay vacation option for U.S. travelers, there's simply no better time to expand your focus from Europe to more exotic areas of the world.

“Exotic river cruise destinations such as Vietnam and Cambodia are very different from anything offered in Europe and are generally not as well known, so the advice given to clients from a trusted travel agent is vital,” said Kristin Karst, co-owner and executive vice president of AmaWaterways. “Your clients will be looking to you to provide details regarding currency, visas, what to pack and health concerns, and this is where you can really showcase your professionalism and separate yourselves from the competition.”

Here are some tips and strategies to get you started.

**Know what you sell.** “Exotic destinations are often a once-in-a-lifetime trip, so it’s incredibly important to do your research and arm yourself with the knowledge needed to convey that experience to each client,” said Karst. “The best advice that I can offer to travel agents wanting to sell more exotic river cruise destinations is to get the personal experience by signing up for one of our Seminars on the River on the Mekong.”

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Lisa Norton, Emerald Waterways vice president of brand management for the U.S., suggested participating in as many webinars as is feasibly possible. “The agent may learn something new from each one,” she said. “My favorite thing to do every month is to buy every travel magazine that I can find and read about the destinations highlighted,” she said. “They’re a good source for what’s hot and what clients might start to ask for.”

**Share your first-hand experiences.** Karst recommended that agents who sample exotic river cruises for themselves take photos and one- to two-minute videos that showcase the people, scenery, food and culture of the destinations visited. “Sharing these images with your clients while you are traveling or sending them free postcards that we provide on board are great ways to pique their interest and can be followed up with personalized emails or an invite to a small group presentation when you return,” she said.

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**Market to past river and ocean cruisers.** “These exotic locations often welcome travelers who have perhaps visited the major sites in Europe and the U.S. and wish to broaden their horizons,” said Uniglobe Senior Vice President of Global Sales Kristian Anderson, adding that agents would be well-served to prospect for clients looking to check destinations off their bucket lists.

“Agents can – and should – look to those clients who enjoy European river or ocean cruises as prospects for exotic locations,” said Vanessa Parrish, channel marketing manager for the Globus Family of Brands, of which Avalon Waterways is a unit. “Many times, clients are not familiar that these options exist. When they venture to more exotic destinations, the experiences are unlike [those found in] Europe but the accommodations are something they’ve grown to love.”

Added CroisiEurope Executive Vice President of Sales Nicola Iannone, “If there is somebody who you booked on a river ship, tickle their interest by saying, ‘Look at what’s next. You did the Rhine and the Rhône – what about going to more continents and other places in the world?’”

**Whet travelers’ appetites.** “We position our luxury riverboat experiences as a luxury safari – only on a boat,” said Francesco Galli-Zugaro, CEO and founder of Aqua Expeditions. “If travelers loved an African safari, they will love adventure river cruising.” By promoting a handful of key features and amenities such as top-of-the-line service, luxurious accommodations and public rooms, gourmet cuisine and soft adventure excursions, Galli-Zugaro said clients will begin to understand they can “experience exotic destinations in a more authentic way without sacrificing any creature comforts.”

Stressing luxury and comfort can also allay the concerns of prospective clients, according to Sven Zika, sales and marketing manager at Pandaw River Expeditions. “Our guests are well educated and well-traveled,” he said. “They are looking for an authentic and off-the-beaten track experience but still don’t want to miss the comfort of a five-star ship and service.”

**Don’t limit your promotions to a single demographic.** “There’s a trip for every budget, age group and lifestyle,” said Norton. “Your high-end clients will love traveling on [Emerald sister company Scenic’s] 68-passenger Scenic Spirit on the Mekong, while perhaps your more value-conscious clients might prefer to travel on [Emerald’s] Mekong Navigator, which also carries only 68 guests.”

In December 2017, CroisiEurope is scheduled to debut a nine-day Africa program that includes a safari and Zambezi river cruise aboard the new luxury African Dream, which sells for \$6,000, including domestic flights. “Our message is don’t be misled by aggressive pricing,” said Iannone. “We can offer value in pricing because we own, build and operate our own product.”

Also, cruise lengths vary, which affects pricing. Century Cruises Sales Manager Jack Xiong noted that the company’s Yangtze River itineraries range from four to 10 days. “Whatever cruise you choose – four days downstream from Chongqing to Yichang, five days upstream from Yichang to Chongqing, or 10 days from Shanghai to Chongqing – all itineraries offer daily excursions that bring China and Chinese history to the forefront,” he said.