

Summer Plans? To Save Big on Christmas Markets River Cruises, Naturally.

June 21, 2017 By Ralph Grizzle – 0 Comments

Summer has officially arrived. While sugarplums and candy canes might not be dancing in your heads, it's a sweet time to book a holiday-themed river cruise. AmaWaterways just announced a limited-time offer that could save you up to \$1,500 on 2017 Christmas markets theme cruises, if you book by July 31, 2017. Don't delay, as these sailings fill up quickly. Case in point: Emerald Waterways 15-day "Christmas Markets of Europe" cruise is already fully booked for 2017, but it's not too late to start planning for 2018.

For several years since 2006, I've celebrated Christmas with friends on the rivers of Europe. It's a tradition that I have very much enjoyed and one that I hope to continue.



Christmas Markets – like this one in Vienna, Austria – are all about unique crafts, local food and traditions. Photo © 2012 Aaron Saunders

I love the cozy feeling of being on a vessel that transports me along the main arteries of Europe during this festive time of year. The rivers are magical. I've cruised through broken sheets of ice, which appeared as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle from the balcony of my stateroom. And although the sky can be brilliant blue, it's often diffused, giving the sky the appearance that reminds me of an Impressionistic painting. Surely, this must be the most romantic time of year to cruise Europe.

If you're lucky, snow will blanket the villages along the rivers. One year, I trudged on powder with my family and friends through the uber-charming Rothenburg ob der Tauber. Christmas trees were decorated with red ribbons and sparkly white lights. Branches were laden with clumps of snow that had fallen from the rooftops. Icicles appeared like mini-stalactites from awnings, and under them, shop windows presented everything from wurst to gingerbread cookies, baked in Old World tradition.

These sailings typically depart between the last week of November through the year's end, and visit the wooden stalls erected in the town's historic squares of Germany, Austria, France, Hungary, and other European countries. Some towns have but one market; I fondly remember visiting tiny Breisach, Germany, with its market that consisted of perhaps a dozen stalls and held plenty of warm, friendly holiday spirit. Big cities, on the other hand, can have more than one. Vienna is one of the most amazing in this regard, with nearly a dozen different markets in any given year—most of which are clustered around the famous *Ringstrasse* (ring road) that encircles the city's historic core.

Food plays a huge part in these seasonal festivities and varies with each village visit. In Hungary, spicy sausages and goulash soups are the order of the day, while Germany is all about the bratwurst and warm soups like *kartoffelsuppe*, or potato soup, served in an edible bread bowl. In Slovakia, we indulged in the most amazing shaved potato wedges we've ever had; while in Strasbourg, French and German-influence combined in a bowl of *spätzle* topped with heavy cream from Alsace.

I enjoy bundling up to stroll historic city streets, sampling as I go, and returning to the ship to sip on hot mulled cider or, when the mood strikes, *Gluhwein*. This is frequently offered as either red or white wine (though red is far more common), and locals will quite often take it *mit schuss* (a shot of something else).



AmaWaterways offers three distinct winter river cruise itineraries: two weeklong cruises “**Christmas Markets on the Rhine**” from Amsterdam,

Netherlands, to Basel, Switzerland, and “Christmas

Markets on the Danube,” from Nuremberg, Germany, to Budapest, Hungary. In addition, a special two-week sailing “**Magnificent Europe (Christmas Cruise)**” is being offered over the official holiday, which encompasses some of the greatest hits from the other two itineraries. In 2018, these same sailings are being offered, but “**Christmas on the Danube**” gets a name change, called “**Iconic Christmas Markets**” when sailing Nuremberg to Budapest and “**Magical Christmas Markets**” in the reverse direction. So same cruise, different wrapping. As the saying goes, “gingerbread by any other name still smells as sweet,” or something along those lines.

One particularly fond memory I have was the year that I took my kids on AmaWaterways’ “**Christmas Markets on the Danube**” voyage, which started off with a two-night pre-cruise stay in medieval Prague, including an optional tour to Prague’s Christmas Market—an event not to be missed.

After leaving Prague, it was off to the historic city of Nuremberg, where we would board the vessel and rest up in port before a full day of exploration of this town’s Gothic churches and ancient ramparts, and of course peruse the Christmas Markets. The following day, we arrived in Regensburg when the medieval city was newly blanketed in snow. It’s a day I’ll never forget, in part because it’s captured in countless photographs that I snapped! During the journey, you’ll be able to visit Passau, Salzburg (by motorcoach), stop in Melk, and cruise through the stunning Wachau Valley en route to Vienna, where you can enjoy an evening concert in the City of Music before reaching your final destination of Budapest, Hungary.



Christmas in Europe can be a very special occasion. Photo courtesy of Uniworld River Cruises™

Steam rises over hot goulash at the Budapest Christmas Market. Photo © Aaron Saunders

AmaWaterways’ “**Christmas Markets on the Rhine**,” between Basel and Amsterdam, can commence (or end) with an optional two extra nights in Zurich. There’s nothing like strolling the streets of Switzerland in December to make you feel as if you’re on the set of *The Nutcracker*. Navigating Amsterdam’s famed canals, sipping Rudesheimer coffee while admiring one-of-a-kind stocking stuffers at Christmas Markets, and savoring Alsatian cuisine is the stuff sugar-plum dreams are made of. Dinners aboard

AmaWaterways are extra extraordinary events as well, adding up to one unforgettable experience.

Perhaps no other name is synonymous with kids than Disney. In 2017 Disney revealed even more theme cruises from the six Beauty and the Beast-themed sailings on the Rhine in 2018 to culinary-themed cruises. One new themed cruise making it just under the wire for 2017 is the **Holiday River Cruise on the Danube**, December 20-27, with an optional three-day extension in Prague. Make marzipan in Passau, walk the famous Tree Path of Koping glittering with Christmas lights, take a traditional Austrian dance lesson in Melk, and enjoy private shows by marionette dolls and Lippizan horses alike. All of this along with the Christmas markets in Salzburg, Vienna, and Budapest, of course. Onboard, Disney continues the holiday magic with gingerbread decorating, mulled wine demonstrations, and festive feasts.

Avalon Waterways offers seven different Christmas markets river cruises ranging in length from five to 17 days, and Crystal River Cruises offers 10-16 day Christmas markets tours.

In addition to six different Christmas Markets sailings, Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection will be offering a **"Parisian Royal Holiday"** Christmas markets cruise that will operate roundtrip from Paris aboard the new *S.S. Joie de Vivre*.

Last but not least, **Viking River Cruises easily offers the most Christmas markets departure dates this year**, thanks largely to its massive fleet of Viking Longships. In fact, the line offers an astonishing 19 different itineraries that operate during the Christmas markets, clustered throughout France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, and other countries. Tauck sticks to one Christmas markets itinerary, an 8-night sailing from Basel, Switzerland, to Köln, Germany, that doesn't disappoint, with visits to markets in cities that other holiday cruises don't visit like the German spa town of Aachen and the Alsatian commune of Colmar in France



During the winter, Cologne's magnificent Cathedral serves as a backdrop for the city's Christmas Market.

If you don't have a lot of time to spare, A-ROSA is a good counterpoint to the typical weeklong Christmas markets cruises. The City of Lights really glimmers during the holidays, with two 4-night sailings that go to Rouen and Vernon aboard *A-ROSA VIVA* as well as a weeklong New Year's roundtrip Paris sailing visiting Rouen, Caudebec-en-Caux, Les Andelys and Le Pecq.

This is not limited to Paris, as A-ROSA offers a series of shorter, 4- and 5-night Christmas markets voyages along the Danube and Rhine in addition to weeklong holiday voyages—with a choice of 15 different itineraries. On the Danube, you can take a 4-night roundtrip voyage from Passau, Germany, which includes a two-day stay in Vienna, Austria, to sample the numerous Christmas Markets. Then either sail on to the Austrian city of Linz, with its spectacular lights display and ever-changing Ars Electronica Center—or Melk, Austria, to sip local apricot liqueur at the market fronting the 900-year-old Abby. Five nights adds a visit to Bratislava, Slovakia, and weeklong voyages round it out with visits to Budapest, Hungary, and Austria's small town of Durnstein. Six other unique holiday-inspired itineraries are offered on the Rhine, sailing roundtrip from the German city of Cologne to destinations such as Strasbourg, France, with its Alsace-influenced cuisine and local *vin chaud* mulled wine, the vibrant Dutch city of Amsterdam and Antwerp, Belgium to name a few.

CroisiEurope offers 4- and 5-night Christmas market itineraries, as well, including a really unique sailing on the canals through Provence. This tour focuses more on the holiday traditions in places such as Avignon, Tarascon, Arles, and Aigues-Mortes. For instance, in Arles you will witness an impressive nativity scene before heading off to Paradou to visit a museum exhibiting 400 different santons (nativity figurines). From candle making to *fougasse* hankering, it's an interesting take on tradition in France.

Emerald Waterways also offers an interesting 5-night sailing from Zurich, Switzerland to Weisbaden, Germany. Spice cakes and biscuits and quaint homes that were surely the inspiration behind the gingerbread variety, this cruise covers it all. From Breisach, the gateway to the Black Forest that takes Christmas ham to entirely new levels, to Strasbourg, France, home to one of Europe's oldest Christmas markets, it's a condensed, but rich journey.

As you can see the choices are aplenty, so start making your list, and I would be happy to help you check it twice. Simply fill out my recommendations form below.