



EXPLORE



How to Choose a Europe River Cruise



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From dazzling Dutch tulip fields in springtime to Germany's atmospheric Christmas markets -- and a host of other destinations -- European river cruises offer a world of sights and experiences.

River cruising is the fastest-growing sector of the cruise industry, with new ships being launched each year. On the plus side, this means more choices, including an ever-increasing number of themed vacations, such as food and wine, active and family-orientated sailings. On the other side of the coin, the biggest challenge about planning a European river cruise is identifying one that is right for you.

We're here to help you narrow down your choices. First, here are some things you should know, followed by a few tips:

Things to Know

River Cruises are Busy.

Unlike ocean cruises that offer "sea days" with plenty of time to relax, voyages along European waterways include a stop each day with a busy -- albeit completely optional -- sightseeing program. So if you want to make the most of your trip, there isn't always as much time to chill out onboard as you might think.

More is Included.

With the exception of a few lines that offer an "a la carte" shore excursion schedule, daily tours are usually included in the cruise fare. They range from introductory walking and motorcoach tours of towns and cities along the route, to immersive experiences such as tours of ancient castles, vineyard visits and food tastings. Some lines also offer extra fee options that are a bit more unusual, including bike tours, exclusive evening concerts, cooking classes, art lessons and even the chance to conduct an orchestra in Vienna.

They differ from ocean cruises.

The majority of river cruises are a week long -- typically taking in three countries -- with some lines offering longer trips from 10 days to two weeks or more. They almost always start in fantastic cities such as Paris, Amsterdam and Budapest, and most itineraries include an overnight onboard. Companies also offer pre- or post-cruise stays so passengers can spend more time in these cities.

It should be noted that virtually all ships on the Rhine and Danube are exactly the same size in order to fit into locks and pass below bridges. Price differences in fares reflect the number of passengers (the more expensive lines carry less people, others up to 190), onboard facilities such as massage rooms and gyms, plus inclusions (some lines include all drinks and gratuities).

There is seasonality.

One final caveat about cruising Europe's rivers: Aside from special Christmas market and New Year cruises, the season typically runs from April to October. Be aware that heavy rain and spring flooding can make the rivers swell and the locks become impassable. (Many are under bridges, so if the water is too high, boats can't fit underneath.) Similarly, during long dry periods, low water can be a problem. If vessels can't move, you'll be taken to the sights by motorcoach or, if the logistics allow, moved to another ship further along the river.



Rhine/Moselle/Main

In a Nutshell:

With more castles than any other river, the Rhine combines centuries of history and culture with spectacular scenery and some of the oldest and most historic cities in Germany. The lesser-known Moselle river, running through northeast France and Luxembourg, joins the Rhine at Koblenz. The Main river flows into the Rhine from eastern Germany; cruise along this, and you'll end up in the Main–Danube Canal, which enables vessels to sail into the iconic "Blue Danube," the gateway to Hungary and beyond.

Typical Itinerary:

Winding its way through six countries -- Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Austria, Germany, France and the Netherlands -- the 776-mile Rhine is the number one river for cruise vacations and a great starting point for first-timers.

The most popular Rhine cruise is a one-week sailing between Amsterdam and Basel, or vice versa, where the landscape of steep vineyard slopes, fairy-tale castles and medieval towns provide an ever-changing panorama.

The scenic highlight on this cruise is the UNESCO-listed Upper Middle Rhine Valley, which is dotted with castles and medieval wine-growing villages. Music is traditionally played on the sun deck, often accompanied by complimentary cocktails, when ships pass the legendary Lorelei rock, a sheer 433-foot slate cliff, where a beautiful siren was said to lure passing sailors to their doom.

Weeklong cruises usually visit Rudesheim, with its bustling main Drosselgasse street, and Heidelberg, with a castle perched on a rocky hilltop. Built between the 13th and 17th centuries, it's had a turbulent past and disproves the old saying that lightning never strikes twice -- having been hit in both 1537 and 1764.

City high spots include Cologne, famous for its landmark, a twin-towered Gothic cathedral that took 630 years to build, and Koblenz, overlooked by the Ehrenbreitstein Fortress, one of the largest castles in Europe. From Koblenz, longer itineraries take in a section of the Moselle, which winds through the heart of Germany's wine-growing country. Quieter and narrower than the Rhine, the Moselle snakes past small wine towns including Cochem, with a charming old town filled with half-timbered houses. Finally, France's Strasbourg introduces you to the sights and flavors of Alsace.

Rhine cruises can also be booked to coincide with annual events such as the spectacular Rhine in Flames firework festival, which takes place every September to celebrate the wine harvest.

Getting There:

You'll fly into Amsterdam (or Basel if you are sailing northbound), from which it's a short transfer to embark your vessel. U.K. passengers can also travel by train, taking Eurostar through the Channel Tunnel and changing onto Europe's rail network at Lille, Brussels or Paris.

Watch Out For:

Not every view is a picture postcard. Inevitably, you'll also cruise past ugly industrial areas and power plants and maybe moor by a road or nondescript apartment block. Forewarned is forearmed.

Things to Do:

Why not slow it all down and give yourself two weeks to explore from Amsterdam to Basel? You'll see many more fascinating towns and cities. Conversely, if time is tight, there are shorter four- and five-night itineraries -- for instance, from Basel to Dusseldorf or vice versa, and round trip from Cologne. In spring, you can take mini-cruises from Amsterdam to see the tulip fields.

You can also cruise the Moselle and Main, sailing between Trier, which dates back to the Romans and boasts the stunning Porta Nigra, one of the original gates into the city, and Nuremberg, infamous for its Nazi rally grounds and the Nazi war crime trials after World War II.

You can also combine itineraries. There are cruises from Amsterdam to Trier, from Trier to Budapest and from Amsterdam to Basel via Trier.



Danube

In a Nutshell:

The inspiration behind the famous waltz by Johann Strauss, the Danube is an enchanting river. A Danube cruise is also a history lesson about the days when Vienna ruled an empire and, more recently, an Iron Curtain divided Europe.

Typical Itinerary:

The Danube flows from the Black Forest in Germany to the Black Sea in Romania, passing through Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, Croatia and Bulgaria on the way.

The most popular itineraries are one-week sailings between Budapest in Hungary and Passau, situated in Germany and close to the Austrian border, or weeklong round trips from Passau. The Wachau Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located between the Austrian towns of Krem and Melk, is particularly stunning. City highlights include elegant Vienna, with its grand palaces such as Hofburg from which the Habsburgs ruled Austria for 700 years. You can also see the gorgeous white Lipizzaner horses at the Spanish Riding School. Although it can be hard to plan a cruise to coincide with one of the evening dressage displays, there are daily stable tours and visitors can sit in on the morning exercise sessions to music, which take place in the ornate, chandeliered riding school.

The Hungarian capital Budapest, divided in half by the Danube and spanned by the landmark 19th-century Chain Bridge, is packed with history and culture. Budapest has the highest number of hot thermal springs than any other city in the world. Szechenyi is the largest and Gellert is noted for its fine architecture.

You'll also visit the city of Linz at the center of Austria's wine-growing region, from which it might be possible to take excursions to Durnstein and Esztergom in Hungary; Salzburg, the birthplace of Mozart and also famous for its "Sound of Music" connections; and Melk with its vast Benedictine Abbey.

Getting There:

Most itineraries start and end in Passau. You'll most likely fly into Munich and transfer to the ship. Munich is less than two hours from Passau, and the majority of cruise lines include transfers. It is also worth considering adding a couple of extra nights in Munich, the capital of Bavaria and famous for its beer gardens.

Watch Out For:

Moorings in Vienna and Budapest are beside busy roads, and due to the number of ships of the river, you might find yourself moored alongside another vessel.

Things to Do:

Cruises on the Lower Danube take passengers east from Budapest through Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania toward the Black Sea. This is a much less explored and quieter stretch of the Danube that is also renowned for its rich wildlife. These two-week cruises also typically include two nights each in Budapest and Bucharest at the start and end of the itinerary.

Stops include Bratislava, the compact capital of Slovakia, which has a delightful Old Town, and Belgrade in Serbia, one of the oldest capital cities in Europe, where you can visit the memorial of Josip Tito, the Communist leader of the former Yugoslavia, and Sveti Sava, the world's largest Orthodox church.

These cruises also take in the impressive Iron Gates gorge -- actually four gorges east of Belgrade, rolled into one name, which stretch for 90 miles and divide the Carpathian and Balkan mountains, narrowing to just under 500 feet at one point. A 40-foot statue of King Decebalus, one of the mightiest rulers of the ancient Dacians, guards the entrance.



Rhone/Saone

In a Nutshell:

If you like food and wine, this is the river cruise region for you, as it sails through Provence and Burgundy, the gastronomic heartland of France and two of the country's top wine-making regions. You'll cruise past acres of vineyards and have ample opportunities to taste the local grapes.

Typical Itinerary:

The 505-mile Rhone river flows from the Swiss Alps through southern France and into the Mediterranean Sea, west of Marseille. Rising in France, the Saone is the chief tributary of the Rhone and the two converge at Lyon, where the Saone becomes the Rhone.

Once an important trading route for the Greeks and Romans, today's cruises run along the southernmost stretch. The main itinerary is a seven-night cruise from Lyon to Arles or nearby Avignon, or the reverse. Some cruises also depart from Chalon-sur-Saone, just north of Lyon.

Passengers are transported through medieval cities such as Avignon and Beaune, the wine capital of Burgundy.

Excursions in Vienne take in the remains of a 14,000-seat amphitheater and a temple built in 25 B.C. in honor of the Roman Emperor Augustus and his wife Livia. There is also the small, walled city of Viviers and the monastic town of Tournus. Cruises may also include the chance to see the artistic town of Arles, where Vincent van Gogh lived and painted his famous works including "The Langlois Bridge at Arles," which is still instantly recognizable today. You can also expect expert-guided tours of the region's vineyards, with tutored tastings.

Getting There:

If you're cruising from Lyon, you'll fly into Lyon airport, from which it's a short transfer to your vessel, and out of Marseilles, which is just over an hour by road from Arles. Some operators fly passengers in and out of Lyon, with a coach trip between Avignon and Lyon at the start or end of the cruise. U.K. passengers can take the Eurostar train from London through the Channel Tunnel and transfer onto one of France's fast TGV trains in Paris (if you're traveling to/from Lyon) or Lille (if traveling to/from Avignon).

Watch Out For:

Unlike Rhine and Danube itineraries, which include long periods of cruising, French programs are generally much shorter with more time offered ashore and less ground covered during the duration of the cruise.

Things to Do:

There really is only one option on the Rhone, but why not take advantage of being in France and add a couple of nights in Paris to the start or end of the cruise? It will give you time to have a taste of the highlights, including the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Champs-Elysees and the Arc de Triomphe.

Alternatively, look to the Loire for a totally different river cruise experience. French-owned line CroisiEurope has pioneered cruises on the Loire -- which is notorious for its shallow waters -- with the introduction of vessels using modern paddlewheel technology. The five- and seven-night round trip itineraries from Nantes include a visit to the STX Saint-Nazaire shipyard, birthplace of many of the world's largest ocean cruise ships, and Chateau d'Usse, which is said to have been one of several castles that helped Walt Disney design his theme park castles.



Seine

In a Nutshell:

Paris, Monet's garden in Giverny and poignant wartime cemeteries and the Normandy landing beaches are among the unique features of a cruise on the Seine river through northern France.

Typical Itinerary:

Rising in Burgundy, the Seine flows north through Paris into Normandy and empties into the English Channel at Le Havre.

There is a seven-night itinerary with cruises sailing from the heart of Paris to Rouen or Caudebec or back. At the start of the cruise, ships provide passengers with some of the best views in town as many moor close to classic sights such as Notre Dame Cathedral or the Eiffel Tower (although check; some lines do dock in an alternate location outside downtown). They all spend at least one night docked in Paris with a guided panoramic tour taking in the main sights, plus free time to shop or order a coffee and croissant in one of the many street cafes before setting sail and meandering through idyllic scenery toward the Normandy coast.

Part of the fascination of the Seine is that it remains an important commercial waterway. It's navigable by oceangoing vessels as far as Rouen and river cruisers will share the water with all kinds of vessels, including barges laden with freight. All itineraries take in Rouen, the historic capital of the Normandy region. It's known as the "City of a Hundred Spires" due to its towering churches, and a huge cathedral, built between the 13th and 16th centuries, is arguably France's most beautiful Gothic church. It was also here that Joan of Arc was notoriously burned at the stake in 1431. Rouen is also filled with charming half-timbered houses.

Rouen and Caudebec are the jumping-off point for excursions to Honfleur, the pretty fishing village with narrow streets and wooden buildings immortalized by artists such as Claude Monet. All Seine cruises offer full-day excursions to D-Day landing beaches, such as Omaha, Juno and Gold, along the Normandy coastline. These are often divided into groups, with tours taking in points of particular interest for U.S., U.K. and Canadian passengers.

Getting There:

Passengers fly into Paris, with the option of train travel for U.K. passengers who can take the Eurostar through the Channel Tunnel direct to Gare du Nord in the center of Paris.

Watch Out For:

Watch out for Paris drivers. They are supposed to stop at zebra crossings but often don't, so wait until they come to a halt before stepping out into the road. Queues for a lift to the top of the Eiffel Tower are horrendous. If you want to go up, get there early.

Things to Do:

There is only one itinerary on the Seine, but it's well worth adding some extra days in Paris, either at the start or end of the cruise, as one day in the "City of Light" is never enough, even if you've visited the French capital in the past.

Some cruise lines also offer extended two-week French itineraries with rail transfers to link a Seine cruise with sailings in Burgundy or Bordeaux.



Douro

In a Nutshell:

If you like scenery, you'll love cruising on Portugal's Douro river, rising in Spain and winding through rugged and dramatic green landscapes until it reaches the Atlantic in Porto, the country's second city and home to famous-name port houses. The fortified wine is the national drink and there'll be plenty of opportunity to taste it en route.

Typical Itinerary:

There is only one itinerary on the Douro or "River of Gold"; a 130-mile seven-night sailing from Porto to Vega de Terron, on the border with Spain. Here river vessels have to turn back because the river is no longer navigable. Most cruises begin or end with an overnight stay in the hilly UNESCO World Heritage city of Porto and the option to take a trip on a traditional rabelo, the wooden vessels that once carried port.

Once a wild, turbulent waterway, the Douro has been tamed by five dams including the landmark Carrapatelo, the world's deepest lock, and sailing past the 115-foot walls is an incredible experience. Cruises stop at Regua, in the heart of port wine country, for excursions to Lamego, where the main attraction is the 18th-century Sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies pilgrimage church, standing atop of a 686-step baroque staircase. (Passengers have the option of walking down after the visit).

You'll also call at Pinhao, a favorite haunt for port wine tastings, and Vega de Terron for a full-day excursion to the city of Salamanca in Spain. A two-hour drive from Vega de Terron, Salamanca is an architectural gem with a grand main square built in Spanish baroque style and surrounded by three-story arcade buildings.

It's worth noting that because no nighttime navigation is permitted on the Douro, you don't miss out on any of the passing landscapes. Also, river ships on the Douro are smaller than those on the Rhine and Danube, creating a more intimate onboard atmosphere.

Getting There:

You'll fly into and out of Porto, and it is a short transfer to the vessel.

Watch Out For:

Cruises on the Douro are very different from other European rivers, such as the Rhine and Danube, which were commercial arteries for the towns and cities that grew up on their banks. There is often little to see at mooring spots and motorcoaches are needed to visit places of interest. It really is all about scenery and enjoying the local tittle.

Things to Do

Add a couple of nights in Lisbon at the start or end of the cruise. Built on seven hills around the banks of the river Tagus, Portugal's capital was the departure point for the great explorers who set off to find new land in the 16th and 17th centuries. As a result, Lisbon is not only steeped in a rich maritime history charting the Golden Age of Discovery but also combines tradition and culture with the excitement of a modern, cosmopolitan city.

More Info: [Douro River Cruise Tips](#)



Elbe

In a Nutshell:

An Elbe cruise is for anyone who loves discovering the past and wants to explore one of Europe's lesser known rivers. There will be time in the fascinating cities of Berlin and Prague at the start and end of the cruise, plus the chance to discover the birthplace of the Reformation along the way.

Typical Itinerary:

The Elbe rises in the Czech Republic, flows into Germany and empties into the North Sea at Cuxhaven, near Hamburg.

There is only one cruise option -- seven nights, sailing either from Magdeburg in Germany to Melnik in the Czech Republic, or vice versa. Cruises run between the culture-rich cities of Berlin and Prague, and in between are the vineyards of Saxony and rocky landscapes of the soaring sandstone massif south of Dresden.

The beautifully restored city of Dresden, immortalised by Italian painter Canaletto as the "Florence on the Elbe," is among the must-see sights. Destroyed during World War II, the city rose from the rubble and highlights include the rebuilt Cathedral of Our Lady, with its distinctive bell-shaped dome, which is the symbol of Dresden.

The delightful town of Meissen is renowned worldwide for its fine porcelain, and excursions include a visit to a factory to see craftsmen at work. In 2017, Wittenberg celebrated the 500th anniversary since Martin Luther, one of the most influential figures in Christian history, nailed his thesis to the door of Castle Church and triggered the Protestant Reformation.

You'll also cruise through craggy Saxon Switzerland and call at Litomerice, a pretty little Czech town with a mix of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque buildings.

Getting There:

You'll either fly into Berlin and out of Prague or the other way around, depending which direction you are sailing.

Watch Out For:

This is quite a strenuous itinerary with a lot to see, so if you have mobility concerns, discuss them first with your river cruise operator.

Things to Do:

There is only the one itinerary on the Elbe, but you really must add extra days in Berlin and Prague at the start and end (included in some itineraries) to make this vacation complete.

More Info: [Elbe River Cruise Tips](#)