

RIVER CRUISE

Persistent dry spell in Europe is challenging river cruise lines

By [Jeri Clausing](#) | Nov 11, 2018

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Low waters of the Danube in Regensburg, Germany. Photo Credit: STGrafix/Shutterstock



AMSTERDAM -- A record hot, dry European summer has persisted into fall, leaving river cruise lines scrambling to reroute ships and keep customers sailing. That is particularly true on the Rhine, which is so low that historical relics and a World War II bomb have been found along its dried-up riverbed.



While high and low water levels are cyclical, causing river ships at times to reroute or to temporarily bus passengers to different ships or hotels to complete their itineraries, it is almost unheard of for such low levels to carry into October and November.

Earlier in the season, the Danube and the Elbe were most affected, and there are still scattered issues on those rivers. But last month, the Rhine hit a record low, forcing river lines to abandon their popular Basel-to-Amsterdam sailings when the port of Cologne, Germany, was shuttered.

Photos reveal that the river, which is a key commercial shipping route, looks more like the southwestern U.S.'s perpetually dry Rio Grande -- which many New Mexicans sarcastically refer to as the 'Rio Sand' -- than like one of Europe's main waterways, on which you can now see huge, exposed sandbars; wide, dry banks; and exposed river bottoms.

In some places, the water is so low that you can practically walk across, according to river cruise employees on recent sailings. Late last month, a bomb was found on the dry riverbed in Cologne. And in Budapest, a ship from the 1600s with 2,000 gold coins was discovered, according to news reports.

While this year's weather is extreme, high and low waters are cyclical, much like snowfall for skiers or hurricanes for beach vacationers. Because issues can pop up every few years, river lines always have extensive backup plans that include everything from simple cancellations and refunds to swapping passengers between ships at points that become impassable.

The river lines use motorcoaches and hotel stays to keep tours moving on their scheduled routes, and they develop alternative itineraries that keep passengers sailing, albeit to sometimes unexpected ports of call.

How dramatic the impact is on guests, who have already paid thousands of dollars for their vacation, depends largely on the cruise line.

Viking, which has the largest European river fleet, declined repeated requests for information about how many cruises have been affected this year and about how they handle refunds, changes and cancellations.

A spokesman for Tauck, which has eight ships on Europe's rivers, said the company had been forced to cancel three sailings this year, one on the Danube in August and two on the Rhine in October, as it prepared to close out the season.



In the Hot Seat

AmaWaterways president and co-founder Rudi Schreiner discusses the ups and downs, highs and lows of Europe's rivers. [Read More](#)

Walter Littlejohn, head of Crystal River Cruises, which has five vessels in Europe, said he had lost count of how many itinerary changes Crystal had made this year in an effort to keep passengers off buses and on the water.

AmaWaterways, with 16 ships on affected rivers, has had a combination of ship swaps and slightly disrupted itineraries. The focus has been on developing new itineraries to keep guests sailing.

CroisiEurope reported that it spent most of the summer swapping passengers between ships running from opposite ends of the unpredictable and extremely low Elbe.

And Avalon said it has used a combination of cancellations, ship swaps and moves to land-based itineraries.

Cost to cruise lines

Steve Born, chief marketing officer for the Globus family of brands, which owns Avalon, said, "When there are conditions that compromise a portion of a river, we create an alternative on land that still gives our guests all of the included destinations and experiences. In these cases, our Globus operations base comes in very handy ... to allow us to quickly react."

Born added, "If the conditions require that we are forced to overnight in a hotel as opposed to the ship, we make those arrangements and work out guest compensation at that moment with the guests directly on the cruise."

James Hill, a U.K. agent who has been selling river cruises for more than 12 years, said that low water is not a new problem. And the costs to river lines are "not inconsiderable." Those costs include moving or renting motorcoaches, hotel rooms and meals, putting together new excursions on short notice and extra administrative and operations expenses for altering itineraries and notifying guests.

Additionally, many companies offer customers compensation for "lost days," either as a cash refund or as a future cruise credit.

Hill said a cash refund "comes straight off the bottom line," whereas a future cruise credit is "meant to get the client to book a further cruise, albeit at a lower cost, thus deferring the cost to the bottom line to later years."

"The hidden cost of a long season of low water is that people looking to book their first river cruise may well read reports of dissatisfaction on the various websites and decide not to book at all," Hill said. "Those who have had a couple of successful trips may well count themselves as having been lucky and call it a day!"

Indeed, many companies are hesitant to share too many details of their compensation policies with the news media for fear of scaring off customers.

For example, when asked for details on the impact of low water on their sailings, Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection CEO Ellen Bettridge said simply, "We always proactively share updates with guests and partners, and in most cases, for the limited number of cruises impacted, are able to seamlessly alter small sections of the trip to offer an equally rewarding itinerary."

Still, there is no end in sight as river cruise operators head into the Christmas market season. AmaPrima captain Ron Schuegard said the Rhine would need at least two weeks of nonstop rain for things to get back to normal.

Alternative itineraries

But that doesn't mean the season is over. AmaWaterways, Crystal and some others have restaged their Amsterdam-Basel routes to the picturesque towns of the Netherlands and Belgium -- basically the spring tulip route without the tulips -- and are prepared to continue altering itineraries as the fast-changing rivers allow.

Passengers aboard a recent AmaPrima sailing that was rerouted through the Netherlands seemed more than pleased, not only with the company's generous compensation offers but also with the opportunity to visit towns they might not ever otherwise have seen.

Heading into the holiday season, said Susan Robison, a spokeswoman for Crystal, "We have multiple contingency plans if needed, including a Moselle itinerary that features a number of picturesque villages and cities that have some of the most charming and atmospheric Christmas markets in Germany."