

European river cruises get radical makeover with immersive experiences - Can hotels do the same?

Ellen Uzelac | Chicago Tribune | March 27, 2018 2:56pm

March 26--River cruising in Europe is redefining itself with itineraries that are "curated" to individual tastes, a new emphasis on active touring options (snowshoeing in the Black Forest, anyone?) and staff positions like "adventure host."

That's right, adventure host.

It's a pretty radical makeover. As Rick Kaplan, president of Premier River Cruises travel agency in Los Angeles, frames it: "What you're seeing in the industry right now is cruise lines trying to broaden their base. They're trying to get everyone engaged, no matter what aspect of travel they most enjoy."

Cruise lines can only do so much to amp up the onboard experience, due to the small size of the ships made for river touring. As a result, the focus is on the destination -- and the ways in which to experience, say, a Budapest or an Amsterdam beyond the obvious must-see attractions.

"People are looking for more dynamic river cruises," says Pam Hoffee, managing director of Avalon Waterways. "They're looking for more variety and choice versus the more traditional experience where things are either dictated or prepackaged. Choice is the operative word."

Some of the lines -- Avalon, Scenic and Crystal, for example -- have elevated the traditional listening device used on guided shore excursions with GPS technology that helps travelers explore destinations on their own.

In a nutshell, here's what's new in the European river-cruising world: a fresh focus on immersive tours that dig deep into local life, a rise in special-interest voyages and programming for every fitness level.

Deep-dive itineraries

Many of the lines are pushing immersive itineraries in a big way. What exactly does that look like?

Grand Circle Cruise Line, which pioneered the home-hosted lunch, encourages its program directors to go off-script and talk about what's going on in the culture and the country, no matter how controversial. The idea is to give passengers real insight into a people and a place.

At Crystal, immersive experiences include cooking lessons in the houses of locals, chats with artists, and dining at restaurants you won't find in travel guides.

Crystal's curated destination program, new this year, allows travelers to focus on five types of experiences: gastronomy, cultural landmarks, active programming, concierge-designed private tours and personal connections with locals, like a visit to a family's home in a small village in Slovakia to learn firsthand about the country's culture and cuisine.

"It's about experiencing a destination rather than observing it," says Walter Littlejohn, vice president and managing director of Crystal River Cruises. "Your vacation becomes more authentic. That's become important to travelers. Not everyone wants a manufactured experience."

Targeted themes

If you have a special interest, there's likely a cruise designed around it. Classical music, beer, wine, nature, World War II, Jewish heritage, art, photography and Christmas markets are among the themed cruises in Europe this year and next. Two of the most popular offerings: wine and classical music.

Wine cruises are an especially big draw, and no one recognizes that more than AmaWaterways, which helped develop the niche in 2010 with 13 departures. Ama has 50 wine-themed cruises in Europe this year, with 64 planned for 2019.

The cruises feature wine tours and tastings, visits to vineyards and onboard tastings and lectures led by wine experts.

Classical music is another perennial favorite -- not surprising given that many host ports are steeped in musical tradition.

Tauck's "Musical Magic Along the Blue Danube" is considered a standout, with opera performances, talks with local professors and music-themed sightseeing. The cruises also feature seminars and performances with two onboard "maestros," or music scholars.

Planning ahead, many of the lines are already promoting cruises that will include premier seating at Oberammergau's passion play in 2020 in Bavaria. The performance has been staged there every 10 years since 1634.

Children in mind

European river cruises typically are not kid-friendly. Tauck and Adventures by Disney are two exceptions, with departures planned especially for grandparents, parents and children.

On Tauck, kids ages 5 and older will see the Louvre in Paris by way of scavenger hunt. At Normandy, they get to sample rations that troops ate in World War II. In Vienna? Waltz lessons.

Disney has less formal programming than Tauck but it does welcome kids at least 4 years old and offers interconnecting cabins for families. Don't expect to see Mickey Mouse on board, but there will be opportunities to watch classic Disney films.

Newcomer to North American market

France-based CroisiEurope, the continent's largest river cruise line, began marketing to North Americans three years ago. North Americans looking for a cruise-like-a-local experience now account for 20 percent of passengers. That's up from zero.

Signage, public announcements and menus are in both French and English, and tour guides speak both languages.

"Our passengers ... want to meet and interact with people from all over the world, not to travel exclusively with other Americans," says John McGlade, general manager for the U.S. and Canada. CroisiEurope also offers Spanish-language cruises.

Passengers on the move

The push into active programming is a departure for most of the lines -- and a welcome one for their target demographic: travelers in their 50s, 60s and older who are fit and active.

Many cruises have offered passengers a small fleet of bikes for years -- but this goes way beyond biking. For example, Avalon features "classic," "discovery" and "active" options in each port, allowing travelers to experience the itinerary at their own pace and pleasure. The active traveler might take a jogging tour through Amsterdam, a biking tour around Vienna, or a canoe trip on the Danube. Next year, Avalon will have an adventure host onboard each ship who will be a resource for active guests.

Meanwhile, AmaWaterways rolled out a wellness program this year that will be extended fleetwide in 2019. Wellness hosts lead morning and afternoon workouts that may include yoga, tai chi, Pilates, and onshore circuit training as well as talks on diet, stress management and nutrition.

Ama, in concert with active travel company Backroads, also offers biking tours with expert trip leaders and titanium bikes.

As for snowshoeing in the Black Forest? That's a Crystal offering.

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