

RIVER CRUISING DEMYSTIFIED

River cruising has grown in popularity over the last few years, and cruise lines have responded with additional ships, itineraries and expanded programs. River cruising is a fantastic experience and vacation, however the number of options can be overwhelming and confusing.

As a travel consultant specializing in river cruises, I get similar questions from clients new to river cruising. Here are the answers to the top 5.

1 Is river cruising anything like ocean cruising?

Simply, NO! There are many differences between the two. There is a saying: "Oceans take you to countries, rivers take you through them." Here are some of the major differences:

- With the exception of paddle-wheelers on the Mississippi, river cruises have fewer than 188 passengers, most averaging between 150-160.
- Fewer passengers means fewer crowds and no lines. Intimate settings allow you to get to know your fellow passengers.
- A few cruise lines may have multiple dining venues for dinner, however most have one venue with one dinner seating.
- One will not find casinos, multiple bars, late night entertainment and Broadway shows on a river cruise. They do have regional entertainers and musicians on board.
- River cruises most often dock right in town, giving you quick and easy access to towns and cities. The walking tours typically start right from the docking area.
- Most river cruises include an excursion each day in port.

2 Will I be bored?

Doubtful. Cruise lines offer a wide variety of activities and excursions for all types of interests and activity levels. Themed cruises include beer and wine, golf, cultural heritage and art focuses. Excursions include guided walking, bike or bus tours, immersive and exclusive experiences. Some ships offer wellness programs, including bicycles, yoga, pools and workout rooms. You can choose what you want to see, how immersive you want to get and how active you want to be.

TIP: Active experiences (daily bicycling and walking/hiking trips) are being added to a number of itineraries. AmaWaterways, Avalon Waterways, CroisiEurope, Crystal River Cruises and Emerald Waterways all have active excursions as part of their offerings.

TIP: River cruising is perfect for multi-generation travel. The best programs are provided by AmaWaterways, Tauck and Uniworld.



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3 River cruises are expensive!

River cruises come in various price points, so your budget will help narrow down which lines to review. River cruises are a wonderful value and include many options that cost extra on an ocean cruise. Most fares include accommodations, meals, beer, wine and soft drinks during lunch and dinner and standard tour excursions. The luxury lines offer more inclusive pricing (unlimited beverages, gratuities) and premium excursions.

TIP: River cruising is promoted as an “all-inclusive” product, however the range of all-inclusiveness varies. The most inclusive cruise lines include unlimited beverages, all gratuities, exclusive excursions, transfers and possibly airfare. Other lines do not include everything in the fare. Determine which benefits are must haves and which ones are nice but not necessary. Depending on what you want included, all inclusive cruises may provide the better overall value and experience.

TIP: When you go will impact fares. March - April and mid October – December are generally lower priced than the peak months of May – September.

4 I see Viking ads all the time. Are they the only cruise line?

No. There are over 10 cruise lines to choose from. Cruise lines have unique personalities, some with a broad appeal and some with a narrower appeal. As the saying goes “Like minded people like to travel together.” The best choice comes down to your travel style – what you prefer (or not). What is the service like? What are the ships like? In some cases, what the line offers may be worth paying extra for due to the extraordinary experience it gives you. In some instances it may not. And the preference one one itinerary may change on the next!

Once you know where you would like to go, the right cruise comes down to the type of service provided, the ship and what is included that is most important to you. Service, ports of call, excursions, on/off board activities combined with your budget will help you select the best cruise.

5 What are the best rivers to cruise?

In Europe, the top rivers are the Danube and Rhine (especially for first time cruisers), Seine, Rhone and Bordeaux region (Dordogne, the Garonne, and the Gironde). In the US, top rivers include the Mississippi and the Columbia. In South America you have the Amazon, in Asia the Mekong and Irrawaddy, in Africa the Chobe and in India, the Ganges. Experienced cruisers can also look at the Douro, Elbe and Volga in Europe as well as the Hudson and St. Lawrence in the US and Canada.

As a cruise specialist, I take pride in understanding the differences between the various lines so that I can match clients to the best possible experience. Contact me. I'd be happy to help!