

Experience Review: River Cruising

This past July, Janet and I enjoyed our first ever European river cruise. We sailed with Avalon Waterways, the river cruise arm of the Globus tour company family of brands, on the Mosel



River in Germany. If you find yourself asking why Avalon and why the Mosel River rather than a better-known river cruise company on a more popular river cruise itinerary...well, those are great questions. The Mosel River isn't the first place most people think of when considering a river cruise, and if I'm being honest, it wasn't my first thought either. We chose this cruise quite simply because we were invited. Our Globus business representative asked us to join her on a travel agent familiarization cruise, and the Mosel itinerary was her choice. For us it was more about the experience than the itinerary, and the

opportunity to travel with someone knowledgeable about the brands was an opportunity we couldn't pass up. Traveling with supplier reps allows us to learn more about the product than we could ever pick up on our own, and it has the added benefit of allowing us to get to know each other better than we can during the few minutes we have to chat at trade shows. Relationship building is a central part of our approach to business, and something we foster with our supplier reps as it pays tremendous dividends for our clients down the road. We still had to pay for our cruise, though we did get a discount, but anytime we get invited to travel with our supplier reps we try to take them up on it. Even when it means paying our way.

Our Itinerary

The Mosel River flows from France to Germany, carving a meandering path through Luxembourg and into the heart of Germany's wine country before emptying into the Rhine River. Our cruise began in Remich in Luxembourg and ended a week later after stops in Trier, Bernkastel, Cochem, Koblenz, and a number of small villages along the way. From Koblenz we were scheduled to sail out of the Mosel River and into the Rhine, ending our cruise in Rudesheim, but the river had other things in mind. The itinerary took us through some of the most scenic countryside you'll find in the western part of Germany, and we toured a number of villages, explored Medieval castles, and learned much of the history and culture of both ancient and modern times in this picturesque area. One of the things Janet and I love most about travel is the opportunity to experience different cultures, meeting and talking with the locals and sampling a bit of their lives through their food, scenery, and history. River cruising allows you to experience all of that with a greater depth than you can ever hope to capture on an ocean cruise ship, and we fell in love with it. I'll skip the detailed tour



descriptions and instead point you to our voluminous social media posts where pictures do a much better job than words, but still fall short of describing the historic grandeur and breathtaking beauty of seeing the region in person.

Peculiarities of River Cruising



On an ocean cruise, ships are limited with the ports they can stop in. Not so with river cruising. European waterways are used to transport people and cargo as readily as trucks, buses, and trains in our country which means cruising can take you to destinations in the heart of areas inaccessible to an ocean cruise. We didn't have to spend hours on a bus getting from a cruise port to points of interest...we docked there. It allowed us to take the most interesting tours, and afterwards walk around quaint towns and villages as we explored and breathed in the culture on our own.

The blending of organized tours with self-guided exploration was one of many highlights of the river cruise experience we enjoyed, though they have their own peculiarities. Infrastructure on the waterways is scaled to meet the needs of a busy river, but there is a limit to the places ships can dock during peak seasons. If another ship is docked where you are scheduled to stop it's no problem...your ship can tie up alongside and passengers cross from one ship through the next and then onto land. For ocean cruisers the concept of passing through someone else's ship sounds like an odd way to get to shore, but for river ships shared moorings are a way of life.

One caution I have to share is that River cruising comes with challenges for anyone with impaired mobility. River ships have elevators, but they don't go to the top deck, so you still need to be capable of walking up one flight of stairs to get off the ship at some ports. It can be also tricky getting from ship to shore. If you've parallel parked next to another cruise ship, you may need to pick your way across the deck of your ship as well as another, stepping over the cables and hoses that provide power and water while docked. And getting from ship to shore often requires a bit of steep walk up or down a fairly flimsy gangway with handrails that aren't the most stable. If you are wheelchair bound on a river cruise you probably won't be leaving the ship. And even if you can navigate your way to land, you'll be faced with uneven road surfaces as many of the places you visit have cobblestone streets and sidewalks. Your reward for putting up with all that, and for most it is truly no inconvenience at all, is the opportunity to take in some of Europe's most breathtaking sites up close and without having to spend hours on a motorcoach to get there. Each day we found spectacular sites a short walk away from our ship's mooring spot.



Water Levels

When you contemplate a river cruise, you have to be willing to put up with changing water levels, and that means being flexible when it comes to changes in your itinerary. This summer the news was full of stories about the impact drier than usual conditions had on Europe's rivers, and there were more than a few reports about the demise of river cruising. It seems that same story plays out every summer, though this past year more so than others.

The problem with water levels in Europe's rivers is real, but it isn't new and modern river cruise ships are designed to handle all but the most extreme water levels. Ships are built to take on ballast and with upper decks that collapse down on hydraulic stilts so they can squeeze under bridges when rivers run high. Which incidentally is why their elevators don't operate to the top floor. Similarly, ships are designed with shallow drafts and the ability to remain stable even after pumping out ballast so they can operate in shallow water when the rivers run low.

When water levels on the rivers are either too high or too low for ships to navigate the length of their itinerary, river cruise companies do one of two things. Some arrange for bus tours to complete the portion of the itinerary beyond the point of their ships' ability to navigate. Other companies offload passengers and their luggage on one side of the obstruction, usually a bridge, and then transfer them to a different ship on the other side. Most river cruise companies operate multiple ships on the same river, some heading upstream and some down, and the ships are designed to be interchangeable when transfers need to occur. The entire process takes place while guests are on land tours so the only inconvenience you face is having to pack and unpack, not a small thing but on balance not a big one either if it means completing your cruise on the water rather than on a bus.

One of the things Janet and I liked about cruising with Avalon was that they are part of the Globus family of brands. Globus has deep expertise in, and a broad infrastructure for, land-based touring. Tapping into that when needed to meet the changing needs of the river makes things more transparent for guests. It allows Avalon to give their ship crews more authority than other river cruise companies to make on the spot decisions and itinerary adjustments. Several times during our trip as we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast our cruise director was on the phone with local suppliers making arrangements that allowed our tours to go on despite last-minute changes to docking locations or arrival and departure times. Other cruise companies rely on a centralized planning model, which is efficient but can result in more noticeable disruptions and delays. In spite of low river levels at the time of our cruise, the only impact on our trip was the inability to cruise from the Mosel onto the Rhine, which meant spending an extra night on the Mosel River. Our cruise director made accommodations so guests with tours in Frankfurt could make their tours, and for those of us who opted to remain on the ship, they arranged for a stop at a village on the Mosel that wasn't on our original itinerary. At the end of the cruise,



Avalon arranged for transportation to the airport, so our transfer was unaffected. If you approach the inevitable adjustments as an adventure, you'll make the most out of the experience. And we did.

For anybody eager to take a river cruise but with concerns about water levels, we recommend planning your river cruise either early in the summer after the winter flood periods have passed, or late in the fall after the fall rains bring river levels back up. If you don't have that flexibility but still want to take a river cruise, just be prepared to be flexible, and book with a cruise line that operates their cruises and tours whether water levels run high or low, and you'll have a great and memorable experience.

That's a Wrap

Our first river cruise experience was memorable, and for all the right reasons. It gave us a taste of how much different river cruising is from ocean cruising, and though we still love our ocean cruises, we have discovered an entirely new travel experience. We've booked our next river cruise for May 2023, again with Avalon. We'll be cruising the lower portion of the Danube, sailing upriver from the Black Sea. The itinerary takes us through the heart of old Europe, exploring Romania, Bulgaria, and Serbia, ending in Hungary. Maybe some of you will want to join us!