

Ship Review: Avalon's Imagery II



Janet and I finally had the opportunity to experience a river cruise...our first river cruise after more than 50 ocean cruises. We sailed down the Mosel River in Germany, and what an interesting, unique, and wonderful adventure it was. To say the experience was different from our ocean cruises would be an understatement, and I want to share the highlights with you.

Our cruise was with Avalon Waterways, the river cruise company that is part of the Globus family of brands. Globus is well known for their land-based group tours around the world, and Avalon extends that same approach to locally curated and immersive cultural experiences that you won't find with other river cruise companies. Avalon is not as well-known as other companies, like industry leader Viking River Cruises, but they have been sailing Europe's rivers almost as long. The two lines, and others, are similar on the surface but we chose Avalon Waterways for our first river cruise after digging deeper into the passenger experience each line offers. As with most suppliers one is not inherently better than the other, but they do offer different experiences. Based on our pre-cruise research we found Avalon Waterways to be the best fit for our travel style, and now having cruised with them our experience bears that out.

Once you remove the livery...the branding...river cruise ships all look the same from the outside, long and narrow. River ships' exterior designs are constrained by the fact that while we can harness the power of the river, we can't subdue it. River cruise ships are long because they can be, and they are narrow because they have to be...ship length is driven by the need to pack as much in as possible to be able to run a profit, while the width is constrained by the need to fit through the locks used on Europe's rivers to keep them navigable. Once you enter the ship the external similarities end.

River cruise ships are designed to be able to navigate the length of their assigned waterway when seasonal flooding causes the rivers to run high and fast as well as during all but the deepest of droughts. To facilitate that, the ships feature upper decks with collapsible structures and navigational bridges on hydraulic stilts that can be lowered to reduce the air draft enough to fit under the rail and auto bridges that span the rivers for when water levels are high. Likewise, the ships are designed with the shallowest draft possible so they can continue to operate during all but the deepest of droughts. They also have clever ballasting systems to

allow the crew to adjust their air and water drafts to the needs of the river while maintaining stability. Once you step aboard a river cruise ship, the differences among brands become more apparent and I'll cover some of those differences throughout this review.

By the Numbers – Avalon Imagery II

Length: 361 feet
Width: 37.5 feet
Draft: 10 feet
Air Draft (height above the waterline): 20 feet
Passenger capacity: 128 guests
Crew: 37
Date commissioned: 2016
Decks: 4 total
Staterooms: 64 total in three categories
 Royal Suites -- 300 ft²
 Panorama Suites -- 200 ft²
 Deluxe Oceanview Suites -- 172 ft²

General Layout

Avalon operates two classes of ships for their European river cruises with the Imagery II being in the smaller class, though not by much. Avalon's larger ships are 82 feet longer than the Imagery II and can carry an additional 38 passengers. That's still small by any comparison with ocean cruise ships, offering river cruise guests a completely different experience without sacrificing comfort or amenities. All of Avalon's ships offer similar public venues, and all feature wifi included as part of your fare. That's important for those Instagram worthy pictures you'll be wanting to post for friends and family, and on a European river cruise there is plenty to share.



Imagery II has a total of four decks...three passenger decks and the uppermost Sky Deck. The aft portion of the lowest deck houses the engine room and engineering spaces. Forward of the engineering spaces the ship offers a small but well-equipped fitness center, and forward from there, 12 deluxe ocean view staterooms. These cabins are referred to as "Swan View" suites in the gentile language of the marketing department, but I call them "Duck Blind" rooms...more on that in a bit. Moving up to the second deck, the aft third of the deck houses the engine room upper level, linen storage, and the laundry room, all of which are limited to crew access. The midships portion of



deck two is dedicated to passenger cabins with 25 Panoramic Suites, and the forward third of the deck is dedicated to the ship's galley and main dining room.

The dining room offers open seating dining with ala carte service three times daily, with beer and wine service included at no additional charge. Outside of mealtime, sodas and alcoholic beverages are available for a fee...most river cruise lines don't offer drink packages like ocean cruises, but the drink prices are reasonable and there is usually a reduced cost happy hour before dinner. Avalon recently announced they will be expanding their free wine and beer service to include during their designated happy hour times. Unlike ocean cruises, there is no restriction against bringing wine or beer on board from your different stops, though there is a corkage fee if you want to bring them into one of the public venues. With river cruises sailing through the heart of Europe's wine and beer making regions, that's a great option.



One deck up from the main dining room amidships you'll find the ship's main entrance foyer and reception area. The entry foyer on a river ship is spacious but functional... nothing like the soaring multi-deck atrium you find on ocean cruise ships. It is the main entry and exit point for the ship, with the exception of times when river levels are low and mooring conditions would require too steep of an angle for the gangplank to reach the entry foyer. At those times, passengers enter and exit the ship from the topmost Sky Deck. Forward from the entry foyer you enter the ship's main public venue, the Panorama Lounge.

Heading aft from the entry foyer, a half-flight of stairs leads up to the third deck of guest cabins, where an additional 25 Panorama Suites and the ship's two Royal Suites are located. Aft of the guest cabins on the third deck is a small hair salon. And at the stern of the ship, you find the Club Lounge, a smaller but nicely appointed sitting area for guests that compliments the Panorama Lounge. The topmost deck of the ship is the Sky Deck. It houses the bridge, a small whirlpool, covered seating areas for guests, a life-sized chess, checker and backgammon board, storage for the ship's supply of bicycles that are available for guest use, and an expansive area for sunning on chaise lounges. As noted earlier, the Sky Deck is designed to be able to collapse down when water levels run high, and when that happens access will be closed off to guests for as long as the ship's air draft needs to be reduced.

Lounges and Entertainment

Moving forward from the ship's main foyer on deck three you enter the ship's main public venue, the Panorama Lounge. The lounge is an open format venue overlooking the ship's bow. By day it serves as an observation area, and at night it is pressed into service as a gathering space for guest lectures and local entertainment.

The indoor and outdoor spaces of the Panorama lounge have the capacity to comfortably seat almost all guests when the ship sails full. This ship's main bar...actually, its only bar...is located just inside the Panorama Lounge. It is well-stocked and staffed by knowledgeable bartenders who can make just about any drink you want. Which brings me to another point of comparison between river and ocean cruises. River cruises are not booze cruises. Alcohol is meant to compliment the experience, not to be the focus of it. I found that to be a refreshing change from ocean cruising. The aft portion of the lounge offers bistro-style tableside seating which is used during mealtimes as an alternative to the main dining room when the crew sets up a self-service buffet with selections from the dining room menu at each meal. The Panorama Lounge also features a covered outdoor observation area for guests to enjoy an unobstructed view of the river.



Entertainment on river cruises is completely different than what you find on ocean cruises. The destination is your entertainment. Guests are free to go off the ship after dinner and explore the local towns or villages that are a short walk from the ship's mooring point. The gangway is open all night, and there is an electronic station in the main entry foyer where guests scan in and out so crew can ensure all guests are accounted for before the ship sets sail. Also, there is always at least one crew member staffing the reception desk all hours to guard against any uninvited, non-paying townspeople who might get curious. The exception is when they perform hourly security checks through the ship during the late night and early morning hours. All of which is to say if you want Vegas style reviews or Broadway shows, go to Vegas or take an ocean cruise. If you prefer immersing yourself in the local culture and sites of the destinations you visit, a river cruise might be your best choice.



Entertainment is offered most evenings in the Panorama Lounge from just after dinner until 10 or 11PM. Early evenings are for enrichment with invited local experts brought on board to help guests make the most of the places they visit. Nightly entertainment on our cruise featured small local groups performing popular music while guests chatted and danced. After 11PM things get quiet as most guests are resting up for the next day's adventures.

The secondary lounge on Imagery II, the Club Lounge, is at the ship's stern. As with the Panorama Lounge, it offers a view during scenic cruising, except the view is of where you've been rather than where you are going. It serves as a more intimate, quiet gathering spot during the evening hours. Most other cruise lines don't even offer this secondary lounge, or if they do they position it in the middle of the ship, without the view Avalon's ships offer. In addition to comfortable seating there are tables and a selection of books, table, and board games. I'm not going to kid you...the real draw for the Club Lounge is that it has a self-serve

coffee/cappuccino/espresso machine and a supply of freshly baked cookies and muffins which are replenished throughout the day. It was my first stop every morning. And my last stop most nights. There is also tea service, an ice machine, and a flavored water station that dispenses still and sparkling water with several infused flavors to choose from. All interior spaces on the Imagery II, as well as most of the outside spaces, are designated non-smoking. The ship has two small smoking areas, a small, covered sitting area outside of the Club Lounge with about half a dozen chairs and tables arranged in a single line overlooking the stern, and a small area on the aft portion of the Sky Deck. Both are positioned at the ship's stern to keep the smoke downwind of the non-smoking guests as the ship cruises on the river.



The Staterooms

One of the things that sets Avalon's ships apart from others, and the aspect of cruising with Avalon that most appealed to us, is the design of their staterooms. There are 50 Panorama



Suites on two decks offering floor-to-ceiling all-glass sliding doors. They provide panoramic river views with the ability to be opened almost completely for a clear view of the scenery and the open air...there are bars strategically positioned to keep anyone from falling into the river without blocking anyone's view. Beds in these suites are positioned perpendicular to the panoramic windows so you can sit or lie in bed and watch the scenery go by without having to risk getting a crick in your neck by having to turn to face the windows.

Balconies on other river cruise ships are the "barely there" variety. They eat into the interior room space, but the width constraints of river ships limit them to barely deep enough for a chair and small table. From what I could see as we passed other cruise lines' ships on the river, their balconies went unused. As much as I like a balcony on ocean cruise ships, Avalon hit the right balance with their approach. Rather than allocating limited room space to a balcony that goes mostly unused, they dedicate that space to the interior of your suite, giving you the flexibility to enjoy the scenery as openly or protected as the weather and your preferences permit. The doors slide all the way open, turning your stateroom into a large, covered balcony when you want to experience the open air. And in inclement weather you can close the doors and still get the full use of the space as part of your room, and enjoy the view all without



getting wet. Or cold. Or overheated. There is a comfortable couch and chair positioned by one side of the sliding glass door to give you that balcony experience without impeding the view of anyone who prefers to sit or lie in the bed and watch the world go by. Each suite also comes with a writing desk and bedside tables.

Staterooms have queen sized bedding which can be separated into two twins as preferred. I suppose for the sake of completeness I should mention the Royal Suites. Imagery II offers two, and we were able to tour one during our cruise. They feature about 100 square feet of additional space as compared with the Panoramic Suites, in the form of a separate seating area. I suppose if money were no object, or if you were traveling with family, the seating area could come in handy. I was fine without it.

The closest thing to an interior cabin you'll find on a river cruise ship are those "Swan View" or "Duck Blind" rooms on deck one, and our ship had 12 of these cabins. These are the lowest



priced staterooms on the ship, and they are located on the lowest passenger deck situated partially below the water line. Because of that, the most they can offer by way of a view is a narrow window positioned almost at the ceiling of the room and just a few feet above the waterline, giving a view of the swans that can be found on most rivers as they swim by. To my eye the view is more akin to a hunter's duck blind. I would find them a bit

claustrophobic, but with the ample public observation areas it can be difficult for some people to justify the extra cost of an upgrade to the Panoramic Suites.

One important caution for those new to river cruising...be sure to close your curtains before turning in for the night. River ships occasionally tie-up side-by-side, and it can happen while you are sleeping. If you don't close your curtains, you might wake up to find the unobstructed view of the river you went to sleep to replaced by a view into someone else's cabin...and they from their cabin into yours. All cabins aboard Avalon's ships feature 220-volt power and use standard European outlets, which means you'll need to bring a plug adapter for your electronic devices. There are also a couple of standard USB ports on either side of the bed and the desk. Storage space is limited so you'll want to pack lite. The bathroom is small but adequate with a toilet, glass door shower, and a single sink vanity, all in the same space with a solid wood door to close it off from the rest of the cabin. Avalon ships include upgraded bathroom amenities, so I would say leave your soap and shampoo at home unless you are really picky.



That's a Wrap

Our river cruise was a wonderful experience. And though it was our first, it won't be our last. River cruising is a completely different experience from ocean cruising, and I mean that in the best way. We've already booked our next river cruise, another with Avalon Waterways. We'll be sailing upriver on the Danube in May, from the Black Sea to Budapest. Anyone want to join us? Give Janet a call!