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TRAVELING ON

European River Cruising

By Nicole Pensiero

The first time I took a European river cruise, in the spring of 2018, I was so enthralled with the experience that I promised myself I'd do another "down the road sometime."

Well, the road came quickly; less than a year after my first trip down the Danube with Viking Cruises, I'd booked a second cruise – this time down the Rhine.

The fact that Viking was running some terrific spring specials - including free airfare - made the decision easier. In an effort to save a little money for our second go-around, we opted for a cabin on the lower level (the smallest and least expensive accommodations), and still found the experience beyond fantastic.

Founded in 1997, Viking has become the most successful cruise line in the world in little more than 20 years (for both river and ocean cruising). It's not the only company to choose from, but it's the market leader, for good reason. The service is impeccable; the ships, modern and comfortable. The onboard cuisine is excellent, too, featuring casual outdoor dining, as well as a formal dining room with three entrée offerings at lunch and dinner, and a breakfast buffet (along with ala carte choices to start your day). We especially enjoyed the German-themed dinner offered one night along the Rhine.

I wasn't quite sure what to expect from my first experience on a European river cruise, but I expected it to be good. Just how good, I couldn't have predicted. As a result, my expectations were high for our second cruise, which proved to be just as enjoyable as the first. Simply put, river cruising is a great mix of relaxation and adventure.

Viking's Chairman, Torstein Hagan, has called their river cruises "the thinking person's cruise," with a focus on the destination, and experiences that allow travelers to learn about other cultures.

While river cruising has captured my heart, anyone expecting something akin to an ocean cruise – especially one with a "party vibe" – will be surprised by the differences between river and ocean cruising. Here are some things to consider:

- *Compared to ocean cruise liners, river cruise ships are relatively small.* We had just under 190 passengers on both our Viking longships, the Egil (2018) and the Hlin (2019), along with 50 crew members. Between the relatively small number of passengers and communal dining, there's a good chance you'll get to know plenty of people on the ship; we loved the sense of community.
- *The ride is incredibly smooth.* Aside from sensing some movement when we passed through the locks along the Danube and Rhine, there's not much to remind you that you're even on a ship in terms of the movement. (Cabins on the lower level, however, do pick up more "ship noise" than those on higher decks). It's a smooth ride, but we moved at quite a pace much of the time. The smooth ride makes sea-sickness a non-issue on river cruises.
- *The focus during a river cruise is on cultural enrichment and daytime exploration.* There were many included shore excursions

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on both our European river cruises, even one to a UNESCO World Heritage site in the Czech Republic. They were all terrific learning experiences but required us to "rise and shine" relatively early. Evenings were for relaxing, not partying (though we certainly celebrated with our complimentary cocktails when we sailed into stunning Budapest at night!). On the Rhine, we especially enjoyed two included tours of German castles.

- *The vibe on the ship is incredibly relaxing.* Viking river cruise ships are virtually identical in layout, and we loved the clean, modern decor and many places to relax onboard, including a small library, a sun deck, and an open-air deck at the front of the ship also used for buffet breakfasts and lunches. The lounge, which features a bar and entertainment, is a popular hangout day and night.
- *River Cruising is geared toward adults.* It makes perfect sense when you take into account the focus on cultural enrichment -- and there's not much that would appeal to kids onboard anyway, like a game arcade or a swimming pool. (Note, there's no casino, either).
- *There are some nice added perks.* Viking Cruises include beer and wine with lunch and dinner with your trip package; an add-on premium beverage package is also offered. Each Viking ship has a round-the-clock coffee bar, which is great for early morning or late night visits; there was always a yummy bakery item offered there as well.
- *River Cruising allows you to see a lot of things in a short time:* We visited five countries in less than a week on our first trip and hit four countries on our second -- but never felt rushed. At each stop, we had an included walking/bus tour, as well as some free time to explore.
- *There's no pressure to do the included side-trips,* which makes river cruising ideal for folks who don't have the stamina or interest in leaving the ship whenever it docks. (Along with

included side trips, there are optional side trips, too, available for an additional cost. On our Danube cruise, we especially loved an evening Mozart concert in Vienna; on the Rhine cruise, we enjoyed a visit to Colmar, France, where World War II hero Audie Murphy, at age 19, single-handedly fought off a charging group of German soldiers).

- *River Cruising makes for memories that last a lifetime.* I still think about both our Viking trips, almost daily, because they were that memorable. We've kept in touch with some of the people we met onboard and hope to take another cruise "down the road." It's an adventure I highly recommend!

For more information, visit www.VikingCruises.com

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