

Rhine/Moselle/Main



In a Nutshell: Rhine River cruises combine history and culture. You'll sail through spectacular scenery, dotted with Sleeping Beauty-esque fairytale castles and discover some of the oldest and most historic cities in Germany.

Typical Itinerary: The Rhine flows from Switzerland to Amsterdam in Holland, passing towns and cities in France and Germany that harbour centuries of history and culture. The Moselle flows into the Rhine from northeast France and Luxembourg. The Main River flows into the Rhine from eastern Germany; cruise along this, and you'll end up in the Main Danube Canal, which connects to the Danube.

The most popular Rhine cruise is a one-week sailing from Amsterdam to Basel in Switzerland, or vice-versa.

One-week itineraries typically call at Cologne, famous for its twin-towered Gothic cathedral, and Koblenz, which sits at the confluence of the Rhine and Moselle and is overlooked by the Ehrenbreitstein fortress, one of the largest castles in Europe. Then you'll sail through the Rhine Gorge, which stretches for 65km (40 miles).

This is the most spectacular section of the river, with miles of castles, spires, Romanesque churches and precipitous riverside vineyards. It's a UNESCO World Heritage Site and famous for the Lorelei Rock, where, according to legend, a beautiful maiden threw herself to her death over a faithless lover and now lures sailors to their deaths with her hypnotic singing.

Weeklong cruises also usually visit Rudesheim in one of Germany's top wine-growing areas, Heidelberg, which houses Speyer, the oldest university in Germany. Speyer has a fabulous Romanesque cathedral, Strasbourg, home of the European Parliament, and Breisach, gateway to the Black Forest.

Getting There: You'll fly into Amsterdam (or Basel if you are sailing northbound), from which it's a short transfer to embark your vessel. If you're coming from London or Southeast England, an easier option is to travel by train, taking Eurostar through the Channel Tunnel and changing onto Europe's rail network at Lille, Brussels or Paris. It's quite a long train journey from Basel to the U.K., but if time is not an issue, look upon it as a bonus chance to see more of Europe.

Favourite Memories: Enjoy a glass or two of the local wine on the Drosselgasse in Rudesheim to get a taste, literally, of this buzzy little alleyway that is packed with shops and wine bars.

In Strasbourg, check out the spectacular Gothic Cathedral. Then head for lunch at Le Gurtlerhoft in the

big square outside. You dine in the cellars, and they serve a mean *choucroust*. (That's the French name for sauerkraut, which is a favourite there because the city has been both French and German many times through its history.) But, beware -- the portions are huge.

Watch Out For: Remember that, in Europe, they drive on the right -- the opposite way to the U.K. (though North Americans should have little trouble adjusting). Most drivers stop at pedestrian crossings, but never rely on it. Wait for cars to come to a halt before crossing.

Not every view is a picture postcard. Inevitably, you'll also cruise past ugly industrial areas and power plants and maybe moor by a road or nondescript apartment block. Forewarned is forearmed.

Been There, Done That? : Why not slow it all down and give yourself two weeks to explore from Amsterdam to Basel? You'll see many more fascinating towns and cities. Conversely, if time is tight, there are shorter four- and five-night itineraries -- for instance, from Basel to Dusseldorf or vice-versa, and roundtrip from Cologne. In spring, you can take minicruises from Amsterdam to see the bulb fields.

You can also cruise the Moselle and Main, sailing between Trier, which dates back to the Romans and boasts the stunning Porta Nigra, one of the original gates into the city, and Nuremberg, infamous for its Nazi rally grounds and the Nazi war crime trials after the Second World War.

You can also combine itineraries. There are cruises from Amsterdam to Trier, from Trier to Budapest and from Amsterdam to Basel via Trier.

The ultimate in European river cruising has to be a two-week cruise from Amsterdam to Budapest, or the opposite, using the Rhine, Main, Main Danube Canal and Danube, or a three-week voyage from Amsterdam to the Black Sea, flying home from Bucharest in Romania.

Danube

In a Nutshell: A Danube cruise is a lesson in history about the days when Vienna ruled an empire and, more recently, when an Iron Curtain divided Europe. Now the curtain has gone, and you can explore cities that were all but closed to the west for more than 40 years.

Typical Itinerary: The Danube flows from the Black Forest in Germany to the Black Sea in Romania, passing through or between Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania on the way.



Most itineraries are one week and start and end in Passau in Germany, on the Austrian border. You'll most likely fly into Munich and transfer to the ship, in which case why not consider adding a couple of extra nights in the city? It's a lively place with palaces, churches and beer halls, but for a special treat, take an excursion to Neuschwanstein to see the fairytale castle built for King Ludwig II in the late 19th century; it inspired Disney's Sleeping Beauty castle. Munich is 1.5 hours from Passau; many cruise lines offer transfers.

One-week, roundtrip Passau cruises visit Vienna, famous for the Hofburg Palace, from which the Habsburgs ruled Austria for 700 years. You can also see the stunning white Lipizzaner horses at the Spanish Riding School and Budapest, which is actually two cities, Buda and Pest, divided by a river and packed with history, culture and loads of spas.

You'll also visit Linz, a small town at the centre of Austria's wine-growing region, from which it might be possible to take excursions to Durnstein and Esztergom in Hungary, as well as Salzburg, Melk, which is famous for its Benedictine Abbey.

Favourite Memories: I'll never forget the moment I walked into a room in the Military Museum in Vienna that held just three exhibits -- a car, a blood-stained uniform and chaise lounge -- and the sudden realisation that these were all connected to the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand I 1914, the final spark that ignited the First World War.

Splash out on coffee and Sacher Tort in one of Vienna's coffee houses. We're talking literary cafe, rather than Starbucks, following a 300-year-old tradition that allows you to linger over coffee as long as you like. I went to Cafe Central on Herrengasse, which claims Hertzl, Lenin and Trotsky as former patrons. I was thrilled to be able to say I was there, too, but I paid well for the privilege!

You'll spend half a day "at sea" between Linz and Durnstein, and it's the most beautiful scenery of the trip, as the river's framed by low mountains that are covered with vineyards. In Durnstein, borrow one of your ship's bikes, and cycle through the Napa-style countryside.

In Budapest, I fell in love with the Disney-esque Fisherman's Bastion in Buda's Castle District. That area offers great views of the city, a myriad of cobbled streets to explore and plenty of places for a bite to eat! Who could want more? In Pest, the two-hour RiverRide (www.riverride.com) on an amphibious coach is a great way to acquainted with the city from land and sea. It runs daily and is priced about €27 (\$33).

Watch Out For: Moorings in Vienna and Budapest are beside busy and noisy roads. When booking, ask your river cruise operator for a cabin on the water side.

Been There, Done That?: There are many variations of the roundtrip Passau cruise, including one-way voyages from Passau to Budapest or from Nuremberg in Germany to Budapest. There are also voyages between Budapest and the Black Sea that include two nights each in Budapest and Bucharest at the

start and end of the cruise, as well as two-week cruises from Passau to the Black Sea or vice-versa.

Choose these longer cruises, and you'll visit Bratislava in Slovakia, which has a delightful Old Town, and Belgrade in Serbia, one of the oldest capital cities in Europe, where you can visit the memorial of Josip Tito, the Communist leader of the former Yugoslavia.

You'll also sail through the stunning Iron Gate Gorge -- actually four gorges east of Belgrade, rolled into one name, that stretch for 90 miles and divide the Carpathian and Balkan Mountains, narrowing to just 150 metres at one point. Be sure to have cameras at the ready.

Rhone/Saone



In a Nutshell: If you like wine, this is the river cruise for you, as it sails through Provence and Burgundy, two of France's top wine-making regions. You'll cruise past acres of vineyards and have ample opportunities to taste the local grapes.

Typical Itinerary: The Rhone rises in Switzerland and flows into France, emptying into the Mediterranean near Arles. The Saone rises in France. They converge at Lyon, where the Saone becomes the Rhone.

The main itinerary is a seven-night cruise from Lyon to Arles or nearby Avignon, or the reverse. (Some cruises also depart from Chalon-sur-Saone, just north of Lyon.)

If you're cruising from Lyon, you'll fly into Lyon airport, from which it's a short transfer to your river boat, and out of Marseilles, which is about one hour, 15 minutes by car from Arles. Some operators fly you in and out of Lyon, with a coach trip between Avignon and Lyon at the start or end of the cruise. (It depends whether your cruise is north or southbound).

An increasingly popular option for British passengers is to take the Eurostar train from London through the Channel Tunnel and transfer onto one of France's fast TGV trains in Paris (if you're travelling to/from Lyon) or Lille (if travelling to/from Avignon).

Speaking of Paris, you might also add a pre- or post-cruise stay there before taking the fast TGV to Lyon.

Cruises typically call at Beaune, the wine capital of Burgundy, Vienne, where you can visit the remains of a 14,000-seat amphitheatre and a temple built in 25BC in honour of the Roman Emperor Augustus and his wife Livia. There's also Avignon, home to the only bridge in France with a song named after it. We know it as Pont d'Avignon, but it is actually Pont St-Benezet.

You'll also visit Viviers, a small, walled city with buildings dating back to the Middle Ages, and Tournon, famous for its wine and chocolate. There will also be plenty of time to explore Lyon, a big city with a cobbled old town and stunning Gothic and Renaissance architecture.

Favourite Memories: Pick a cruise that stays overnight in Lyon so you can dine out in the city known as the gastronomic capital of France. Of course there is haute cuisine, but for a dine-with-the-locals option, try a bouchon. These restaurants serve traditional Lyonnaise food (sausages, duck pate and chicken) in simple surroundings and are licensed annually to make sure they are authentic. Le Tablier in the Old Town was great, but there are plenty more. Look for the word "bouchon" on the front of the restaurant.

The Roman amphitheatre at Arles was an unexpected treasure. Actually, so was the rest the city, with its narrow streets and medieval and Gothic architecture. Van Gogh loved to paint there; a fun game is to see if you can spot some of the scenes from his paintings.

Watch Out For: British travellers: Note that people drive on the right in France, the opposite to the U.K., so take extra care when crossing roads.

Service is usually included in restaurants in France. (It will say so on the menu if it is.) If you decide to leave a tip as well, small change or a couple of euros is quite acceptable.

Been There, Done That?: There really is only one option on the Rhone, but why not take advantage of being in France and add a couple of nights in Paris to the start or end of the cruise? It'll give you time to have a taste of the highlights, including the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Champs Elysees and the Arc de Triomphe.

Douro

In a Nutshell: If you like scenery, you'll love cruising the Douro River, which twists and turns through steep, vine-clad slopes and rocky outcrops as it makes its way from Porto, the second-largest city in Portugal, to the Spanish border. An added attraction is port, the fortified wine that took its name from the city. The drink is a local celebrity, so there'll be plenty of tastings en route.

Typical Itinerary: The Douro rises in north central Spain and flows southwest and into northern Portugal, emptying into the Atlantic at Porto.



Riverboat lines all cruise the same itinerary, sailing from Porto to Vega de Terron, on the border with Spain, a distance of 210km (130 miles). You pass through five locks as you go. At Vega de Terron

riverboats have to turn back because the river is no longer navigable.

You'll fly into and out of Porto, unless you add extra time in Lisbon, Portugal's capital city, which is 2.5 hours by train to the south.

Your cruise will either start or end with a tour of Porto, an elegant city built on steep hills that is most famous for its port wine lodges. Once under way, cruises stop at Regua, in the heart of port wine country, for excursions to Lamego, where the chief attraction is the 18th-century Nossa Senhora dos Remedios pilgrimage church, standing atop of a 686-step baroque staircase.

You'll also call at Pinhao, a favourite haunt for port wine tastings, and Vega de Terron for a full-day excursion to the city of Salamanca in Spain. Vega is in Spain; when you rejoin the vessel after a day away, it will have turned around and be moored at Barca d'Alva, on the Portuguese side of the river, for a next-day excursion to tiny Castelo de Rodrigo.

Favourite Memories: What an incredible city Salamanca is! It's known as the Golden City on account of its yellow sandstone buildings, and it's home to one of the oldest universities in the world. Take a stroll around the market, which boasts stalls crowded with cured hams and dried sausage. Visit the cathedrals and churches, and finish up with tapas and beer on the Plaza Mayor, one of the largest squares in Spain, made for a fabulous day out.

Pinhao is a delightfully sleepy little place (although I'm assured it comes to life in autumn for the grape harvest). Be sure to check out the railway station, decorated with the blue-and-white tiles (azulejos) that are ubiquitous in Portugal. Then call at the Vintage House Hotel for a glass of port on the terrace. It's right by the dock, with views over the river, so you can't miss it.

Watch Out For: Don't come on this cruise for iconic cities dripping in history. Salamanca is a gem, but Castelo de Rodrigo can be ticked off in 20 minutes, while Lamego takes about a half hour. It really is all about scenery and enjoying the local tittle.

Been There, Done That? : If you add a couple of nights in Lisbon at the start or end of the cruise, why not also take a couple of days to drive north, staying at one of Portugal's beautiful *quintas* -- small hotels that have opened in former manor houses -- along the way?

Elbe



In a Nutshell: This is a cruise for anyone who loves discovering the past. You'll have a bit of time in Berlin and Prague at the start and end of the cruise and discover the birthplace of the Reformation along the way.

Typical Itinerary: The Elbe rises in the Czech Republic, flows into Germany and empties into the North Sea at Cuxhaven, near Hamburg.

There is only one cruise option -- seven nights, sailing either from Magdeburg in Germany to Melnik in the Czech Republic, or vice-versa. You'll either fly into Berlin and out of Prague or the other way around, depending which direction you are sailing.

The itinerary starts with a tour of Sanssouci Palace in Potsdam; then it's a one-hour transfer to the boat in Magdeburg -- a 65-mile journey -- for the cruise.

Stops include Wittenberg, the birthplace of the Reformation; Meissen, famous for its eponymous porcelain; and Dresden, which was levelled by Allied bombers towards the end of the Second World War. You'll also cruise through craggy Saxon Switzerland and call at Litomerice, a pretty little Czech town with a mix of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque buildings.

Favourite Memories: You have to do the history in Berlin -- Checkpoint Charlie, the Reichstag and the Jewish Museum -- but make time for shopping on the Kurfurstendamm, which has fashion favourites, including H&M, Benetton and Zara. Also opt for dinner at the *Kartoffelkeller*, or potato cellar (www.kartoffelkeller.com), which serves more than 100 potato dishes. It's always busy, so be sure to book ahead.

Wittenberg was an eye-opener, thanks to a great guide. I finally understood what drove German priest Martin Luther to fight against the established church. Dresden was a sobering reminder of the horrors of war, but it was great also to see how they have rebuilt the city to its former glory.

And who could not love Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic? I could have stayed all day on the ancient Charles Bridge, just watching the swarms of painters, musicians, souvenir-sellers and tourists.

Watch Out For: This is quite a strenuous itinerary with a lot to see, so if you have mobility concerns, discuss them first with your river cruise operator.

Been There, Done That? : There is only the one itinerary on the Elbe, but you really must add extra days in Berlin and Prague at the start and end to make this holiday complete.

Seine

In a Nutshell: This is a favourite with gardeners because it visits Monet's garden in Giverny. It is also a top choice for Francophiles and all those who want to see the Second World War landing beaches.

Typical Itinerary: The Seine rises in France, flows north through Paris into



Normandy and empties into the English Channel at Le Havre.

River cruises sail from Paris to Rouen or Caudebec and back. Most will fly into Paris. If you're travelling from Southeast England, it makes more sense to take the Eurostar train through the Channel Tunnel from St. Pancras in London to Paris Gare du Nord in the centre of Paris. Journey time is just two hours, 15 minutes.

There is only one itinerary. It'll include a full day in Paris, which is just enough time to go up the Eiffel Tower and explore Montmartre, which is always packed with artists, and also stop at Vernon to visit Giverny, where artist Claude Monet lived from 1883 until his death in 1926.

Other calls include Les Andelys for excursions to Chateau-Gaillard -- built in 1196 by English king Richard the Lionheart in the days when England owned Normandy -- and Rouen, where Joan of Arc was burnt at the stake.

Rouen is also the jumping-off point for excursions to the Normandy beaches or to Honfleur, a pretty little fishing village. From Conflans, you can visit the Palace of Versailles.

Favourite Memories: Dinner in bustling St. Germain in Paris is a must. There are loads of restaurants from all over the world, none particularly gourmet, but it's a lively place come nightfall. Rouen is fabulous, as there is so much to do -- see the city, take an excursion to the Normandy beaches where allied troops landed in 1944. Also try a gastronomic tour of the region, tasting its cheese, Calvados and cider.

Watch Out For: Watch out for Paris drivers. They are supposed to stop at zebra crossings, but wait until they come to a halt before stepping into the road.

Paris is hugely expensive these days. The Champs-Elysees is hugely over-priced, but other areas are not much better.

Queues for a lift to the top of the Eiffel Tower are horrendous. If you want to go up, get there early.

Been There, Done That? : There is only one itinerary on the Seine, but if you're coming back, add more days in Paris, either at the start or end of the cruise. One day is not nearly long enough.