



Christmas Market River Cruises in Europe Brighten Up the Shoulder Season

By Erica Silverstein

The weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas are considered a slower travel period in Europe – but not for river cruise lines and ports along the Rhine and Danube rivers. Late November and December cruises are some of the river cruise industry’s most popular itineraries.

Christmas market river cruises hit the sweet spot for modern travelers seeking authentic cultural experiences and a festive holiday atmosphere. They also boost business for river cruise lines and the communities they visit during what would otherwise be a slow season.

These limited-time, themed sailings sell out far in advance of the holiday season – a win-win-win for the river cruise lines, travelers and the ports they visit.

Christmas market river cruises transform the shoulder season

Reinvigorating the slow travel months of November and December (with some cruises into early January) brings benefits in many ways.

Christmas market cruises “allow us to extend our sailing season into January, keeping our ships and crew active during what would traditionally be a quieter time on Europe’s rivers,” says Ellen Bettridge, President and CEO of Uniworld Boutique River Cruises. At a time when river cruise lines might be laying up ships for the winter off-season, they are instead delivering popular itineraries.

At the same time, two trends have taken hold among travelers, slow-season travel, as they strive to avoid summer crowds, and seeking out cool-climate experiences. Festive holiday cruises deliver in this regard, “helping us meet strong demand for unique, off-peak experiences,” says Pam Hoffee, president of Avalon Waterways.

Ports along the rivers also benefit from the extension of the river cruise season, as cruisers do their holiday shopping, indulge in gingerbread and other edible treats, visit attractions and enjoy holiday cheer. “It really is an economic driver for some of these small towns we visit” says Jennifer Halboth, CEO Riverside Luxury Cruises. “Plus, people really like to showcase their town during Christmas.”

Holiday sailings attract new river cruisers and drive repeat bookings

For the cruise lines, Christmas market river cruises are good for business. A longer cruise season means added revenue, and holiday sailings command premium prices. Also important, these cruises help river lines draw first-time cruisers with seasonal attractions and convenient seven-night itineraries.

“Our Christmas Market cruises often serve as the perfect introduction to river cruising, attracting travelers who might not have considered a sailing before but are drawn to the idea of Europe during the holidays,” says Bettridge.

Riverside’s Halboth notes the appeal of these itineraries is not just for couples, solo travelers and groups of friends but for multigenerational families looking to spend time together during the holiday season.

Christmas market cruises also drive repeat bookings. Guests fall in love with the destinations, the ease of travel, the friendly crew and the beautiful ships and are persuaded to sign up for another river cruise in a different destination or time of year, the executives say.

“The combination of shorter itineraries, iconic destinations and the built-in magic of the season makes these cruises a natural entry point for new guests,” says Hoffee. “Once guests experience Avalon’s elevated design and excursions, many (approximately 40%) become repeat cruisers.”

Christmas market cruises are in demand

“Demand has been so strong that our entire Rhine, Main, and Danube fleet is dedicated to Christmas Market sailings this season — a clear indicator of how this segment continues to grow,” says Ken Muskat, President of Scenic Group (USA and Latin America), parent company of the Scenic and Emerald river cruise brands. “We’re also seeing these voyages book further out.”

As Christmas Market river cruises’ popularity skyrockets, cruise lines are taking advantage by adding festive-season sailings on other rivers, such as France’s Rhone and Portugal’s Douro, to give repeat cruisers more options featuring regional holiday traditions.

“Our Christmas Market cruises have transformed what was once the quietest time on Europe’s rivers to one of the most in-demand seasons of the year,” says Hoffee.

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