

Written by: **MIKE YARDLEY**

Europe's exceptional pulling power is withstanding the strains of global recession, with New Zealand travel agents reporting strong and constant booking interest. There are many ways to explore the bountiful continent, but for a long time, I have yearned of sampling the joy of a European river cruise. In May, I was lucky enough to realise this sightseeing objective, as part of a spring swing through Europe.

The dawn of the northern spring is a fabulous time to visit. You'll queue jump the summer tourist crush, and the daily mercury across Western Europe tops out around a comfortable 20C. In the past decade, the river cruise boom has continued to explode, with a dozens of operators plying Europe's renowned waterways. The Seine, Rhone, Rhine and Danube have all been lionised in prose, paint and music. These rock-star ribbons of water weave their way through the very heart and soul of the continent.



The largest river cruise operator is the French-based, family-owned CroisiEurope. The company has been plying Europe's storied waters for over 30 years, with a fleet of 27 vessels. The company offers a dazzling range of tours and destinations, spanning over a dozen nations, ranging from 3 to 15 days in duration. What I particularly like about CroisiEurope is its exceptional value for money. Some cruise operators pander to the big money-spenders who routinely fly "first class." Their vessels are decked out like floating 5-star hotels, where no expense is spared, which subsequently explains why their cruise tariffs are so pricey. As a general rule of thumb, a Croisi cruise is only half the price of their competitors, with the company determined to remain accessible and affordable for mainstream travellers.

I would assess the standard of the accommodation and on-board facilities as equivalent to a good 3-star hotel. My cabin was bright, spacious and comfortable, complete with air-conditioning, satellite television, panoramic window views and a great en-suite. True to their French character, the on-board dining is exemplary, with a tempting menu of dishes, in the proud tradition of French gastronomy. All meals are included in the cost of the cruise, and a very nice touch is the complimentary wine service that accompanies lunch and dinner.

With no more than 180 passengers on-board, a wonderful sense of warmth and intimacy is fostered. The multi-lingual staff set the tone with a delightful mix of relaxed professionalism and genuine friendliness, which cultivates a convivial atmosphere throughout the cruise.

I chose to explore the mighty **Seine River**, which courses its way through French capital before wending its way north-west to the English Channel. Setting sail from **Paris** in the early evening, the twinkling city lights and landmark sights made for a memorable departure. The first stop was in the fairytale-pretty village of **Les Andelys**. Our tour group ascended the hill overlooking the village, and marvelled at the glorious views across the rolling countryside and down to the curving beauty of the Seine River, as it laces its way through the landscape. A short drive from Les Andelys brings you to **Chateau of Vascoeuil**. This historic estate has been restored as a boutique art gallery, playing host to all manner of French artworks. The restoration of the chateau was principally cheer-led by the former French president, Francois Mitterand. Back on board the river boat, several hours later, you'll arrive in the medieval tourist mecca of **Rouen**. The former capital of Normandy, Rouen boasts one of Europe's biggest Gothic churches and the market square, Place du Marche, is where **Joan of Arc** was burnt at the stake. The square is flanked by an enchanting cluster of half-timbered and brightly painted buildings. Your camera will get a serious workout.

From Rouen, my cruise headed further up the Seine, under the mighty Normandy Bridge before docking in the enchanting port of **Honfleur**. This colourful fishing village is a hot-bed for painters, with hordes of wannabee impressionists beating a path to the village from all over the world, armed with an easel and paint brush. This is a great village to explore on foot as you crane your neck to admire the tall and slender historic buildings. Be sure to stop by **St. Catherine's Church**, built entirely of wood. Sailing out of Honfleur, the cruise returned up-stream back to Paris. The final day of the cruise provided a great opportunity to lap up the passing scenery of woodland and picturesque riverside villages. Being an early-riser, one of the biggest highlights of the cruise, was to get dressed and head out onto the opened deck before breakfast. At the dawn of a new day, the Seine was like a millpond. The peace and solitude at day break was something to behold. Adding to the magic was the veil of mist that lingered just above the river. I half expected The Phantom of the Opera to make a sudden appearance.



If you want to dip your toes in the boom-business of river cruising, the 5 day Seine River excursion is a tasty sampler. For further details, contact Innovative Travel, who represent CroisiEurope in New Zealand. Ph. 0508 100 111 or go to www.innovative-travel.com