YOUR RIVER CRUISE

THE INSIDER'S GUIDE TO GETTING READY, SETTLING IN & MAKING THE MOST OF EVERY MOMENT



Prepared for travellers who have already booked - and now want to cruise smarter.

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WELCOME - YOU'RE GOING RIVER CRUISING!



You have chosen one of the loveliest ways to travel: unpack once, settle into a small ship and let the scenery come to you. This guide is about what happens after the booking - the practical details, little surprises and insider habits that help turn a good river cruise into a brilliant one.

River cruising is wonderfully easy, but it is not simply a smaller version of ocean cruising. Your ship is travelling on a working river system. Berths can change, ships may dock side-by-side, bridges can be low, locks become part of the journey and river conditions can occasionally alter the plan. Knowing that before you go means these moments feel interesting rather than unexpected.

MICHELLE'S TIP
Read this guide once now, then again in the week before you leave.

You will notice completely different things the second time.

THE FIVE THINGS TO REMEMBER

1. Be flexible. River cruising rewards travellers who can go with the flow - literally.
2. Comfortable walking shoes matter more than an extra evening outfit.
3. Listen carefully to the Cruise Manager and daily briefings.
4. Know where and when you are rejoining the ship before wandering independently.
5. Leave some empty space in the itinerary. Watching the river is part of the holiday.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE HOME



A smooth river cruise begins before you reach the gangway.

Check the cruise line's own documentation because inclusions, luggage rules, gratuities, apps, embarkation arrangements and excursion booking procedures vary between operators and ships.

YOUR PRE-DEPARTURE CHECK

- ✓ Passport validity, visas and entry requirements for every country on your itinerary.
- ✓ Travel insurance details, emergency assistance number and a copy of your policy.
- ✓ Flight, hotel, transfer and cruise documents saved offline as well as in your email.
- ✓ Prescription medication in original packaging, plus enough for unexpected delays.
- ✓ Bank travel notifications if required, cards that work overseas and some small local currency where useful.
- ✓ International roaming/eSIM arrangements and important numbers stored in your phone.
- ✓ Any cruise-line app, guest portal or excursion selections completed before the deadline.
- ✓ Accessibility, dietary or medical requirements reconfirmed with the appropriate provider before travel.

GOOD TO KNOW
Do not rely on having perfect internet access every minute.

Ship connectivity can vary with location, so keep critical documents available offline.

PACK FOR THE RIVER, NOT THE RUNWAY



River cruising is generally relaxed and destination-focused. Your wardrobe needs to cope with cobblestones, churches, changing weather, coach transfers, sunny decks and comfortable dinners - sometimes all on the same day.

PACK THESE FIRST

- Two genuinely comfortable pairs of walking shoes.
- Light layers that can be added or removed during the day.
- A compact waterproof jacket or travel umbrella.
- A small secure day bag or cross-body bag.
- Sun hat, sunglasses and sunscreen.
- Smart-casual pieces for evenings; check your cruise line for any specific dress guidance.
- Power adapters and charging cables appropriate to your destinations and ship.
- Reusable water bottle if permitted/appropriate, medications and a small personal first-aid kit.
- A lightweight scarf or cover-up for religious sites where modest dress is requested.

LEAVE SOME ROOM

Cabins are cleverly designed but storage is not infinite. Avoid packing for every imaginable scenario. You will appreciate a lighter suitcase on flights, transfers and any itinerary adjustment that involves changing ships or hotels.

MICHELLE'S TIP

If you are choosing between the gorgeous shoes and the shoes you can walk 12,000 steps in, take the second pair. Europe has a lot of cobblestones and absolutely no sympathy for your feet.

MEET YOUR FLOATING HOTEL



One of the pleasures of river cruising is how quickly the ship becomes familiar. Most vessels have only a handful of passenger decks, so within a day you will know your way from cabin to restaurant, lounge and gangway.

FIND THESE PLACES EARLY

- Reception - your practical hub for questions and onboard assistance.
- Main lounge - usually the heart of briefings, drinks, entertainment and scenic viewing.
- Restaurant(s) - learn meal times and whether seating is open or assigned.
- Sun Deck - often the best place for scenic sailing, weather permitting.
- Coffee/tea station, water refill points and any self-service areas.
- Fitness, wellness, pool or spa facilities if your ship offers them.
- The usual gangway locations - remembering these can change with the berth.

Elevator coverage varies by vessel and may not extend to every deck, particularly the Sun Deck. If stairs or mobility are a concern, check the exact ship rather than assuming.

YOUR FIRST JOB: Put your cabin key somewhere consistent. Your second job: work out where the coffee is.

YOUR FIRST 24 HOURS ONBOARD



Do not rush through embarkation. The first few hours are when you learn the rhythm of your particular ship.

ON DAY ONE

- Unpack properly so your cabin immediately feels settled.
- Attend the safety briefing and welcome talk.
- Meet the Cruise Manager and learn how daily information is communicated.
- Confirm your shore excursion selections and meeting arrangements.
- Check dining times, beverage inclusions and any reservation-only dining.
- Understand Wi-Fi access, onboard account procedures and gratuity arrangements.
- Look at tomorrow's programme before going to bed.
- Ask when the most scenic sailing sections are expected - and put them in your mental diary.

DON'T MISS THIS

The Cruise Manager's evening briefing can contain exactly the information that prevents tomorrow morning becoming confusing: docking location, excursion groups, weather, walking conditions, departure times and scenic highlights.

THE THINGS NOBODY TELLS YOU



This is the page first-time river cruisers often wish they had read before travelling.

YES, YOU MAY WALK THROUGH ANOTHER SHIP

Popular river ports have limited docking space, so ships can berth side-by-side. Your route ashore may involve crossing another vessel's gangway or walking through its public areas. Your beautiful river view can also temporarily become a very close-up view of the ship next door.

THE GANGWAY CAN MOVE

Water height, quay design and the way vessels are rafted can mean you leave from one level and return via another. Follow crew instructions rather than assuming yesterday's route still applies.

THE SHIP MAY NOT STAY WHERE YOU LEFT IT

A vessel can reposition while guests are touring. If you explore independently, know the correct rejoining point and time before you leave.

YOU MAY HEAR THE RIVER WORKING

Locks, engines, mooring activity and neighbouring vessels are normal parts of travelling on an active inland waterway.

MICHELLE'S TIP

Never wander ashore independently with only the thought, 'I'll just come back to where the ship was.' Check the day's instructions first.

RIVER LEVELS: WHEN NATURE CHANGES THE PLAN



Rivers are natural systems, not railway tracks. Prolonged dry weather can produce low water; heavy rain and snowmelt can produce high water.

Either can affect whether a particular vessel can safely pass through a section of river or beneath bridges.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN?

- Arrival or departure times may change.
- A port may be substituted or visited by coach.
- Part of the itinerary may operate overland.
- Guests may transfer between sister ships on opposite sides of an affected section.
- In more significant situations, accommodation or routing can be altered.

Operators monitor conditions and make navigation decisions around safety and what is operationally possible. Exact responses vary by operator, river and conditions.

THE BEST MINDSET

Book the river and the region, not an expectation that every minute will unfold exactly as printed months earlier. Flexibility is one of the quiet skills of a happy river cruiser.

LOCKS, LOW BRIDGES & THE ENGINEERING OF THE RIVER



A lock is essentially a water lift for boats. The ship enters a chamber, gates close, and the water level rises or falls until the vessel can continue at the level of the next section of river. Some itineraries pass through many locks, including overnight.

WATCH AT LEAST ONE

If you get the chance, watch a lock passage from an appropriate open deck or lounge. Seeing a long river ship fit into the chamber with remarkably little room to spare is part engineering lesson, part theatre.

WHY THE SUN DECK SOMETIMES CLOSES

River ships are designed to pass beneath bridges with limited clearance. Railings, awnings and other structures may be lowered, and access to the Sun Deck can be temporarily restricted for safety when passing beneath low bridges or through locks.

DON'T MISS THIS

If the Cruise Manager says a particular stretch of river is worth being awake for, take the hint. Some of the best moments of the entire cruise happen between ports.

SHORE EXCURSIONS: CHOOSE FOR YOU



Included excursions are one of river cruising's great advantages, but 'included' does not mean you must automatically do everything. Your goal is not to collect tours. It is to enjoy the destinations.

ASK YOURSELF

- Is this a place where a guide will add important history or context?
- Would I rather have free time to photograph, shop, eat or simply wander?
- Is there a gentle, regular or active walking group available?
- Would a cycling or hiking option suit me better?
- How much free time follows the guided portion?
- Does the excursion involve steep streets, cobblestones, stairs or long periods standing?
- Could my travelling companion and I happily choose different tours today?
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MICHELLE'S TIP
Choose your walking group based on how you actually want to spend the morning - not pride. The 'gentle' group still gets to see Europe.

HEADSETS & MEETING POINTS

Many guided programmes use personal audio devices so you can hear the guide without standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Learn how yours works before the group starts moving, and always listen for the exact meeting time and location.

GET MORE FROM EVERY PORT



A little preparation gives you freedom.

You do not need to plan every cafe and corner, but knowing the shape of the day helps you decide when to follow the guide and when to explore.

THE SMART PORT ROUTINE

- Photograph or save the daily programme before leaving.
- Carry the ship or Cruise Manager's contact information provided for that sailing.
- Download an offline map of the destination.
- Note the ship's berth and, crucially, the rejoining instructions.
- Carry a small amount of cash where useful for toilets, markets or small purchases.
- Ask the Cruise Manager or local guide what they would do with one free hour.
- Build in buffer time. Do not make the entire group wait because you found one last souvenir shop.

Sometimes the most memorable hour is the unplanned one: a riverside cafe, a market stall, a tiny church, a glass of local wine or simply sitting in the square watching ordinary life happen.

GOOD TO KNOW

Historic centres can involve uneven paving, steps and areas coaches cannot access. Read excursion descriptions carefully if mobility or stamina is a concern.

DON'T FORGET TO ENJOY THE SHIP



It is very easy to become so focused on the next castle, cathedral and walking tour that you forget one of the reasons you chose a river cruise: the river itself.

MAKE TIME FOR

- Morning coffee while the river wakes up.
- At least one uninterrupted hour on deck doing absolutely nothing.
- Scenic commentary through major river valleys where offered.
- Local performers, lectures, tastings or demonstrations brought onboard.
- Wellness, fitness, cycling or active programmes if your ship offers them.
- A drink in the lounge as the ship leaves port.
- Watching a lock passage.
- An evening sail into an illuminated city when the itinerary allows.
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DON'T BE SO BUSY SEEING EUROPE THAT YOU FORGET TO WATCH IT GO BY.

MICHELLE'S TIP
The itinerary tells you the ports. The Cruise Manager tells you the moments.

DINING, DRINKS & THE SOCIAL SIDE



River ships are intimate, and dining is often part of the social experience. Depending on your cruise line, meals may use open seating, fixed dining times or a combination of main and specialty venues.

A FEW USEFUL HABITS

- Tell the cruise line about dietary requirements before travel and reconfirm onboard.
- Check exactly which beverages are included; policies vary substantially by cruise line and fare.
- Be open to sharing a table. Some of the best cruise friendships begin at dinner.
- Try regional dishes and wines when offered - they connect the ship to the places outside.
- Check whether specialty dining requires reservations.
- Understand gratuity arrangements for your particular operator and booking.
- Keep corridor conversations quiet late at night; river ships are compact and cabins are close to public areas.

GOOD TO KNOW

Do not assume inclusions from another cruise line apply to yours. Wi-Fi, drinks, gratuities, excursions and specialty dining can all differ by operator, ship and fare.

10 THINGS EXPERIENCED RIVER CRUISERS KNOW

- Comfortable shoes beat fashionable shoes.
- Layers are your friend.
- Photograph the daily programme before going ashore.
- Always know when and where you are meeting the ship again.
- You do not have to take every included excursion.
- Spend at least one sailing period doing nothing except watching the river.
- Another ship parked against your window is normal river-cruise life.
- An itinerary adjustment is not automatically a disaster; listen to the revised plan before judging it.
- The Cruise Manager is one of your best sources of practical local knowledge.
- If the crew says, 'You should be on deck for this,' believe them.



BONUS #11
You may start discussing your next river cruise before this one is over. This appears to be a common side effect.

YOUR FINAL 7-DAY COUNTDOWN





One week to go!!!

Keep this page handy and tick things off as you finish them.

- [ ] Passport, visas and entry requirements checked
- [ ] Travel insurance and emergency details accessible
- [ ] Flights, transfers, hotels and cruise documents saved offline
- [ ] Excursions reviewed/booked where required
- [ ] Medication packed in carry-on luggage
- [ ] Phone roaming/eSIM and chargers sorted
- [ ] Bank cards/currency organised
- [ ] Comfortable walking shoes packed
- [ ] Weather forecast checked and layers adjusted
- [ ] Ship embarkation point and transfer arrangements confirmed
- [ ] Important contacts shared with someone at home
- [ ] Enough room left in the suitcase for something you absolutely did not plan to buy

ONE LAST THING...

Your river cruise does not need to be perfect to be extraordinary. Weather changes. Rivers rise and fall. Berths move. A favourite moment may be somewhere you had barely noticed on the itinerary. Arrive prepared, stay curious and let the river do what it does best - carry you through the heart of the destination.

Have the most wonderful journey.

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Important: This guide is general preparation advice. Always follow the current information supplied by your cruise line, ship's crew, local authorities, insurers and relevant government travel advisories.