

What's the Difference Between River Cruising and Ocean Cruising?

By Kelly Gregg Rubingh, San Carlos resident of 22 years

In March I had the opportunity to go the American Society of Travel Agents River Cruise Expo in Amsterdam, and I can now say I truly understand the magic of river cruising! I travelled with three agents from Family Travel and had the opportunity to tour and dine on 13 different river cruises, while staying on one during the Expo and sailing on one when it was over.

While many people have sailed on an ocean cruise for vacation, river cruising is an entirely different experience. The river cruise ships only hold an average of 150 passengers versus ocean ships that can hold thousands, they pull right into port and you can walk off and explore, dine, and experience the town you are in at your own pace, and they are quite relaxing on smooth waters with scenic views you sail past and view from your window. Because they move at a slower pace without ocean currents and waves, motion sickness is very unlikely.

River cruises are mainly focused in Europe, and provide ample opportunities to explore local culture, history, and beauty. It's very nice to unpack once, and wake up in a different port each day with options of walking tours, concerts and performances, and cultural experiences involving history, food, and architecture.

One of the downsides of ocean cruising is the bill at the end of the cruise, which often charges for drinks, wifi, excursions, tips, and other services. On river cruising, most of the lines have a more all-inclusive approach, and there is very little to pay at the end. Most river cruises include a tour in every port, wine and beer with meals, wi-fi, and often gratuities are included as well. While there can be some options for upgraded tours or top shelf liquor, the lack of a photo booth, casino, gift shop and other features of an ocean cruise ensure the price you pay up front for a river cruise is quite all-encompassing.

One of the differences in the myriads of river cruise lines to pay attention to are what the inclusive components are, for instance some only offer wine and beer with meals while some include all drinks.

I loved the intimacy of the boats, and it was a nice opportunity to get to know the staff and other guests. Jody Quinn, an agent at Family Travel in San Carlos, says, "I really enjoy the lounge area. I always feel like I am in someone's living room. And of course, the service and food are top notch!"

It's quite exciting to go through the locks of the canals and enjoy the smooth sailing while sipping pre-dinner cocktails and learning about the next day's port and opportunities. Most have a luxury feel and highly personalized level of service while maintaining a casual atmosphere. There are no formal nights or need to dress up for dinner.

Susie Vick of Family Travel said "I liked that the river cruise was smaller than a cruise ship and more intimate. There isn't such a feeling of being crowded and busy with a river cruise as there is with an ocean cruise. The food was also really good, and I liked that we were able to sample the food and wines that were well known in the regions we were in."

The average age of river cruisers is 55 to 75, and most lines are adults-only, though they may offer family cruise sailings through the year.

They also offer opportunities for fit excursions, with several cruise lines carrying bikes on board to explore the city you are docked in. Small gyms and spas are usually available.

Are there any downsides to river cruising? Sure, there are not as many choices when it comes to entertainment and bars and restaurants as there are on a large ocean cruise. We had the same entertainer on our cruise the whole four days, for a longer cruise they often switch mid-week. There is usually one dining room and one lounge, though they may use the upstairs for al fresco

dining in nice weather or have an alternative smaller dining venue or lounge. On the other hand, it's nice to get to know your servers, and the menu changes every day.

I am already looking forward to my next river cruise when I host a Christmas Markets river cruise in early December of 2025. We sail along the Rhine, disembarking in European towns for the magic of decorated town squares lit up with little booths selling local wares, Christmas items, and mulled wine and treats. It's quite a magical way to experience the charm of Europe!

Kelly has lived in San Carlos for 22 years and is the owner of Family Travel, a San Carlos travel agency specializing in planning vacations around the world that cater to families, multi-generational trips, and individuals. She has been in the travel industry for 30 years and can be found on the stages of local theaters when not traveling the world. She can be reached at kelly@familytrav.com or www.family.travel.

