



River Cruising in the South of France

by Durant Imboden

What do you do after you've cruised the Rhine and the Danube, or if you want to cruise in a region where you can practice your high-school French? My advice: Take a river cruise on the Rhine and Seine in the sunny, scenic South of France.

Three cruise lines--Viking River Cruises, Peter Deilmann Cruises, and Uniworld--offer Rhine and Seine cruises for English-speaking travelers from spring through fall. Their itineraries vary slightly, but--at a minimum--you'll visit the former silk capital and present-day gastronomic mecca of Lyon, Avignon with its Papal Palace, and Arles, with its Roman amphitheatre and Van Gogh landmarks.

You'll also travel through river locks and have the chance to visit such places as Beaune (Burgundy's wine capital), the Pont du Gard aqueduct, and medieval villages such as Uze and Les Baux. See my detailed Viking Burgundy cruise review and photo gallery to learn about a typical Rhine and Seine cruise.

Here's what to expect from Viking, Peter Deilmann, and Uniworld when you book a river cruise in Southern France:

Viking River Cruises has two ships on the Rhine and Seine: the Viking Burgundy, which caters to the English-speaking market, and the Viking Rhone, which is geared to Germans and other Europeans. (On my Viking Burgundy voyage, most of the cruisers were American, but a pair of English ladies were on board.)

The Viking Burgundy's 7-night cruises run from Chalon-sur-Saone to Arles and Avignon or vice versa, depending on the departure date. The itinerary includes excursions to Beaune (with a visit to the medieval Hotel-Dieu hospital) and various local tours. My son and I enjoyed our cruise aboard the Viking Burgundy, and I wouldn't hesitate to cruise with Viking again.

Peter Deilmann Cruises, a German cruise line, offers a more European experience than Viking or Uniworld, thanks to a mixed English- and German-speaking clientele. It differs from its competitors in charging extra for shore excursions, but it also offers a greater

variety of trips (ranging from the usual city walking tours to a half-hour flight over Provence).

Its four-star ship on the Rhine, the Princesse de Provence, operates a 7-night itinerary that begins and ends in Lyon. I haven't cruised on the Princesse de Provence, but I did spend a very pleasant week on another Deilmann ship a few years ago; see my MS Casanova cruise review for a firsthand report with photos.

Uniworld Grand River Cruises - Uniworld's River Royale has seven-night cruises from Arles to Chalon-sur-Saone or vice versa, depending on the departure week. The ship offers a Jacuzzi, a fitness center, and optional Internet access (with Wi-Fi connections for laptops).

Most shore excursions from the River Royale are included in the fare, but there are some optional tours, such as a half-day excursion to Beaune or a visit to the Pont du Gard aqueduct.

Land packages and cruise combos

Often, you can book land tours in combination with river cruises, and some lines offer combination cruises at a package price. For example, several Deilmann cruise departures have hiking themes, and the company markets a 16-day "Exploring France" package that includes Seine and Rhine cruises plus TGV high-speed rail travel between Paris and Lyon.