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Rolling on the rivers with value-conscious CroisiEurope



People line the quayside for the christening of CroisiEurope's Loire Princesse, one of four new river ships being launched by the company this year. ROBIN ROBINSON/Postmedia Network

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ROBIN ROBINSON, POSTMEDIA NETWORK
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PARIS -- CroisiEurope may well be the largest river cruise line Canadian cruisers have never heard of -- for now.

With 43 ships in its fleet, the Strasbourg-based company is the biggest on the continent, but it's still relatively unknown on this side of the Atlantic. That will likely change soon now that the value-conscious family owned business has started courting North Americans.

Whether you are already a fan of river cruising, or want to give it a try, it's welcome news as CroisiEurope's all inclusive fares are very affordable compared to many other cruise lines.

The company has dozens of long and short itineraries, and ships sailing on every major river in Europe as well as the Mekong River in Vietnam and Cambodia. And Croisi is in expansion mode with four new ships this year and more planned through 2017.

I recently had a chance to do some mini-cruising on two of the new ships -- MS Raymonde and MS Loire Princesse -- and tour a few others. Here are some highlights:

BARGING AROUND PARIS

CroisiEurope calls its new Raymonde a barge, but potential passengers shouldn't be fooled into thinking they will have to rough it aboard this brightly decorated and cozy little canal boat.

The 12-cabin Raymonde is sailing its first season on the Seine River, going as far as Normandy and the beautiful towns of Rouen, Deauville, Trouville and Honfleur.

The cruise season hadn't started when our group of travel writers came aboard the first week of April, and Raymonde was docked at Bassin de Vilette, a once-dodgy neighbourhood that is morphing into a cultural hub.

Have you ever been on a river cruise?

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The capable crew took us out for a couple of spins around Paris, first on the St. Martin Canal -- including a very cool underground segment that passes under a 2.5-km swath of the city and emerges in Port Arsenal -- and then for a night cruise on the Seine, passing landmarks such as Notre Dame Cathedral, the stately Musee D'Orsay, the palatial Louvre and the iconic Eiffel Tower, which was twinkling brightly on the 126th anniversary of its completion.



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ROLLING ON THE RIVER

Cruising on the Loire presents unique challenges. Although wide, the river is very shallow in places, especially in the summer. Until the recent launch of the Loire Princesse, there have been no multi-day cruises on the Loire.

But CroisiEurope embraced the challenge and had the 48-cabin, 96-passenger ship specifically designed for these conditions.

Some of its special features are a very shallow draft, use of lightweight materials such as aluminum, smaller water tanks that are refilled more often -- even using real rope to attach the anchor instead of a heavy metal chain, says Thibault Tincelin, director of Stirling Design International, which designed the ship.

The most unique aspect of the sleekly elegant ship are two side-mounted paddlewheels, which help propel it along, and balconies -- rare on river ships, which normally must keep width to a minimum to fit in narrow locks, but not an issue on the wide Loire.

At the ship's christening, Lucas Schmitter, Croisi's head of e-commerce and grand-nephew of founder Gerard Schmitter, remarked: "The Loire Princesse is a landmark in shipbuilding and we are very proud that is 100% French as it was made in France, is French-owned and opened on a French river."

Next year, CroisiEurope will roll out a similar ship on the Elbe River.

WILDS OF FRANCE

Sitting between the Mediterranean and the two arms of the Rhone River, the Camargue is a renowned natural delta rich in wildlife, including semi-feral horses, flocks of flamingos and many other bird species. Croisi's new 104-passenger Camargue will sail several itineraries on the Rhone and Soane Rivers this season and make port calls at charming towns such as Chalon-sur-Soane, Macon, Lyon, Avignon, Arles and more.

MUCH DEPENDS ON DINNER

Dining is an important aspect of any cruise, and CroisiEurope gets it right with excellent French fare at every meal.

Breakfast is buffet-style with many choices. Lunch is a sit-down affair with cheese and dessert courses. Dinners can be quite divine. (The Creme Brulee of Foie Gras appetizer was memorable, and I'm not normally a foie gras fan.) While only one entree is offered, menus are posted each morning and if the kitchen is serving something a passenger doesn't like or can't eat, an alternative is prepared.

A well-curated selection of wine, beer, spirits and soft drinks are included with meals and in the lounge -- as well as a few premium drinks offered at an extra fee.

BONJOUR MATEY

One of the points of travelling is to meet locals, and sailing with CroisiEurope provides that chance. Some 215,000 people sailed with the company last year. Of those, about 55% were French, about 35% other Europeans, and about 10% North Americans and other nationalities.

Passengers are grouped by language for dining but there are ample opportunities for mingling, especially in the lounge, where the larger ships have live entertainment nightly.

During a tour of the Seine Princesse, purser Fabiola Minatchy put it this way: "To me, a successful cruise is when the French are trying to speak English, the English are trying to speak French, and everyone is saying 'bye-bye' and making plans to come back."

SHORE THINGS

While watching the world go by from the deck is delightful, one of the big draws of river cruises is easy access to the shore, where you can explore independently or take a tour. CroisiEurope has many excursions to choose from, all led by knowledgeable guides.

In Paris, we explored some of the city's hidden "passages." Most of these beautiful 19th-century shopping arcades have disappeared but some have been restored and now house chic shops. Others are more shabby than chic, but still interesting.

We also foraged for gourmet goodies at the new five-storey Galeries Lafayette food hall/home store on boulevard Haussmann. Warning: This is no place for dieters! If you must resist fine French cheese, colourful macarons, and the like, just stay away. Eclairs -- decorated in myriad colours -- seem to be trending this spring.

During a three-day Loire cruise, the city of Nantes was an unexpected delight. We had a walkabout in the old town and on Ile de Nantes, a former industrial area being redeveloped as a cultural, residential and business hub.

In Saint Nazaire, we toured the giant Shipyard STX France, which builds giant ships as well as ships for CroisiEurope and others. Royal Caribbean's Harmony of the Seas is the current mega-ship taking shape at Saint Nazaire, and we had a fascinating look at how these behemoths are built in modules, then assembled almost like enormous Lego blocks.

When complete, Harmony of the Seas will be the world's largest cruise ship, able to accommodate 6,300 passengers and about 2,200 crew. The floating city will have 20 swimming pools, an ice-rink, an open-air promenade landscaped with trees and shrubs, an aquatic centre for diving shows, a theatre for 1,400 people, and a Bionic Bar, where robots will mix cocktails.

And while it is all very impressive, I was quite happy to return to the more human-scale Loire Princesse and be pampered by attentive human staff.

NEED TO KNOW

CroisiEurope has dozens of itineraries with departures from major cities across Europe. Airport transfers are also available. For details, contact croisieurope.rivercruises.com or 1-800-768-7232.