

SAIL AWAY

Why aren't more families going on river cruises? Sue White heads to the Rhine to investigate. WORDS & IMAGES SUE WHITE

After driving in relative silence through the streets of Basel, Switzerland, our taxi driver suddenly pipes up and starts pointing vigorously.

"See the left side of the street? That's Switzerland. The right side? Germany!"

It's a separation that continues to astound me over the next nine days as we cruise the Rhine. Morning? Germany. Afternoon? France. This side of the river? Germany. That side? France.

As my 5-year-old son Ollie and I board the MS Douce France – a 55-cabin cruise boat from French company CroisiEurope – for our Rhine river adventure, I'm well aware that other unique aspects lie ahead. Unlike large cruise ships, river cruises usually cater more for grandparents than young families. There'll be no kids' clubs, no waterslides, no tailored children's program and, very

likely, no other kids. So why go?

First, for the ease of cruising. Whatever the style, cruising means unpacking once, no time-sucking logistics and plenty of good food. River cruising has an added bonus: the size of the ship means small towns rather than big cities – better for kids (and far more peaceful for adults).

Of course, our Rhine itinerary has its own advantages. Each day we tackle one or two destinations, sometimes in different countries, and spend the bulk of our waking hours off the boat.

Given that the organised excursions are targeted at adults, we make our own fun on shore. In the beautiful but tourist-filled French town of Colmar, we replace a tour of Musée Unterlinden with watching punts navigate impossibly low bridges in Little Venice, wading in the canal's icy waters

and buying dried pineapple, papaya and apple from a store so beautiful the piles of fruits look like art. There's still time to pass a peaceful hour in Colmar's toy museum (Musée du Jouet), where we build with French blocks, watch the model trains and giggle at my toy choices from the 1980s.

On the fringe of Germany's Black Forest in the small town of Breisach, we climb the cobblestone streets up to the town's small cathedral before dropping in at the local riverside playground. As local children play hide and seek in German, I push Ollie on the swings, eyeing the reconstructed buildings in the distance.

Other solo adventures abound. We join the Swiss residents in a large park in Basel instead of taking a bus tour; we reward ourselves with a ride of a two-storey carousel after climbing the 300 ▶



River cruising on the Rhine



Colmar's toy museum



Morning exercise onboard



5 BEST RIVER-CRUISE DESTINATIONS

MEKONG, SOUTHEAST ASIA

RV Lan Diep travels through Vietnam and Cambodia.

RHINE, EUROPE

A bucket-list river cruise for many, available from CroisiEurope.

MISSISSIPPI, USA

Cruise through America on a paddlewheel boat.

NILE, EGYPT

A variety of budgets are catered for, from luxury ships to basic felucca.

KERALA, INDIA

Backwater cruises offer a peaceful way to traverse the rivers and lagoons.



Strasbourg



We spent most of our waking hours off the boat



Doing laundry the old fashioned way

NEED TO KNOW



GETTING THERE

Fly direct to Switzerland on Emirates or Etihad from Australia.



BEST TIME TO GO

Weather-wise the best time for a European river cruise is late June to mid-October. The cheapest time is late October, November and December because of the colder weather and fewer tourists.



Colmar

steps of Strasbourg's stunning cathedral; we become experts at navigating the pram over cobblestone streets in small town after small town. In Amsterdam we choose pedal power, booking ourselves in for a tour of the Dutch countryside with We Bike Amsterdam, Ollie content on the back of my bike as we ride along the top of a dyke in search of windmills.

Back onboard, there is one group activity I'm delighted not to miss. North of Mainz in Germany lies the 'Romantic Rhine', a strip of the river dotted with so many castles the list runs to an A4 page. As my son plays with the ship's staff, I join other passengers to learn of the sieges, wars, builds and rebuilds occurring here over the past 700-odd years.

For four hours, glass of sparkling wine in hand, I play a form of castle tennis, looking left and right from the deck to spot Gothic castles perched on hills, ruins resplendent among vineyards and villages hugging each side of the river.

Before this trip, I'd have imagined the lack of other children would be a problem, but instead we enjoy bonding time together. We curl up in the ship's lounge and do drawings, watching the world go by. We make cubbies in our generously-sized cabin. We even join in the occasional adult activities, like the extremely gentle morning exercise class

and the trivia (where we dominate, taking home a fluffy Alsace duck toy as a prize).

Of course, it's not all castles and cubby houses. There is one challenge: dinnertime. On night one we attempt the official 7.30pm start, but as the meal drags out through multiple courses, Ollie quickly fades. It's not pretty by 9.15pm, so the next day I request his meal early in our cabin. I specify 6pm and simple and decide to eat there too.

Surprisingly, evenings turn out to be memorable despite being trapped in a cabin. Each night after dining, I make my own show; topped up by a complimentary glass of sparkling wine from the bar, I open the large sliding window I've not let Ollie know exists and watch the Rhine slide by as he sleeps.

I wave to campers outside their motorhomes along the riverbanks, spy on couples picnicking on blankets as the sun sets, and as the late European summer nights go on, I feel deeply, deeply content. **ft**

Sue White is a travel writer and the founder of the free Facebook community Kids Who Travel.



Go to familytravel.com.au for more ideas and inspiration for holidaying in Europe with kids. Sign up to receive our weekly newsletter, full of family holiday ideas and deals, direct to your inbox.



TIPS FOR RIVER-CRUISE WITH KIDS

- Carefully consider the organised excursion. Some may have long drives, while others simply begin on foot from the port. Ask plenty of questions in advance before paying for additional excursions you may not undertake.
- Do your research. If the boat is docked for a while, research children's activities nearby. Then mix the 'adult' activity (say a walk of the old town, perhaps partly with the group for the guided information) with a kid-friendly one like visiting a playground.
- Take snacks. River cruise ships usually have just one restaurant, so you may need snacks between meals.
- Make dinner work for you. The adult nature of river cruising may mean dinner comes too late for your child. Organise to have this meal in the cabin at an earlier time - yours too if you want to sleep early!
- Beware of the balconies. Balconies are lovely for adults but stressful for families with young children. If there's a window that opens onto a balcony, don't open it when your child is awake and see if you can lock it.
- Mix it up with older kids. Look for a cycle plus cruise option - these abound but can book out quickly.