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Book now for clients who want to cruise at Christmas, says Jane Archer

PHOTO: PAL RØDHALTIN

» SEASON'S SAILINGS

With just 198 days left to Christmas, it's time clients were booking their festive-season cruises. Think we're joking? Hurtigruten reports its Christmas cruise to Antarctica on *Fram* is already full, while Viking River Cruises says its Christmas cruises on the Danube, Douro and in Aquitaine are filling fast.

There are many reasons why people like to cruise over Christmas. You don't have to cook your own turkey and spend the next few days living on the leftovers; and what better excuse is there for avoiding irritating relatives and the Queen's Speech?

And for people who don't have a family, a cruise is a perfect way to avoid spending the festive season with a ready meal for one while watching a rerun of *The Sound of Music*.

● AT SEA

Most ocean cruise ships are at sea on Christmas Day so they can lay on traditional festivities with all the trimmings.

Carnival Cruise Lines and Norwegian Cruise Line, for instance, enter into ►

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the Christmas spirit with trees, decorations, carol singing, festive films on the TV, visits from Santa and a traditional turkey dinner. P&O Cruises decorates its ships with trees and wreaths, has carol concerts, Christmas shows, church services and Father Christmas, who comes bearing presents for all. In the evening, turkey and Christmas pud is served along with crackers, mince pies and a Yule log.

Crystal Cruises also keeps tradition, with Christmas Day spent at sea, religious services, decorated ships and a dinner of turkey, goose and chestnut stuffing. Celebrity Cruises has a parade of Santa and his elves, Christmas films on cabin TVs, carol singing and a priest on board selected ships.

Hurtigruten, which sails the coast of Norway, docks all its ships in port for 24 hours on December 24 and treats passengers to a Norwegian yuletide. A church service on Christmas Eve is followed by a smorgasbord dinner and visit from Julenissen (Norwegian for Santa). On Christmas Day, they serve traditional Norwegian Christmas fare including julegrøt, a porridge with hidden almonds.

But there is an alternative for clients looking to escape Christmas. Oceania Cruises decorates its vessels but skips the Santa stuff. It will have ships in

Maputo, Mozambique, and San Juan, Puerto Rico, on Christmas Day.

Likewise, instead of tucking into turkey, passengers on Azamara Club Cruises' *Azamara Quest*, on a sailing from Bali to Cairns, will go on excursions to see komodo dragons on December 25.

Passengers on Ponant's *Le Soléal* will spend Christmas Day seeing the volcanic springs in Rotorua on an excursion from Tauranga in New Zealand, visited on a 10-night cruise from New Caledonia to Christchurch.

ON THE RIVERS

Passengers sailing in Europe can get in the festive mood on Christmas markets cruises from the end of November and throughout December, and operators including Viking, AmaWaterways, CroisiEurope, A-Rosa and Scenic Tours also have voyages over Christmas.

These may also give passengers a chance to visit the markets at the start of the cruise (most are shut December 24 but a few are open on December 25 and beyond) and itineraries are usually tweaked to allow them to attend Mass on Christmas Eve and spend some or all of the following day ashore.

Amadeus River Cruises, for instance, has a seven-night voyage round-trip from Passau departing December 22 that is in Durnstein for Christmas Eve Mass and



spends the next day in Vienna. On the Rhine, cruises operate from Cologne and are in Speyer for Mass and Strasbourg for Christmas Day.

Generally, Christmas comes with a light touch so passengers can celebrate or not as they wish. On Viking, for instance, Christmas songs play as background music in the lounge, Santa makes a quick appearance and there's a

gala dinner in the evening. On AmaWaterways, passengers who leave their shoes out on Christmas Eve will find them filled with sweets in the morning, and there are also festive carols and games.

CroisiEurope has a three-night cruise round-trip from Strasbourg departing December 23 that has a Christmas Eve dinner, a chance to go to Mass in Boppard, ▶



Komodo dragon, Indonesia



Rotorua, New Zealand

PICTURE: ARTURO DE FRÍAS MARQUES

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**American Queen
Steamboat Company**
**New Year
fireworks,
Madeira**
PICTURE: MADEIRA REVELLON/HUGO REIS


Germany, and spends the following afternoon in Mainz.

The River Cruise Line has a seven-day Rhine cruise departing December 23 that spends Christmas Eve in Cologne and Andernach, and Christmas Day cruising the Rhine Gorge followed by a Christmas lunch and an excursion to Siegfried's Mechanical Music Museum in Rudesheim.

On the Mississippi, the American Queen Steamboat Company will be dressing up its *American Queen* paddlewheel as it sails from Memphis to New Orleans over the festive season. There will be gift-wrapping and Christmas trivia contests, services on board or in St Francisville and Baton Rouge. On Christmas Day, *American Queen* is in Nottoway, Louisiana, for a tour of the antebellum houses of the Deep South.

● CHRISTMAS MARKETS

Europe's Christmas markets are big, colourful affairs, packed with huts and stalls – well over 100 in the best – that sell everything from scented candles and gingerbread to wooden toys, nativity scenes and food. Visitors can munch on bratwurst, deep-fried potatoes, sugared churros and more, and of course sup gluhwein to keep their spirits up.

River lines including Uniworld River Cruises, Scenic Tours, Viking, AmaWaterways, The River Cruise Line and Avalon Waterways have Christmas market cruises on the Rhine and Danube, usually from late November.

The biggest markets in Germany are in Cologne – the city has five markets including one by the cathedral – and Nuremberg, where the

stalls are in the huge main square, but you'll find them in almost every German town including in Heidelberg, Koblenz and Mainz.

On the Danube, the best markets are in Regensburg, Vienna, Linz and Salzburg (it's not on the river but cruise lines have excursions there) and Budapest, where a big market in front of the cathedral stays open well after Christmas Day.

Advise clients to pick itineraries that stay late or overnight in cities with the best markets as they come to life after dark (which luckily comes early in winter). Viking stays in Rudesheim until after midnight on cruises between Amsterdam and Basel, while Uniworld has a day in both Nuremberg and Frankfurt at the start and end of its Christmas cruises between the two cities.

Amadeus's Danube Christmas markets cruises between Vienna and Nuremberg include overnights

in both cities at the start and end, and there's also a late night departure from Regensburg.

● NEW YEAR TOO

Rather than just celebrating Christmas at sea, clients can double the festive fun and book a voyage that also takes in the New Year.

Cruise & Maritime Voyages has a 14-night cruise round-trip from Tilbury departing on December 22 on *Magellan* that offers a British-style Christmas at sea en route to the Canary Islands and is in Funchal, Madeira, for the New Year's Eve fireworks.

On the rivers, Uniworld's 11-day cruise from Passau to Budapest departing December 23 includes a Christmas Day lunch in Salzburg followed by carol singing in Oberndorf, where *Silent Night* was composed in 1818, while 2016 will be welcomed in at a New Year's Eve dinner and dance in Budapest. **TW**

