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Happy hour at the Aquavit Restaurant, on the bow deck while on the Rhone River, in Avignon, France. (Steve Haggerty Photography/Colorworld/MCT)

Tuesday, September 16, 2014

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By: Anne Z. Cooke

BORDEAUX France — “Looks like you’re going cruising,” I asked the ladies sitting across from me in the airport lounge. With their carry-on bags piled between us, I couldn’t help spotting the Viking River Cruise tags on the handles. “Your first time?” I asked, thinking about my own recent river cruise and feeling very wise and experienced. “How exciting! What a wonderful way to travel.”

The brunette in the group, swaddled in a bulky sweater and turban, smiled smugly, the cat who ate the canary. “I couldn’t agree more. But this isn’t our first river cruise with Viking,” she said. “It’s our third. We did the Volga, in Russia, five years ago, and the Danube last December, to see the Christmas Markets. This time we’re sailing on the Rhone, in southern France.”

Touche. So much for thinking I was the only one who’d noticed the Vikings are back, re-conquering Europe with their newest weapons, 443-foot-long “Longships.” If you haven’t followed Viking River Cruise’s yearlong advertising blitz, highlighting the Longships, tune into PBS’s Downton Abbey or Masterpiece Mystery to see what I’m talking about.

I sampled a Longship myself last March, on an overnight sail on the Garonne River, in Bordeaux, France. The mini-cruise was a wrap-up to Viking River Cruise’s recent christening ceremony, a major bash during which the company named 18 new ships at three locations in five days, setting a Guinness world record.

The event, held in Avignon, France, for friends, partners and the media, also inaugurated VRC’s “Portraits of Southern France” itineraries, sailing on the Rhone and Saone Rivers, just two of the European rivers the Vikings explored a thousand years ago.

Sallying forth on uncharted seas, the Norsemen arrived in 792 A.D. Raiding and trading up passable rivers, they landed on coasts from France to Newfoundland and east to the Mediterranean and Turkey. And everywhere they went, they left their leather-working, wood carving, metal working, weaving and ship-building techniques.

Though most Vikings sailed home, a few found southern climes more hospitable and stayed on, leaving their language, artifacts and DNA for archaeologists to unearth. By 1066, the Viking era was over. Then, in 1997, that latter-day Viking, VRC Chairman Torstein Hagen, formerly the CEO of Royal Viking Cruise Line, took a

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second look at river cruises and found them promising.

Partnering with investors and with Karine Hagen, his daughter, an economist and Russia scholar, Hagen bought and renovated four Russian-owned river boats. But the company's growth was glacial. When VRC came through the last recession intact, the burly, take-no-prisoners Hagen made his move.

"When we were still alive in 2009 we decided to take the risk and build a lot more ships," he said, speaking at the christening. "We introduced 10 new ships last year and will christen 18 more this week. And 10 more are due to come on line in 2015." By the end of next year, he says, the company will have 60 ships on rivers in Europe, Russia, Egypt, China and Southeast Asia. By 2020 Hagen expects the fleet to grow to 100 ships.

Dividing my week between Avignon and Bordeaux, I had a chance to see and stay on two nearly identical Longships, the Heimdal and the Forseti. Both were light and bright, lovely examples of uncluttered Scandinavian design, highlighted by a soft tan-and-ivory color scheme. Natural light streamed through floor-to-ceiling glass walls in the dining room, lounge and the reception areas and poured down through a skylight. Outdoor decks included the Aquavit Restaurant, on the Bow deck, an ideal spot for breakfast coffee or an afternoon tea; and the roof-top Sun Deck, the place to watch the scenery pass by.

Meals, served buffet style at breakfast and lunch, and at round, square and long tables for dinner, were excellent, with fresh vegetables and fruit, baked goods, a choice of entrees and desserts or cheeses, with house wine and beer included. My middle deck stateroom on the Heimdal was brand new, with a king bed, fine linens, a chair, a tiny but efficient bathroom, ample closet and shelf space, a large television screen and a French balcony (sliding glass doors with exterior railings.)

But the cabin was so cramped (not really designed for a king bed) that walking from the door to the French Balcony was a squeeze. After levering my suitcase under the bed, I could barely retrieve it.

During the event, some attendees raised the issue of the Longships' ambitious design, at 443 feet, one-third longer than the typical river ship. Suggesting that it had already proved unwieldy, they cited rivers infamous for swift currents,

shifting sandbars, low bridges and — most hazardous — annual flooding. With so many ships coming on line at once, most staffed by inexperienced new hires, wouldn't employees have difficulty handling the inevitable disruptions?

Asked about the challenges of hiring and training 1000 new employees overnight, Viking Forseti Manager Thomas Koessler agreed that it was a tall order. "But this company gives people the tools they need to do the job," he said. "The staff are willing, hard-working and happy team members."

And so they were, during my uneventful cruise. But according to former guests onboard during flooding in Central Europe in the spring of 2013, the staff was too green to handle emergencies. Disorganized and unsure, they struggled to organize bus tours, arrange alternate transportation home, or accommodate guests who paid top dollar and now found themselves stuck at a dock. When disgruntled guests demanded a full refund, the company instead offered free drinks, unwanted bus tours or discount coupons off future cruises.

Viking River Cruise said that occasionally there are water situations that make sailing impossible. In those cases, VRC does everything possible — including ship swaps — to modify itineraries in the least impactful way for passengers, a spokesman said.

The flooding in Europe was the worst seen in the region in centuries, Viking River Cruise said. Even so, of the more than 1,000 Viking sailings that season, only a handful experienced a situation where sailing was not possible, the company said. Compensation offered in those situations was fair and equitable, VRC said.

Where Viking River Cruise does excel is with its one-of-a-kind shore excursions. Created and organized by Karine Hagen, VP of product development, her "privileged access" small-group tours provide personal connections with local people and places, one-off experiences unique to the company.

Multilingual, Karine Hagen's diverse educational background, degrees in economics and Russian/East European studies, and her experiences working in St. Petersburg, San Francisco, Oslo, Silicon Valley, France and London, provided her with global connections and convinced her that the value of travel lies in meeting the people.

"We want a local life component on every cruise," she told me. "For example, a visit to Lobkowicz Palace in Prague, where the Prince shows us around. Or a private ballet rehearsal. A morning spent with a city mayor, or a leading artist. A cooking lesson with a famous chef. You'd be surprised to learn that these people are as interested in meeting Americans as the Americans are in meeting them."

Anyone can visit the public rooms in St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum; Hagen is able to arrange a tour of the vault. Any tourist can drive through the vineyards in Bordeaux; Viking River Cruise passengers visit a private manor house and vineyard. Other river cruises sail on the Volga River; Hagen knows local farm families there who are willing to host small groups.

If the company succeeds, Viking River Cruises may yet outdo its competitors, not with big hardware but simply by upping the cultural thrill factor. For now, the Vikings are in mid-stream and steering by the stars. What they need is clear skies ahead.

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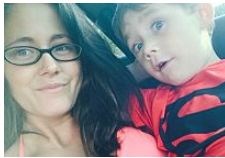
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