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Posted: 04/20/2015 1:34 pm EDT | Updated: 04/20/2015 1:59 pm EDT

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Happy hour at the Aquavit Restaurant, on the stern deck. On the Rhone River, Avignon, France.

It's not too late to see Europe this summer, sailing with Viking River Cruises. And if you're lucky, you might get a bargain rate, maybe even airline tickets. Viking River Cruises, now one of the world's largest river cruise companies, has so many river ships now sailing on European waterways that there are always a few cabins available at the last minute.



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ANGELA has typhoid.

Date: April 19, 1848
Weather: hot
Health: fair
Food: 170 pounds
Next landmark: 89 miles
Miles traveled: 215 miles

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But I'm not the only one who's noticed that the history is repeating itself. The Norsemen are back, re-conquering Europe's waterways with a fleet of slick new 195-passenger longships and an advertising blitz that has dominated PBS's favorite shows - Downton Abbey and Masterpiece Mystery - for the last three years. And who could resist those spectacular aerial views of the ships and their passengers, cruising by castles and vineyards and sipping French wine?

I sampled a longship myself recently, sailing on the Garonne River out of Bordeaux, and on the Rhone, from Avignon, in France. The cruise coincided with VRC's introduction of more than 20 new ships with news of more to come. The fleet now stands at more than 60 longships, sailing not just in Europe, but in Asia and elsewhere.



Back in the day, the year 792 A.D. to be exact, the year of the first major Norse invasion, the Vikings left Scandinavia and sallied forth along Europe's Atlantic coast, sailing up every large river they passed, from France to Newfoundland and east to the Mediterranean and Turkey, taking and trading slaves and goods as they went. For nearly 300 years they were a major cultural influence, absorbing new skills and lifestyles and leaving evidences of their own: exquisitely wrought gold jewelry, fine weaving and leather-working, and some of the world's most sophisticated ship-building techniques.

When the Viking era ended, in 1066, most Vikings sailed home. But a few found southern climes more hospitable and settled permanently, leaving their language, artifacts and DNA for archaeologists to decipher. The tradition continues today, led by Viking's Chairman Torstein Hagen, formerly the CEO of Royal Viking Cruise Line.



Dividing my week between Avignon and Bordeaux, I had a chance to see and travel on two nearly identical Longships, the Heimdal and the Forseti. Both were light and bright, classic examples of uncluttered Scandinavian design, highlighted by a soft tan-and-ivory color scheme and natural wood-toned furnishings. Natural light streamed through floor-to-ceiling glass walls in the dining room, lounge and the reception areas and poured down through a skylight.

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The Aquavit Café, on the bow deck, was an ideal spot for morning coffee and afternoon tea; the roof-top Sun Deck was an ideal place to sit under an umbrella and watch the scenery on shore. Dining room meals, served buffet style at breakfast and lunch and by waiters at various sized tables at dinner, were delicious and filling, with an abundance of fresh vegetables, salads, fruit and baked goods, hot and cold entrees and sweet desserts or cheese. The food was so good, in fact, that everyone looked forward to the next meal. Wines and beer were included.



My middle deck stateroom on the spanking-new spotless Heimdal, was furnished with a king bed, silky linens, a tiny but efficient bathroom and ample closet and shelf space.

A large, flat-screen television faced the bed, and a "French balcony" (sliding glass doors) opened wide for fresh air and a wall-size view of the scenery. The cabin might have been designed for two narrow beds; it was certainly too small for a king bed, which might have been installed temporarily at the request of a previous passenger.

But where Viking River Cruise excels is with its one-of-a-kind shore excursions, unique outings that raise the bar so high that other cruise companies will be hard put to match it. Designed by Karine Hagen, VP of product development, these "privileged access" small-group tours, many arranged through business connections, provide one-off experiences unique to Viking and not available on other river cruises. Multilingual, Karine Hagen's diverse educational background, with degrees in economics and Russian/East European studies, and her experiences living and working in St. Petersburg, San Francisco, Silicon Valley, Oslo, France and London, 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 Lobkowitz 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 Americans are in meeting them."

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A top player for now, Viking River Cruises continues to expand, offering smart itineraries, attractive ships and good value for its mid-to upper range prices. For a catalog, prices, dates, general information and bookings, contact the cruise line at vikingrivercruises.com; or call reservations at (855)338-4546. The race to succeed may not be to those who build bigger ships, but to those who offer their passengers life-changing experiences.

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