## Sailing Down To Strasbourg

Aboard the MS Serenity, a river cruise from Mainz in Germany to the French medieval city is a leisurely affair

've never been on a river cruise before but now I understand why they're so popular. Cocktail of the day in the panoramic lounge bar of MS Serenity is a margarita, and I'm happy to go with the flow! The handsome Italian on-board manager Michele is singing Volare and everyone is joining in with the 'oh oh oh oh'.

I arrive in Germany by train from the UK, although many of my fellow passengers travel by coach. If you don't enjoy flying, then an organised road or rail

journey to your embarkation point is just the thing.

In the city of Mainz, the MS Serenity awaits and smartly uniformed captains Leo and Roland warmly welcome guests: lashings of bacon, egg, beans,

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before casting off during dinner to sail down the Rhine.

It's a real family atmosphere on the boat, a floating four-star hotel with room for 190 passengers – many travelling alone, others in groups. I soon

sausage and toast, I'm off to sightsee and shop.

make friends and get chatting.

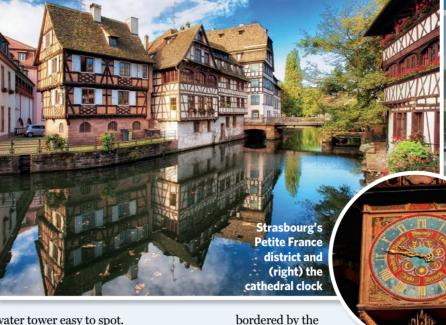
Before sunrise we arrive at

Mannheim, sited where the

Rhine and Neckar rivers join.

After a buffet breakfast with

It's simple to get around as the city - nicknamed 'die Quadratestadt' - has its streets and avenues laid out in a grid, with the 1886 Romanesque



water tower easy to spot.

Mannheim Palace was damaged by Second World War bombs, but this luxurious 18th-century Baroque building has been restored and is used by the university. On display (Tuesday to Sunday) are tapestries, furniture, paintings, porcelain and silverware.

In summer the peaceful Luisenpark, a municipal green space, offers an arboretum, lush greenhouses and a Chinese garden with teahouse.

After lunch, we head by coach to nearby Heidelberg,

If you fancy getting on your feet, the dance floor beckons. Königsstuhl and Overnight we Gaisberg mountains and sail into France and.

music quiz

and a fun

Ages in waterfront houses.

As Strasbourg is the 'official'

sing-along.

overlooked by the city's castle. Ramble along the Philosophers' Walk for wonderful views and you may spot a Siberian swan goose.

It's nice to enjoy a hot power shower in our cabins and dress up for dinner at the end of the day. We're ready for the chef's four-course meal and I opt for smoked duck with raspberry dressing, tomato soup, braised lamb and panna cotta.

Then in the lounge there's a

seat of the European Parliament I decide to walk to the Wacken district to see the controversial Louise Weiss building, where it meets. This iconic, modern,

MS Serenity

60m-high curved edifice has been intentionally left with an unfinished look on one side negotiating two locks, join the like an abandoned Roman river Ill to reach Strasbourg. amphitheatre. The steel and where the historic city centre, glass design is certainly bold the Grande Île (Large Island), but, ironically, has been is a UNESCO World Heritage dogged by bits falling down. site. The narrow buildings with To revive myself, I escape to

high roofs and tiny skylights the bright vellow decor of café offer character and charm. Gagao (gagao.eu) and enjoy a deliciously rich organic café Prettiest of all is the Petite France district, where the city's choco (hot chocolate with a tanners, millers and fishermen shot of espresso coffee). congregated during the Middle The must-see before leaving

is the Notre-Dame Cathedral, an ornate and very imposing

example of 15th-century Gothic architecture, built in rose-coloured sandstone.

It boasts a medieval astronomical clock, which can be seen in action each day at 12.30pm. I consider climbing the 468ft spire but as my visit is in December, I decide instead to explore the Christmas market, the oldest in Europe dating back to the 1570s.

Bagged baubles in hand, I return to MS Serenity in time for afternoon tea and home-baked cakes, and the strudel doesn't disappoint.

Next morning I'm off back to the UK by rail via Cologne, a very scenic route along the Rhine Valley. We pass miles of sloping vineyards and towering cliffs with turreted castles high in the trees. It's a shame to nod off...

## **Travel details**

The River Cruise Line (01858 438 330; rivercruiseline.co.uk) offers a choice of cruises aboard the MS Serenity in 2018, including the Dutch bulbfields, Rhine Valley and Danube. A four-day Strasbourg Christmas Market cruise is from £449 per person, inclusive of meals.

