

# Sailing Down To Strasbourg

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



Strasbourg's Petite France district and (right) the cathedral clock



MS Serenity

I'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

*Cocktail of the day is a margarita and I'm happy to go with the flow!*

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

make friends and get chatting. Before sunrise we arrive at Mannheim, sited where the Rhine and Neckar rivers join. After a buffet breakfast with lashings of bacon, egg, beans,

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

bordered by the Königsstuhl and Gaisberg mountains and 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 smoked duck with raspberry dressing, tomato soup, braised lamb and panna cotta. Then in the lounge there's a

music quiz and a fun sing-along. If you fancy getting on your feet, the dance floor beckons. Overnight we sail into France and,

negotiating two locks, join the river Ill to reach Strasbourg, where the historic city centre, the Grande Île (Large Island), is a UNESCO World Heritage site. The narrow buildings with high roofs and tiny skylights offer character and charm.

Prettiest of all is the Petite France district, where the city's tanners, millers and fishermen congregated during the Middle Ages in waterfront houses. As Strasbourg is the 'official'

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, 60m-high curved edifice has been intentionally left with an unfinished look on one side – like an abandoned Roman amphitheatre. The steel and glass design is certainly bold but, ironically, has been dogged by bits falling down.

To revive myself, I escape to the bright yellow decor of café Gagao (gagao.eu) and enjoy a deliciously rich organic café choco (hot chocolate with a shot of espresso coffee). 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](http://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.

Stop off at Heidelberg for fabulous views



**Great For Tranquil Travellers**  
Crisscross the water and wander over some of Strasbourg's beautiful bridges. There are covered originals from the Middle Ages, and the 1858 Passerelle des Juifs footbridge is adorned with love padlocks.

**Great For Food Lovers**  
Try the savoury choucroute garnie, a mix of sauerkraut, salted meats and mashed potatoes, or spätzle (little sparrows), a popular soft egg noodle. If you have a sweet tooth, taste kugelhopf, a bread cake with raisins and toasted almonds.

Choucroute garnie

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