

THE POINTS GUY

The 10 most exciting new river cruise ships of 2021



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It's going to be a big year for fans of new river cruise ships.

The big river lines that cater to North Americans plan to launch more than a dozen new vessels across the United States, [Europe](#) and [Asia](#) in 2021 as they get back into expansion mode.

Many of the new river vessels on the way originally were scheduled to debut in 2020. Their arrivals were put on hold after the [cruise industry shut down in March](#) due to the coronavirus pandemic. But there also are new river ships coming that originally were ordered for 2021.

The result is that 2021 will see more new river ships debuting than anyone expected just a year ago.

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New river ships in Europe, North America, Asia

As is typically the case, Europe will be at the center of the growth. River cruise giant Viking alone is adding four new ships in the region. AmaWaterways, Avalon Waterways, Emerald Waterways, Uniworld and Tauck have new Europe river ships coming, too.

Debut vessels in other parts of the world include everything from a notable paddlewheeler for the Mississippi River to a first-of-its-kind new build for the [Nile in Egypt](#).

River lines aren't alone in adding a profusion of new vessels to the market this year. This also will be a significant year for new [ocean-going ships](#) (see our picks for the most notable newcomers).

Read on for a list of the 10 new river ships we're most excited to book.

American Countess (American Queen Steamboat Company)



American Countess will have a classic Mississippi riverboat look. Image courtesy of American Queen Steamboat Company.

Toot the whistle horn! Gather 'round the calliope! A new Mississippi paddlewheeler is on the way. Initially scheduled to debut in 2020 but delayed due to the new coronavirus, the 245-passenger American Countess will begin sailing between [New Orleans](#) and Memphis in the spring. Eventually, it will operate as far north as Red Wing, Minnesota.

Like the two American Queen vessels currently on the Mississippi — American Queen and American Duchess — American Countess will be a whitewashed, wedding cake-like confection with red trim powered by a great, big paddle wheel on its back. Four decks high and 361 feet long, it'll also have such American Queen riverboat signatures as a soaring Grand Lobby, an elegant dining room with river views, a theater and a forward-facing Chart Room where “riverlorians” will regale passengers with [river stories](#).

But American Countess won't be a carbon copy of the earlier vessels. In one notable twist, it'll have sleeker, more modern cabins than its predecessors. There will be four categories of cabins in all, two of which come with balconies.

The details: American Countess will sail a mix of six- to 15-night trips on the Mississippi, Ohio, Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. Fares start at \$1,999 per person, not including taxes and fees. For information, call 833-598-0119 or visit americanqueensteamboatcompany.com.

American Melody (American Cruise Lines)



An aft lounge on American Cruise Lines' new Modern Series of riverboats. (Photo courtesy of American Cruise Lines)

Also adding a new vessel on the Mississippi in 2021 — two, actually — is fast-growing American Cruise Lines. But unlike American Queen Steamboat's new American Countess, the new American Cruise Lines boats — American Jazz and American Melody — won't be traditional paddlewheelers with an old-fashioned riverboat decor.

Instead, they'll be sleek and modern. Both the vessels will be part of American Cruise Lines' new "modern series" of vessels that hold fewer than 190 passengers and began debuting in 2018. The series already has two vessels: American Song and American Harmony.

Of the two new vessels, perhaps the most notable is American Melody, which will be the first in the modern series with an elegant new interior designed by Miami-based Studio DADO — a cruise ship design firm well-known for its stylish creations.

Like its sisters, American Melody will feature interior spaces with lots of panoramic views, including a soaring glass atrium at its center; a grand dining room and outdoor cafe; a yoga, wellness and fitness room; and multiple lounges. As is typical for American Cruise Lines ships, it'll offer standard cabins measuring a generous 350 square feet and some cabins as big as 650 square feet. Even the smallest cabins, designed for solo travelers, will measure 250 square feet and feature full-size bathrooms, roomy closets and private balconies — a rarity for a river ship.

The details: American Melody and American Jazz both will sail a mix of different Mississippi River itineraries (American Cruise Lines offers 10 different routes), including roundtrip voyages from New Orleans and brand new Music Cities voyages between Nashville and Memphis. Fares for weeklong trips start at \$4,605 per person, not including taxes and fees. For information, call 800-814-6880 or visit [americancruiselines.com](https://www.americancruiselines.com).

Avalon View (Avalon Waterways)



Panorama Suites on Avalon Waterways ships have wall-to-wall windows that slide open to create a balcony-like feel. (Photo courtesy of Avalon Waterways).

Avalon Waterways' latest ship in Europe won't have a radically different look than other recent additions to the Avalon fleet. In fact, the design of the 166-passenger Avalon View will be almost identical to the design of the last dozen or so Avalon vessels to debut. But the design is so good, Avalon View is an obvious choice for any list of the most exciting new river ships.

Scheduled to sail on the Rhine, Main and [Danube](#) rivers, Avalon View is the latest of Avalon's "suite ships," that began arriving in 2011. The vessels feature particularly spacious (and brilliantly laid out) cabins known as Panorama Suites on two of three cabin decks. The highlight of the rooms are sweeping, floor-to-ceiling window walls. Offering stunning views, these walls slide open seven feet to create a balcony-like effect (don't worry: There are permanent glass panels along the lower part of the walls so you don't fall out).

In a twist from what's been typical on Europe-based river ships, the beds in Panorama Suites face the water and not an interior wall.

Avalon View's public spaces will include a restaurant, lounge with bar, secondary lounge, fitness room and spacious sun deck. With its addition, Avalon will have 14 of the suite ships in Europe.

The details: Avalon View will operate three- to 14-night sailings on the Rhine, Main and Danube rivers. Fares start at \$724 per person, not including taxes and fees. Call 877-797-8791 or visit avalonwaterways.com for more information.

S.S. São Gabriel (Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection)



Nearly the entire top deck of the SS Sao Gabriel will be suites. Image courtesy of Uniworld.

No doubt about it, river cruising on the [Douro River](#) in Portugal has been hot in recent years — so hot the relatively minor European waterway is drawing two major new vessels this year.

Upscale river line Uniworld's S.S. São Gabriel will be the first of the two ships to debut, and it's promising to be a charmer. Built for just 100 passengers, the three-deck-high vessel will boast elegant decor with local touches like handmade glazed Portuguese tiles. It'll also have menus infused with regional specialties such as chorizo and octopus carpaccio.

Known for its ultra-attentive service, California-based Uniworld has operated voyages on the Douro before. But S.S. São Gabriel will be an upgrade from the line's former ship on the river, Queen Isabel. Nearly the entire top deck of the vessel will be devoted to lavish suites, four of which will measure more than 300 square feet. All come with butler service.

Other features will include a restaurant, lounge with a bar, spa, fitness room and a sun deck with a pool — a relative rarity on river ships.

The details: S.S. São Gabriel will operate seven-night sailings out of Porto, Portugal, with stops in such river towns as Regua and Pinhão. Fares start at \$3,699 per person, not including taxes and fees. For information, call 800-349-7397 or visit uniworld.com.

Andorinha (Tauck)



Andorinha will be upscale tour operator Tauck's first vessel on the Douro River. Image courtesy of Tauck.

The second of the two new ships coming to Portugal's Douro River this year is Andorinha, which is – notably – the first Tauck vessel ever on the river. Designed for just 84 passengers, it'll bring Tauck's signature highly-inclusive, also incredibly high-touch type of cruising to the Douro for the first time.

Like other Tauck river ships, Andorinha will have spacious, elegantly appointed cabins (some measuring 300 square feet) and multiple restaurants. It'll also sail with three Tauck Director guides who accompany every tour outing along with local guides, one of [the line's key differentiators](#).

As is typical for Douro vessels, Andorinha will be just two decks high and relatively short for a river ship at 263 feet long. Bridge heights and lock sizes on the Douro limit how big river ships can be.

Andorinha will operate three itineraries on the Douro, including what's being billed as the first family-focused routing on the river. Tauck was an early pioneer of [family-focused river cruise departures](#) and continues to be a leader in the niche.

The details: Andorinha's main seven-night Douro River itinerary, out of Porto, Portugal, will include an overnight in Porto and stops at several river towns including Peso da Régua and Pinhão. Activities will include walking tours of the towns, tours of vineyards and wine estates, visits to historic sites and scenic cycling. Fares start at \$4,390 per person, including taxes and fees. For information visit tauck.com or call 800-788-7885.

Viking Skaga (Viking)



Viking Radgrid will be small enough to travel into the heart of Paris. Image courtesy of Viking.

River cruise giant Viking is known for operating a fleet of almost identical vessels in Europe. If you've seen one Viking river ship in Europe, you've seen them all. But the line is tinkering with the formula a tad with Viking Skaga, which will debut on the [River Seine](#) in the spring.

Along with three more sister ships that will begin service on the French waterway in 2021, Viking Skaga will be just 410 feet long, about 33 feet shorter than the typical Viking river ship. The smaller size will allow it to travel all the way into the heart of [Paris](#). In the small world of Seine cruises, that's a big deal (bigger ships on the Seine have to dock as far as 11 miles away).

Viking Skaga also will have fewer cabins than the typical Viking ship — just 84 instead of 95. But it'll still have the wide range of cabin types (including multiroom suites) that's a Viking signature. Cruisers will also recognize the same streamlined Scandinavian design that's a hallmark of the brand. Public spaces will include an expansive sun deck, a restaurant, a lounge with a bar, a boutique and a library.

The details: Viking Skaga and its sisters will operate seven-night Seine cruises out of Paris that include day stops in La Roche Guyon (for an excursion to [Claude Monet's home](#) in Giverny) and Les Andelys. There's also an overnight stay in Rouen, allowing for a day trip to the Normandy beaches. The trip begins and ends with overnight stays in Paris. Fares start at \$1,999 per person, not including taxes and fees. Call 800-304-9616 or visit [viking.com](#) for more information.

AmaSiena and AmaLucia (AmaWaterways)



The 156-passenger AmaSiena will sail on the Rhine and Main. Image courtesy of AmaWaterways.

These two new 156-passenger ships from California-based AmaWaterways will be similar to three other AmaWaterways vessels that have debuted since 2017.

Like their three earlier sisters (AmaMora, AmaLea and AmaKristina), AmaSiena and AmaLucia will offer cabins and suites with the line's signature twin balcony concept (both a walk-out balcony *and* a French balcony along the outer-facing wall). They'll also offer multiple dining venues and a heated pool with a swim-up bar — both AmaWaterways signatures.

In addition, as is typical for the line, both of the vessels will have a heavy focus on wellness. A designated Wellness Host on both of the ships will lead daily exercise classes and a lineup of active biking and hiking excursions.

The details: AmaSiena and AmaLucia will offer voyages in 2021 on the Danube, Main, Rhine and Moselle rivers, with rates for seven-night sailings starting at \$2,799 per person, not including taxes and fees. For information, call 800-626-0126 or visit amawaterways.com.

Viking Osiris (Viking)



Viking Osiris will be Viking's second ship in Egypt. Image courtesy of Viking.

The Seine isn't the only river where Viking is expanding in 2021. It also has built a new ship for the Nile in [Egypt](#) — and it's quite the notable development.

Viking Osiris was being built from the ground up specifically to Viking's specifications. It's also owned and operated by Viking. That's unusual in a market where most Western lines charter local vessels for their trips.

Indeed, when it debuts this year, Viking Osiris will be the only ship on the Nile built, owned and operated by one of the big Western river cruise companies. In Viking's eyes (and ours, too), that means Viking will be able to offer the most consistent product on the river. Unlike some other Western companies operating in Egypt, Viking will have complete control of the experience.

Viking Osiris will be smaller than the typical Viking ship, with just 41 cabins. But it'll be a classic Viking vessel in other respects (the aforementioned Scandinavian design and distinct Viking-style included touring). If you've been on any of Viking's 60-plus river ships in Europe, you'll feel right at home.

Viking Osiris is joining Viking's 2-year-old, 52-passenger Viking Ra on the Nile. Viking Ra, too, is owned and operated by Viking. But it technically wasn't built by the line. Viking gutted and reconfigured an existing Nile ship to create it. Next year, Viking will launch a sister ship to Viking Osiris: [Viking Aton](#).

The details: Viking's Egypt trips pair a three-night hotel stay in Cairo with a seven-night Nile cruise and include visits to such iconic Egypt sites as the [Great Pyramids of Giza](#) and the Valley of the Kings. Fares start at \$5,599 per person, not including taxes and fees. For information, call 800-304-9616 or visit [viking.com](#).

Emerald Luna (Emerald Waterways)



An artist's drawing of Emerald Luna. (Image courtesy of Emerald Waterways)

Australia-based Emerald Waterways continues its expansion in Europe with its sixth "star-ship" built for the Rhine, Main and Danube rivers.

Like five previous sisters, the the 180-passenger Emerald Luna will have an interior that revolves around a chic, contemporary social space called the Horizon Bar & Lounge. It'll also offer a barbecue venue on its Sun Deck in addition to a main restaurant in its interior.

The Sun Deck also will boast a retractable glass roof that can open to let fresh air and light into a heated pool and lounge area below. The pool area can convert into a cinema.

With the addition of Emerald Luna, Emerald will have nine ships in all.

The details: Emerald Luna will operate four- to 14-night sailings on the Rhine, Main and Danube rivers. Fares start at \$1,595 per person, including port charges but not taxes. Call 857-201-5204 or visit emeraldwaterways.com for more information.

Other newcomers

Cruisers also can look forward to other new river ships from both Uniworld, Viking and AmaWaterways.

In addition to a new vessel in Portugal, Uniworld is adding new ships on the Nile. The vessel originally was due to debut in 2020 but was delayed due to the new coronavirus.

Uniworld also is relaunching its Italy-based River Countess, which was struck and damaged in 2019 by an MSC Cruises ship while docked in Venice. River Countess underwent a complete redesign and has been renamed S.S. La Venezia.

In addition to new vessels on the Seine River in France and on the Nile, Viking also is adding a new vessel on the Mekong River in Asia called the Viking Saigon.

AmaWaterways has a third river ship debuting late in the year on the Nile. To be named AmaDahlia, it'll hold up to 68 passengers.