

RIVER CRUISING GUIDE

The Rhine

Amsterdam to Basel, the Rhine Gorge and the places in between

GORDON SADLER TRAVEL

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About this guide

The River Cruising Guide is published by Gordon Sadler Travel. It breaks down what each waterway is truly like—the routes ships sail, the ports of call, and the best seasons to travel.

You might be drawn by a single landmark you've always wanted to see—like the Spanish Riding School in Vienna or the castles of the Rhine Gorge—and want to discover what else that river has to offer. You might simply be looking for fresh inspiration for your next journey, or you may have already booked and want to explore the details of the voyage ahead. Whatever brings you here, this guide helps you connect with the river itself, giving you the full picture before, during, or after choosing your cruise.

Truly Independent

We created The River Cruising Guide to offer an honest, inspiring, and completely impartial look at the world’s waterways. Whether you're planning your very first river cruise or have lost count of the rivers you've sailed, our goal is to give you genuine facts, beautiful imagery, and practical tips you can trust. Every line sailing a river is included—even those we don't book—and no one can buy a better ranking or a glowing review. It’s all about helping you explore with confidence.

First-Hand Insight

Wherever possible, we showcase our own photography, video, and personal notes captured during our travels on the rivers. We want to show you the waterways as they really are, not just how the marketing brochures portray them. For complete peace of mind and integrity, any imagery or commentary originating from an operator-sponsored trip is clearly marked.

This PDF is the first edition of the Rhine section. The latest version is always at rivercruisingguide.co.uk. Itineraries change from year to year, so check the sailing you are considering.

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RIVER

The Rhine



Panorama of the Rhine bend below the Loreley from a viewpoint near Urbar

The Rhine runs from the Swiss Alps to the North Sea, and the stretch between Basel and Amsterdam is one of the great river cruises of Europe. In a week you pass from Switzerland through France and Germany into the Netherlands: Alsace, the vineyards of the Rheingau, the castles of the Rhine Gorge, Cologne Cathedral and the canals of Amsterdam.

Most Rhine cruises sail between Basel and Amsterdam, in either direction. From Basel the river runs north along the border between France and Germany, past Breisach and Strasbourg, through the wide Upper Rhine plain to Speyer, Mannheim and Mainz. Below Mainz the river turns west along the Rheingau, then enters the Rhine Gorge at Bingen and Rüdesheim: 65 kilometres of castles, vineyard terraces and small wine towns, with the Loreley at its heart. At Koblenz the Moselle joins, and the river widens again towards Cologne and the Netherlands, where the ships take the Dutch waterways into Amsterdam. Two turnings matter for longer journeys: the Main at Mainz, which leads to the Main–Danube Canal and the Danube, and the Moselle at Koblenz.

FROM MY OWN TRAVELS

The Rhine is a river of striking contrasts—a hard-working commercial artery serving great cities, yet effortlessly beautiful. Starting on Amsterdam's canals, I sailed on to Cologne to see its majestic cathedral glowing at night from the deck, before gliding past hilltop castles through the stunning Rhine Gorge. It's those contrasts that truly stay with you.

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At a glance

Length	About 1,230 km from the Swiss Alps to the North Sea
Source and mouth	Rises in the canton of Graubünden in Switzerland, where the Vorderrhein and Hinterrhein meet; reaches the North Sea in the Netherlands
Countries	Six: Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Austria, Germany, France and the Netherlands
Cruise lengths	From 3 nights to 14 or more. Seven nights between Amsterdam and Basel is the most popular; Rhine and Moselle cruises run 10 to 14 nights, and Amsterdam to Budapest 14 nights
UNESCO World Heritage on the route	The Seventeenth-Century Canal Ring Area of Amsterdam (2010); the Mill Network at Kinderdijk-Elshout (1997); Cologne Cathedral (1996); the Upper Middle Rhine Valley (2002); the ShUM Sites of Speyer, Worms and Mainz (2021); Speyer Cathedral (1981); Strasbourg, Grande-Île and Neustadt (1988, extended 2017)



The Rhine from Amsterdam to Basel

When to go

January	Few sailings; some lines run New Year cruises. Christmas markets in Koblenz and Speyer stay open into early January.
February	Few or no sailings.
March	The season opens in the second half of the month.
April	**Best month.** Spring, and tulip time in the Netherlands; some sailings offer a visit to the Keukenhof gardens.
May	**Best month.** Mild weather, long days, vineyards in leaf. The Rhine in Flames season begins: five summer evenings of fireworks at different places along the river, from May to September.
June	**Best month.** Long days on deck through the Rhine Gorge.
July	Warm. Low water is possible in dry summers, especially in the Rhine Gorge at Kaub. See water levels.
August	As July. The biggest of the Rhine in Flames evenings, with fireworks and an illuminated convoy of ships, is at Koblenz.
September	**Best month.** Grape harvest begins in the Rheingau and the Middle Rhine.
October	**Best month.** Harvest and autumn colour on the vineyard terraces. Low water can persist into autumn after a dry summer.
November	Christmas markets open in the second half of the month, and Christmas market sailings begin.
December	**Best month.** Christmas markets in Cologne, Koblenz, Rüdesheim, Mainz, Speyer, Strasbourg and Basel; short days and cold.

Water levels

The Rhine is a working river, and its level rises and falls with the weather. After a dry summer the water can run low, and the Rhine Gorge around Kaub is the stretch most often affected. After heavy rain or snowmelt it can run high instead, and then ships may not fit under the bridges or be able to moor safely.

Either way, a cruise usually goes ahead in a changed form. You may move to a sister ship sailing the other way, take a coach around the stretch that is closed, or find that some stops change. When you book, ask how the line handles water levels, and check what your travel insurance covers.

FROM MY OWN TRAVELS

When we sailed in 2023, low water levels meant transferring mid-cruise to a sister ship, with our time in Nuremberg followed by a coach transfer to Passau to board the new vessel. What stood out was how effortlessly it was managed. We were offered help packing, left our luggage in the cabin, and found it already waiting in our new room on arrival. We even left an item behind on the first ship—one word to the Cruise Director, and it was back in our hands the next day.

Fluctuating water levels are a reality of river cruising, and recent summers have seen some notably low conditions. However, operators are seasoned pros at adapting behind the scenes. Rivers are natural waterways shaped by the seasons and the climate, and going with the flow is all part of the adventure.

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Reading the river

Watch the banks and you will see large white boards with black numbers. These are the Rhine kilometres, counted downstream from the old Rhine bridge at Konstanz, on Lake Constance, to the Hook of Holland a little over 1,030 km away. Not every river is counted this way: the Danube is measured upstream from the Black Sea, and the Moselle, Main and Neckar from where they meet the Rhine. The system dates from 1 April 1939; before that, each state along the river measured its own stretch. Between the boards, smaller signs mark every 100 metres, and a black cross marks each half kilometre. A few of the old stone markers, set every 10 km, still stand beside the towpath. On deck the numbers make an easy guide: Basel is at about km 167, the Rhine Gorge runs from about km 527 to 592, the Loreley is around km 555, Koblenz about 591 and Cologne about 688.

Where other rivers join

- **Moselle, at Koblenz.** The Moselle joins the Rhine at the Deutsches Eck. Longer Rhine cruises often detour up the Moselle to Cochem and Bernkastel. Not covered in this edition; the Moselle is the next river to be guided.

Sources: Rhine (Wikipedia); Rhine River (Encyclopaedia Britannica); Upper Middle Rhine Valley (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Riverside Luxury Cruises opens reservations for 2027 season (Travel Market Report); Seventeenth-Century Canal Ring Area of Amsterdam inside the Singelgracht (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Mill Network at Kinderdijk-Elshout (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Cologne Cathedral (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); World Heritage List: ShUM Sites of Speyer, Worms and Mainz (2021) (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Speyer Cathedral (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Strasbourg, Grande-Île and Neustadt (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); River cruise water levels and other ways bad weather could impact your voyage (Cruise Critic); Rhine and Danube river cruises impacted by high water levels (Cruise Critic); Rhine water levels hit record lows (Cruise Critic); Riviera Rhine low water cancellations, September 2026 (Deep Arrival); Low water levels continue to plague European river cruises into October (Travel Market Report); Rheinkilometrierung (Schiff und Technik (Lexikon)); Die Kilometrierung des Rheins (B. P. Kremer) (Heimatjahrbuch Kreis Ahrweiler 2010); Wer hat eigentlich den Rhein ausgemessen? (the-duesseldorfer.de); The Best of the Rhine (audio tour map) (Rick Steves); DE:Rhein (OpenStreetMap Wiki); The Deutsches Eck (Koblenz-Touristik).

Who sails the Rhine

These cruise lines sail the Rhine and sell their cruises to travellers from the UK, listed alphabetically. The guide is independent: lines do not pay to be included, and the list includes lines we do not book with. Start and finish points vary from line to line, so the examples show what each sails.

A-ROSA	Rhine cruises from Cologne, Duisburg and Frankfurt, 2027
Amadeus River Cruises	Classical Rhine Cruise, Basel to Amsterdam, 2027
AmaWaterways	Enchanting Rhine and Captivating Rhine, Basel and Amsterdam, 2027
APT	Amsterdam to Budapest via the Rhine, 2027; Rhine Christmas markets sailings, 2028. Limited Rhine-only programme
Avalon Waterways	Romantic Rhine and Active & Discovery on the Rhine, Basel and Amsterdam, 2027
Celebrity River Cruises	New line from August 2027; Rhine sailings including Basel to Amsterdam and Christmas and New Year cruises
CroisiEurope	Amsterdam to Basel: The Treasures of the Celebrated Rhine River, 2027 edition
Emerald Cruises	Jewels of the Rhine, Amsterdam and Basel, 2027
Riverside Luxury Cruises	Romantic Rhine Southbound, Amsterdam to Basel, and A Week on the Resplendent Rhine, Basel to Amsterdam, 2027
Riviera Travel	Rhine Gorge & Cologne Discovery (4 days); Rhine & Moselle; Rhine Cruise to Switzerland, Cologne to Basel; Rhine, Strasbourg & Heidelberg, 2027
Saga River Cruises	Sights and Scenery of the Rhine, from Mainz, on Spirit of the Rhine, 2027
Scenic	Rhine Highlights, Amsterdam and Basel, 2027
Tauck	The Romantic Rhine, Amsterdam to Basel; The Rhine and Moselle; Rhine Enchantment, Milan to Amsterdam; Rhine Connoisseur, Lake Geneva to Belgium, 2027
Trafalgar	Best of the Rhine & Amsterdam, Basel to Arnhem with Amsterdam, 2027
Travelmarvel	The Rhine and Moselle, Basel to Amsterdam, 2027
TUI River Cruises	Rhine Explorer, Basel to Amsterdam, 2027
Uniworld	Castles along the Rhine & Amsterdam, and Remarkable Rhine & Historic Holland, 2027
Viking	Rhine Getaway, Amsterdam and Basel, 2027
VIVA Cruises	Rhine Discovery North (Rhein Entdeckerreise Nord), Basel to Amsterdam, and Majestic Rhine, Amsterdam to Basel, 2027

Checked in November 2026 against the lines' own published itineraries for 2027 and those of their agents. Itineraries change from year to year; check the sailing you are considering.

ROUTE · 7 NIGHTS

Amsterdam to Basel



A river cruise ship sailing below Burg Katz at St Goarshausen

A week on the Rhine between Amsterdam and Basel, through four countries, with Cologne, the castles and vineyards of the Rhine Gorge, Alsace and the Swiss border. The most popular Rhine cruise, and a fine first river cruise.

This is the Rhine most people mean when they talk about a Rhine cruise. In seven nights the ship travels between Amsterdam and Basel, from the canals of the Netherlands to the edge of Switzerland, with Germany and France on either side for much of the way.

Sailing south, the first days are the cities of the north: Amsterdam, then Cologne and its cathedral. The middle of the week is the best of it. At Koblenz the Moselle comes in, and from there to Rüdesheim the ship sails the Rhine Gorge: castles on the heights, vineyards on the terraces, and the Loreley rock where the river is at its narrowest. This is a stretch to watch from the top deck. The last days are gentler: the wide Upper Rhine, Speyer or Heidelberg, Strasbourg, and Breisach for the Black Forest and Alsace, before the journey ends in Basel.

The route runs in both directions, and the stops vary from line to line. The ones listed here come up most often. Check the itinerary of the sailing you are considering; we can help with that.

Highlights

- Amsterdam's canals before you sail
- Cologne Cathedral, seen from the river
- The Deutsches Eck at Koblenz, where the Moselle meets the Rhine
- A daylight sailing through the Rhine Gorge, past the Loreley
- Wine in Rüdesheim
- Strasbourg's Petite France and cathedral
- Arriving in Basel, where France, Germany and Switzerland meet



Amsterdam to Basel: the usual stops

The week, stop by stop

DAY 1 **Amsterdam** Most itineraries

Embarkation. Many itineraries spend a day or an evening in Amsterdam before sailing. The mooring can change at short notice, and some ships moor outside the city.

DAY 2 **Kinderdijk** Some itineraries

A stop on some itineraries as the ship sails south through the Dutch waterways.

DAY 3 **Cologne** Most itineraries

Usually most of a day, with a walking tour of the old town and the cathedral.

DAY 4 **Koblenz** Most itineraries

Where the Moselle meets the Rhine, at the northern end of the Rhine Gorge.

DAY 4 **The Rhine Gorge** Seen from the ship

Sailed in daylight between Koblenz and Rüdesheim on most itineraries; worth being on deck.

DAY 4 **St Goar and the Loreley** Seen from the ship

Passed in the gorge; the Loreley rock is just upstream.

DAY 4 **Rüdesheim** Most itineraries

Often an afternoon and evening stop at the southern end of the gorge.

DAY 5 **Mainz** Some itineraries

A stop on some itineraries; on others replaced by Mannheim or Ludwigshafen.

DAY 5 **Heidelberg** Reached by coach

Reached by coach from Mannheim, Ludwigshafen or Speyer; Heidelberg is on the Neckar, not the Rhine.

DAY 5 **Speyer** Some itineraries

A stop on some itineraries.

DAY 6 **Strasbourg** Most itineraries

Many ships moor at Kehl on the German bank, with a short transfer into Strasbourg.

DAY 7 **Breisach** Most itineraries

The base for excursions to Colmar, Freiburg and the Black Forest.

DAY 8 **Basel** Most itineraries

Disembarkation. Some ships moor at Huningue, on the French bank just downstream.

Days are typical, sailing south. Many itineraries sail the other way, from Basel to Amsterdam. Start and finish points vary: some lines begin or end in Arnhem or Nijmegen in the Netherlands and take passengers to or from Amsterdam by coach, some stay in Amsterdam or Lucerne before or after the cruise, and some run between Basel and Cologne only. In Basel some ships use the landing at Huningue in France. The middle of the week varies most: some lines stop at Mainz, others at Mannheim or Ludwigshafen for Heidelberg, at Speyer, or at Braubach or Lahnstein for the Marksburg. Shorter breaks of three or four nights run between Cologne and the Rhine Gorge, and longer versions of 10 to 14 nights add the Moselle. In dry summers low water in the Rhine Gorge can lead to ship swaps or coach transfers.

The cruise lines that sail this route are listed alphabetically under *Who sails the Rhine*, in the river section of this guide.

Sources: Rhine water levels hit record lows (Cruise Critic); Riverside Luxury Cruises opens reservations for 2027 season (Travel Market Report).

Places on the route

1. **Amsterdam** Netherlands
2. **Kinderdijk** Netherlands
3. **Cologne** Germany
4. **Koblenz** Germany
5. **The Rhine Gorge** Germany
6. **St Goar and the Loreley** Germany
7. **Rüdesheim** Germany
8. **Mainz** Germany
9. **Heidelberg** Germany
10. **Speyer** Germany
11. **Strasbourg** France
12. **Breisach** Germany
13. **Basel** Switzerland

NETHERLANDS · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 1, MOST ITINERARIES

Amsterdam



Most Rhine cruises begin or end in Amsterdam, and it is worth arriving a day early. The seventeenth-century ring of canals, with its gabled merchants' houses, is a World Heritage Site and best seen from a canal boat. The ship moors close to the centre, though the mooring can change at short notice.

Good to know

- The Seventeenth-Century Canal Ring Area inside the Singelgracht was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2010.
- The canal ring area has 14 kilometres of canals and 80 bridges.
- The port can change cruise ship moorings at short notice, sometimes to a berth outside the city.



Canal houses and a church spire across a canal in autumn



A bicycle on a canal bridge with flower boxes

Sources: Seventeenth-Century Canal Ring Area of Amsterdam inside the Singelgracht (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Management Plan: the seventeenth-century canal ring area of Amsterdam (City of Amsterdam, via UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

Kinderdijk



Nineteen windmills stand in lines along the drainage canals at Kinderdijk, east of Rotterdam, the best-known view of the Dutch fight to keep the land dry. Most date from the eighteenth century. Some ships stop here as they sail between Amsterdam and the Rhine.

Good to know

- The Mill Network at Kinderdijk-Elshout was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1997.
- There are 19 drainage mills; all are kept in working order as a back-up to the modern pumping stations.
- The eight brick mills of the Nederwaard were all built in 1738.

Sources: Mill Network at Kinderdijk-Elshout (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); ICOMOS evaluation: the mill network at Kinderdijk-Elshout (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

GERMANY · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 3, MOST ITINERARIES

Cologne



The twin spires of Cologne Cathedral are the first great sight of the Rhine for anyone sailing south, and the cathedral is as impressive inside as out. Building began in 1248 and was not finished until 1880. Below it the old town runs down to the river, full of small squares, Romanesque churches and beer halls.

Good to know

- Building began in 1248 and was completed in 1880.
- The cathedral's tower façade is 157 metres high.
- Inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1996.
- The golden Shrine of the Three Kings is behind the high altar.
- Kölsch, the local beer, is served in small 0.2-litre glasses.

From the ship

Where ships moor	On the Rhine close to the old town.
Into town	The old town is on the same bank as the cathedral and is flat and easy on foot.

Visiting the cathedral

Entry to the cathedral is free. Inside, look for the golden Shrine of the Three Kings behind the high altar and the medieval stained glass. The tower climb is the energetic option, and the view from the top is worth it.

In your own time

- Walk across the Hohenzollern Bridge, covered in lovers' padlocks, for the classic view back to the cathedral.
- Wander the old town between the cathedral and the river, past Great St Martin's Church.
- Try a Kölsch in a traditional beer hall.

Excursions often offered

- Guided walking tour of the old town and the cathedral, usually included
- Beer tasting in a Cologne brewery
- Eau de Cologne, the scent named after the city



The Rhine at sunrise with the Rheinauhafen crane houses and the cathedral in the distance



Colourful old-town houses on the riverside with Great St Martin's Church

Sources: Cologne Cathedral (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); How to spend a perfect long weekend in Cologne (Lonely Planet).

GERMANY · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 4, MOST ITINERARIES

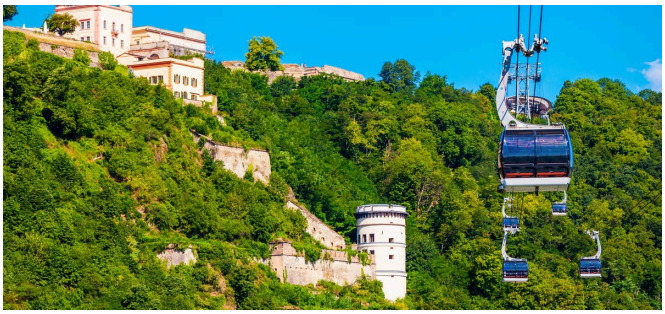
Koblenz



Koblenz takes its name from the Latin for 'the fort at the confluence', and the confluence is still the thing to see: the Deutsches Eck, a headland where the Moselle flows into the Rhine beneath a huge statue of Kaiser Wilhelm I. A cable car crosses the Rhine to Ehrenbreitstein Fortress for the view down on both rivers.

Good to know

- The name comes from the Latin Castellum apud Confluentes, the fort at the confluence.
- The Deutsches Eck is named after the Teutonic Order, which settled at the confluence in 1216.
- The monument to Kaiser Wilhelm I was inaugurated in 1897, destroyed in the Second World War and restored in 1993.
- The cable car to Ehrenbreitstein Fortress, about 890 metres long, was built for the 2011 Federal Garden Show.



The cable car climbing towards Ehrenbreitstein Fortress

Sources: The Deutsches Eck (Koblenz-Touristik); Koblenz: where rivers and empires converge (Historic Germany); Things to do in Koblenz (App Savvy Traveller); Upper Middle Rhine Valley (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

GERMANY · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 4, SEEN FROM THE SHIP

The Rhine Gorge



The 65-kilometre stretch of the Rhine between Bingen and Rüdesheim in the south and Koblenz in the north, where the river cuts through the Rhenish Slate Mountains. Castles stand on the heights, vineyards climb the terraces and small wine towns line the banks. It is a World Heritage Site and the featured location for the Rhine in this guide.

The Rhine Gorge is the featured location for the Rhine: see the feature later in this guide.

Good to know

- About 65 kilometres of the Rhine between Bingen/Rüdesheim and Koblenz, river kilometres 527 to 592.
- Inscribed as the Upper Middle Rhine Valley on the World Heritage List in 2002.
- The property includes some sixty towns and settlements and forty castles and forts.



The Loreley rock and the Rhine bend at sunset from above



Pfalzgrafenstein on its island in the Rhine at Kaub

Sources: Upper Middle Rhine Valley (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Upper Middle Rhine Valley: nomination file 1066 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

GERMANY · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 4, SEEN FROM THE SHIP

St Goar and the Loreley



St Goar and St Goarshausen face each other across the river in the heart of the gorge, each with its castle above: the ruins of Rheinfels on one side, Burg Katz on the other. Just upstream rises the Loreley, the slate rock of legend, where the Rhine is at its narrowest. Most ships sail past, slowly.

Good to know

- The Loreley is a slate rock 132 metres high on the right bank at St Goarshausen.
- The river narrows to no more than 130 metres at the Loreley, and at 20 metres this is the deepest stretch of the Middle Rhine.
- Heinrich Heine's poem about the Loreley made the legend famous.
- Rheinfels Castle above St Goar was handed over to the French revolutionary army without resistance in 1794, and blown up in 1796 and 1797.



Burg Katz above St Goarshausen

Sources: Rheinfels Castle history (Burg Rheinfels); Detours: Lorelei (Goethe-Institut); Upper Middle Rhine Valley (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Loreley (Koblenz-Touristik); Lorelei (Wikipedia).

GERMANY · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 4, MOST ITINERARIES

Rüdesheim



A wine town at the southern gate of the Rhine Gorge, in the heart of the Rheingau. The Drosselgasse, a lane of wine taverns barely 150 metres long, is the lively centre. A cable car climbs over the vineyards to the Niederwald Monument for the view across the river to Bingen.

Good to know

- The Drosselgasse is 144 metres long.
- The Niederwald Monument above the town was inaugurated in 1883.
- Siegfried's Mechanical Music Cabinet, in the Brömserhof, was the first German museum of self-playing instruments.
- The Rheingau Wine Museum is in Brömserburg castle.



A cobbled lane in Rüdesheim climbing towards the vineyards

Sources: Rüdesheim museums (German National Tourist Board); Rüdesheim: Rhine river travel (Stars and Stripes); Rüdesheim am Rhein (Wikipedia); Rüdesheim am Rhein (Wikipedia); Upper Middle Rhine Valley (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

Mainz



Mainz is the city of Johannes Gutenberg, who was born here and changed the world with printing by movable type. The Gutenberg Museum holds two of his original Bibles. The Romanesque cathedral has dominated the skyline for more than a thousand years, and the old town of half-timbered houses lies around it. The Main joins the Rhine opposite.

Good to know

- The foundation stone of Mainz Cathedral was laid in around 975.
- Johannes Gutenberg was born in Mainz around 1400.
- The Gutenberg Museum, founded in 1900, holds two original Gutenberg Bibles.
- Mainz is one of the three cities of the ShUM Sites, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2021.



Half-timbered houses in Mainz old town

Sources: Mainz: City of Gutenberg and Germany's wine capital (German National Tourist Board); The morning in Mainz (Rheinhessen Touristik); Mainz city guide (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz); Mainz (Leibniz-Zentrum für Archäologie); World Heritage List: ShUM Sites of Speyer, Worms and Mainz (2021) (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

GERMANY · DAY 5, REACHED BY COACH

Heidelberg



Heidelberg is on the Neckar rather than the Rhine, but it is one of the most popular excursions of the week, reached by coach from Mannheim, Ludwigshafen or Speyer. The ruined red castle looks down on an old town of baroque streets, and the Old Bridge crosses the river to the Philosophers' Walk. Germany's oldest university was founded here in 1386.

Good to know

- Heidelberg University, founded in 1386, is the oldest university in Germany.
- Elector Karl Theodor had the stone Old Bridge built between 1786 and 1788, after floods destroyed its wooden predecessor.



The Old Bridge gate with its twin towers

Sources: History of Heidelberg (Heidelberg Marketing); Heidelberg highlights (German National Tourist Board).

Speyer



Speyer is a quiet, handsome town dominated by its vast Romanesque cathedral, the burial place of German emperors for almost three hundred years. The broad main street, Maximilianstrasse, leads straight to the cathedral, and the medieval Jewish quarter, with its ritual bath, is part of a second World Heritage Site.

Good to know

- Speyer Cathedral was founded by Conrad II in 1030 and remodelled at the end of the eleventh century.
- Eight emperors and kings, from Conrad II to Albrecht of Habsburg in 1309, are buried in its vault.
- Inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1981.
- The Speyer Jewry-Court, with its intact underground ritual bath, is part of the ShUM Sites, inscribed in 2021.

Sources: Speyer Cathedral (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); World Heritage List: ShUM Sites of Speyer, Worms and Mainz (2021) (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

FRANCE · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 6, MOST ITINERARIES

Strasbourg



The capital of Alsace sits on an island in the River Ill, a few kilometres from the Rhine. Its pink sandstone cathedral, with a single spire, was the tallest building in the world for more than two hundred years. Around it, Petite France is a quarter of half-timbered houses, canals and covered bridges. Many ships moor at Kehl, across the Rhine in Germany.

Good to know

- The Grande-Île was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1988, and the property was extended to include the Neustadt in 2017.
- At 142 metres, the cathedral was the tallest building in the world from 1647 to 1874.
- The astronomical clock's figures appear every day at 12.30, because the clock keeps local solar time. Public viewing, with a short film, is not offered on Sundays, feast days or during the Christmas market.
- The Christkindelsmärik dates from 1570, when the city council replaced the St Nicholas market with one dedicated to the Christ Child. It is the oldest Christmas market in France.



Petite France



St Paul's Church and bridge over the Ill in autumn

Sources: History of the Strasbourg Christmas market (Strasbourg365); Strasbourg, Grande-Île and Neustadt (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); The astronomical clock (Visit Strasbourg); Strasbourg Cathedral (Wikipedia).

GERMANY · DAY 7, MOST ITINERARIES

Breisach



A small town on the German bank, halfway between Freiburg and Colmar, with St Stephen's Minster on its hill above the river. Most passengers use Breisach as the base for a day out: across the river to Colmar and the Alsace wine villages, or east into the Black Forest. Inside the minster, Martin Schongauer's Last Judgement covers the walls of the west hall.

Good to know

- Breisach lies about 60 kilometres north of Basel and 60 kilometres south of Strasbourg, halfway between Colmar and Freiburg.
- Building of St Stephen's Minster ran from the late twelfth century into the fifteenth.
- Martin Schongauer painted the Last Judgement in the minster's west hall between 1485 and his death in 1491.



Colmar's Little Venice



A Black Forest village reflected in the river

Sources: Im Blickpunkt: Die Stadt Breisach am Rhein (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg); St. Stephans-Münster, Breisach (ADAC); Unser Münster: Schongauer's Last Judgement (Münsterbauverein Breisach (Heidelberg University journals)).

SWITZERLAND · DAY 8, MOST ITINERARIES

Basel



Basel is where most Rhine cruises begin or end, at the point where Switzerland, France and Germany meet. Switzerland's third-largest city has a fine old town above the river: the red sandstone Minster with its terrace over the Rhine, and the brilliant red town hall on the Marktplatz. Small ferries cross the river driven by the current alone.

Good to know

- Basel is Switzerland's third most populous city, after Zurich and Geneva.
- The town hall on the Marktplatz is a sixteenth-century building of red sandstone.
- Four ferries cross the Rhine, each about midway between two bridges, driven by the current alone.
- Some river cruise ships moor at Huningue, on the French bank just downstream.



The Minster towers above the Rhine at sunrise



A small square and fountain in Basel old town

Sources: Rathaus, Basel (Lonely Planet); Basel (Wikipedia).

FEATURED LOCATION

The Rhine Gorge



Illustration

Sixty-five kilometres of castles, vineyard terraces and wine towns between Rüdesheim and Koblenz, and the stretch of the Rhine that everyone comes to see.

FROM MY OWN TRAVELS

Sailing the Rhine Gorge is a genuine highlight of the trip. Up on deck, we enjoyed local delicacies and regular top-ups of Glühwein while the Cruise Director's informative commentary brought each passing castle to life. That's the real beauty of river cruising: the unhurried pace means nothing feels rushed, giving you time to relax and soak it all in.

GORDON

Why the Rhine Gorge

Between Bingen and Rüdesheim in the south and Koblenz in the north, the Rhine leaves the open plain and cuts a deep, winding valley through the Rhenish Slate Mountains. For about 65 kilometres the river passes some sixty towns and villages and forty castles and forts, with vineyards terraced into the steep slopes between them. For centuries this was one of the great trade routes of Europe, and the castles were built to defend it and to tax it. UNESCO inscribed the valley as the Upper Middle Rhine Valley in 2002. From the deck of a river ship it is the Rhine at its most romantic.

Seeing it from the river

Most Amsterdam to Basel itineraries sail the gorge in daylight, usually on the day between Koblenz and Rüdesheim. Be on deck. Sailing south from Koblenz, look out for the Marksburg on its hill above Braubach, the great loop of the river at Boppard, St Goar with the ruins of Rheinfels above it and Burg Katz on the opposite bank, then the Loreley rock itself. Beyond it come the castle of Pfalzgrafenstein on its island in mid-river at Kaub, Bacharach under Stahleck Castle, and Rheinstein Castle on its rock before the valley opens out at Rüdesheim. Most lines make an event of it, with commentary on deck, and some serve local snacks and drinks as the castles go by. For many passengers it is the highlight of the week.

The Loreley

The Loreley is a slate cliff 132 metres high on the right bank at St Goarshausen, where the river bends sharply and runs narrow and deep. The rock was a danger to boatmen for centuries. The story of a golden-haired maiden who sat on the rock and lured them to their deaths was made famous by Heinrich Heine's poem, and it has been sung ever since.

A toll castle in mid-river

Pfalzgrafenstein, the white castle on its island at Kaub, was built in 1326 and 1327 by King Ludwig the Bavarian to collect tolls from passing ships, working together with Gutenfels Castle and the town of Kaub. Unlike most Rhine castles, it was never conquered or destroyed.



The Rhine Gorge, between Koblenz and Rüdesheim

The wine

The gorge is Riesling country. The Middle Rhine is one of Germany's smallest wine regions, and its vines grow almost entirely on steep slate terraces worked largely by hand. At the southern end, Rüdesheim belongs to the Rheingau, one of Germany's most celebrated Riesling regions. A tasting in Rüdesheim or Boppard is one of the most popular excursions of the week.

When to go

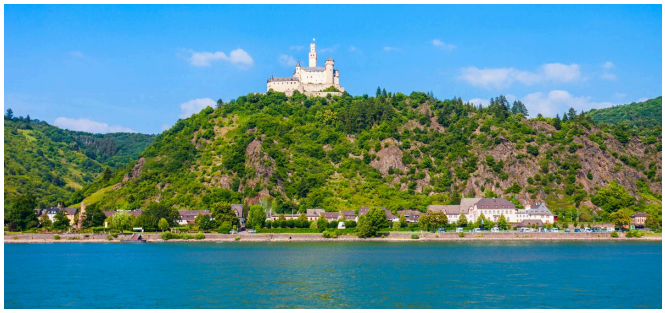
Spring brings fresh green to the vineyards, early summer the long evenings on deck, and September and October the grape harvest and autumn colour. In a very dry summer the water at Kaub, in the middle of the gorge, can fall too low for some ships, and lines then change ships or use coaches; it is worth asking about when you book a late-summer sailing. See water levels on the Rhine page.


The Loreley rock and the Rhine bend at sunset from above


Pfalzgrafenstein on its island in the Rhine at Kaub



Pfalzgrafenstein and Kaub with Gutenfels Castle and vineyard terraces above



The Marksburg on its hill above Braubach



Bacharach in autumn



Bacharach below its vineyard slopes

Sources: Upper Middle Rhine Valley (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Upper Middle Rhine Valley: nomination file 1066 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Pfalzgrafenstein Castle (Wikipedia); Detours: Lorelei (Goethe-Institut); Lorelei (Wikipedia); Mittelrhein (Wines of Germany (Deutsches Weininstitut)); Wine temptations (Romantischer Rhein Tourismus); Rheingau (Deutsches Weininstitut); Anbau robuster Rebsorten schreitet voran (DWI vineyard figures 2023) (Tageskarte); Die bestockten Rebflächen in Hessen 2025 (Hessisches Statistisches Landesamt); Rhine water levels hit record lows (Cruise Critic); Riviera Rhine low water cancellations, September 2026 (Deep Arrival).

THEME

Wine



Illustration

The Rhine passes through some of Europe's finest white wine country. Riesling is the star: in the Rheingau around Rüdesheim, where the river runs west and the vineyards face south, and on the steep slate terraces of the Rhine Gorge. Further south, Alsace lies just across the river from Strasbourg and Breisach, and the Kaiserstuhl's vineyards are close to Breisach. Wine tastings are among the most popular excursions on the route.

Where	Rüdesheim, The Rhine Gorge, Strasbourg, Breisach
When	September, October

Sources: Rheingau (Deutsches Weininstitut); Mittelrhein (Wines of Germany (Deutsches Weininstitut)); Wine temptations (Romantischer Rhein Tourismus).

THEME

Christmas markets



Mainz Christmas market at dusk

The Rhine is one of the great Christmas market rivers, and a December cruise can take in a market almost every day. In Cologne the best known stands at the foot of the cathedral. Koblenz spreads its market across seven squares of the old town. Rüdesheim's Christmas Market of Nations fills the old town and the Drosselgasse with stalls from many countries. Mainz holds its historic market on the squares around the cathedral, Speyer's runs the length of the Maximilianstrasse to the cathedral, and Strasbourg's Christkindelsmärik, first held in 1570, is the oldest in France. In Basel the market runs from the Barfüsserplatz to the Münsterplatz beside the minster. Most markets open in the second half of November and close around 23 December, though Koblenz and Speyer keep theirs open into early January. Ships moor close to the centre, so you can see the stalls lit up in the evening. Wrap up warmly.

Where	Cologne, Koblenz, Rüdesheim, Mainz, Speyer, Strasbourg, Basel
When	January, November, December
Cologne	Christmas market at Cologne Cathedral, one of several in the city November to December
Koblenz	Seven historic squares in the old town; five stay open into January November to January
Rüdesheim	Christmas Market of Nations, old town and Drosselgasse November to December
Mainz	Historic Christmas market on the cathedral squares, with smaller WinterZeit markets nearby November to December
Speyer	Christmas and New Year market along the Maximilianstrasse, from the Altpörtel to the cathedral November to January

Strasbourg	Christkindelsmärik, since 1570, oldest in France	November to December
Basel	Barfüsserplatz and Münsterplatz, about 150 stalls	November to December

Months only: dates change from year to year, so check before you book.

Sources: Weihnachtsmarkt Basel (Basel Tourismus); Christmas market at Cologne Cathedral (Cologne Tourism); Marchés de Noël 2026 dans le Grand Est (info-lux.com); Koblenz Christmas market programme (Koblenz-Touristik); Weihnachtsmarkt Programm-Plan 2025 (Koblenz-Touristik); Weihnachtsstadt Mainz 2025 (flyer) (City of Mainz); Rüdesheimer Weihnachtsmarkt der Nationen (Rüdesheim am Rhein); 50. Speyerer Weihnachts- und Neujahrsmarkt (brochure) (City of Speyer); History of the Strasbourg Christmas market (Strasbourg365).

THEME

History: castles and cathedrals



Rheinstein Castle on its rock above the Rhine

Few rivers have as many castles as the Rhine, and few have finer cathedrals. In the Rhine Gorge, forty castles and forts line a single 65-kilometre stretch, built over centuries to defend the river trade and to tax it. Along the rest of the route stand three of Europe's great cathedrals: Cologne, begun in 1248 and finished in 1880; Speyer, the burial place of German emperors; and Strasbourg, whose spire was the tallest building in the world for more than two hundred years.

Where	The Rhine Gorge, St Goar and the Loreley, Koblenz, Cologne, Speyer, Strasbourg, Mainz, Heidelberg
When	

Sources: Upper Middle Rhine Valley (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Cologne Cathedral (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Speyer Cathedral (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Strasbourg Cathedral (Wikipedia).

Let Us Help You Plan

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