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Exploring Exotic Rivers

River cruise lines have been busy adding off-the-beaten-path itineraries



Uniworld operates the 58-guest River Orchid on the Mekong River.

Over the past decade, travelers have realized that river cruising is one of the best ways to explore Europe. And now, they want to explore other places in the same manner.

So, over the past few years, river cruise companies have expanded into far-off destinations. Yangtze River cruises have long been a favorite way to see China. The Mekong River through Vietnam and Cambodia has exploded in popularity and the current hotspot is Myanmar, the country also known as Burma, which is opening up to international tourism. Travelers seeking to explore the exotic in a comfortable, familiar fashion also are heading to rivers in

Botswana and India.

Here's an overview of some of the more exotic river cruises around the world.

AMAWATERWAYS

AmaWaterways operates a division called AmaVoyages for its more exotic offerings. The six-ship fleet explores Portugal and Russia as well as more far-flung destinations. The company was a pioneer on the Mekong River in Vietnam and Cambodia, sailing between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City on the 124-passenger AmaLotus. In 2015, the company will introduce a newly built ship on the Mekong — the 124-guest AmaDara. The itineraries include an overnight on an authentic junk, stops at UNESCO World Heritage

sites, and time exploring the ancient Khmer empire.

This year, AmaWaterways introduced the 56-passenger AmaPura on the Irrawaddy River in Myanmar, offering 14- and 16-day trips that include 10- and 14-day cruises and hotel stays in Yangon.

Perhaps the most unusual option is the line's trip to Africa. AmaWaterways packaged a four-night cruise on the Chobe River in Botswana with stays in Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa, and at various safari lodges. The river cruise is operated on the 2009-built, 28-passenger Zambezi Queen and offers prime viewing from a unique perspective, especially at sunrise and sunset, of the wild animals coming to the river to drink.

AQUA EXPEDITIONS

Originally focused on the Amazon, Aqua Expeditions is expanding to the Mekong River starting in October. The newly built, 40-passenger Aqua Mekong offers three-, four- and seven-night voyages from Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and Saigon, Vietnam.

In South America, the luxury company operates two vessels on the Peruvian stretch of the Amazon River. The 32-passenger Aria Amazon and 24-guest Aqua Amazon feature three-, four- and seven-night voyages. Itineraries vary with low or high water.

AVALON WATERWAYS

Part of the Globus Family of Brands, Avalon Waterways is expanding in Asia in 2015 with two new 36-guest Suite Ships that have 245-square-foot accommodations and floor-to-ceiling windows that slide open.

The Avalon Siem Reap will enter service on the Mekong in January (replacing the Avalon Angkor) while Avalon Myanmar is expected to start cruising the Irrawaddy River in Myanmar in October 2015.

Avalon says the smaller size of the vessels gives them more flexibility. For example, the Siem Reap can sail into Ho Chi Minh City harbor, where guests then have just a short walk into the city and hotel. The Avalon Myanmar is small enough to cruise the Upper Irrawaddy.

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Avalon also offers China tours packaged with Yangtze River cruises operated by Century Cruises' Paragon and Legend (see related item). Also available are Galapagos cruises on the 42-passenger Isabela II and Amazon voyages on Aqua Expeditions' 32-guest Aria.

BELMOND

Formerly known as Orient-Express, this luxury hotel and train company also offers luxury river cruises in Myanmar onboard the 82-passenger Road to Mandalay and the 50-guest Orcaella, which was launched in June 2013.

CENTURY CRUISES

China-based Century Cruises operates seven ships on the Yangtze River. While all ships have been built since 2003, the two newest ones, the 408-passenger Century Paragon and Century Legend, both entered service in 2013. Century Cruises promises five-star onboard service

Top: Avalon Myanmar suite with open-air balcony — Avalon Waterways' Avalon Myanmar, set to enter service on the Irrawaddy River in October 2015, will boast spacious suites with floor-to-ceiling windows that slide open. Bottom: Haimark's Mekong Navigator — The 68-passenger Mekong Navigator was scheduled to enter service on Sept. 7.



and amenities, including private balconies in all cabins.

For more information: www.centuryrivercruises.com

CROISIEUROPE

Though its name obviously evokes its long-time home in Europe, this company is expanding in Asia. It has chartered the RV Indochine since 2011 from Compagnie Fluviale du Mékong, or CFM, but in March purchased the operator, which altogether sails four colonial-style ships on the Mekong. Now the company is called CFM by CroisiEurope and is building two more vessels in Vietnam.

HAIMARK LTD.

A new company, Haimark plans to introduce three Asia river ships by January — including one on the Ganges River in India — with more on the horizon after that.

The company also plans to introduce the 56-passenger Irrawaddy Explorer on Sept. 3 in Myanmar and the 68-guest Mekong Navigator on Sept. 7 to operate in Vietnam and Cambodia.

On Jan. 3, Haimark will launch river cruising in India. The 56-passenger Ganges Voyager will operate seven-night round-trips from Kolkata, India, and offers land extensions to Delhi and Varanasi and/or the Golden Triangle of Jaipur, Agra and Delhi. A second vessel, the Ganges Voyager II, is scheduled to enter service on Jan. 6, 2016.

The company also is building a unique "spa concept ship" that will accommodate just 24 people in 12 suites. The Mekong Princess is scheduled to enter service on Sept. 10, 2015, with an extensive spa menu.

Haimark also has its sights set on destinations beyond Asia. It plans to introduce the 44-guest, all-suite Amazon Discovery on Oct. 5, 2015, on the Peruvian Amazon to operate six-night voyages.

PANDAW RIVER CRUISES

Pandaw operates 12 replicas of colonial river steamers on the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers in Myanmar (Burma) and on the Mekong River through Cambodia and Vietnam. The ships, many of which are built in Burma, have an average age of about four years and carry 60 or fewer passengers. This summer, the company hired Global Voyages Group (GVG) in

Seattle to help reach North American travelers and travel agents.

TAUCK

Well known for its tour offerings, Tauck operates a growing river fleet in Europe but also farther afield. For example, Tauck offers land-and-river packages in Myanmar on Belmond's Road to Mandalay and on China's Yangtze River on the 124-guest Yangzi Explorer.

UNIWORLD BOUTIQUE RIVER CRUISE COLLECTION

In 2015, Uniworld will operate the 15-day Timeless Wonders of Vietnam, Cambodia & the Mekong on the 58-guest River Orchid. The company also offers 11- to 18-day trips to China that include Yangtze River cruises on the Century Legend and Paragon.

VICTORIA CRUISES

This company operates four- to nine-day Yangtze River cruises with a fleet of seven ships that were awarded the five-star rating from the China National Tourism Administration. The ships are new or newly renovated and now also offer the optional Executive Amenities Program, which includes VIP additions such as access to exclusive areas on the ship, complimentary Wi-Fi access, enhanced dining privileges, shoe shine service and reserved seating for evening entertainment. They also offer private balconies.

The Victoria Katarina recently completed its second renovation since 2010 and now features a modern appearance, new furniture and a full-service spa and salon.

VIKING RIVER CRUISES

Beyond Europe, Viking offers cruises on the rivers of China, Southeast Asia and Egypt. In China, the company operates the 256-passenger Viking Emerald on 13- to 18-day cruise-tours. A highlight is the 16-day "Roof of the World" trip, which includes a six-day Yangtze River cruise and a flight to Lhasa on the Tibetan plateau in the Himalayas.

In Southeast Asia, the 56-guest Viking Mekong runs a cruise as part of the 15-day "Magnificent Mekong" land-cruise package.

Refurbished in 2013, the 60-passenger Viking Mandalay offers 11-day Irrawaddy River cruises as part of a 16-day package. 🌐