



Story and photos
by Laurie Carter

on the River Rollin'

My husband's next milestone birthday was closing in and, wanting to make it a particularly memorable occasion, I decided to take him on a very special surprise trip. This may seem like an odd choice for a couple of travel writers, sort of a busman's holiday, but it actually makes a lot of sense. Giving Bruce a real vacation—a sightseeing trip like normal people enjoy with no dawn-til-way-past-dusk schedules, no elbowing other journalists out of the

shot, no polite nodding and smiling at the interminable speeches of local dignitaries—would be a rare treat. I set my campaign in motion as we watched episodes of Rick Steves' on PBS. Europe was already established as my general target (we'd never travelled there together), and Rick's shows gave me the chance to casually discuss specifically where Bruce would like to visit. Before long I knew that he longed for a

return to Amsterdam for the art, the architecture and the Amstel. Excellent, Amsterdam would fit perfectly into the plan. (Did I forget to mention my tiny, little personal agenda—a river cruise.) With a dozen big ship voyages from Cape Horn to the Baltic under my lifebelt, I'd been dying to marry the one-bed, one-packing comfort of floating travel with a tour of Old World sights in the heart of Europe. And Amsterdam



happens to be the terminus of one of the best river cruises of all—the Rhine. I called my travel agent.

Fast forward six months to Basel, Switzerland, where I'm walking along the quayside with a guy who's entering a new decade in his life with a very big smile on his face. Privately, I'm feeling extremely relieved that my brilliant plan didn't fizzle because I'd left it too late. Half a year proved barely enough time to secure a booking on one of these very popular itineraries.

Viking Sun is waiting for us, long, sleek and gleaming white on an

early May afternoon. I look around for the kind of cruise terminal I'm used to, where thousands converge during the hours of organized pre-boarding chaos, but there is none. A little puzzled, I lead the way to the gangplank, each of us trundling a single bag (you can travel light on these cruises—no formal wear required). We're greeted by several crewmembers. One takes charge of our luggage, another offers a cheery welcome and tells us to go ahead and board. That's it. We enter the lobby atrium, find the desk and register, just like checking into a hotel.

This no-fuss entree to shipboard life is only the first of many advantages to river cruising we'll find. On a cozy four-deck vessel with a mere 198 passengers, everything is easier. It doesn't take long to explore our new digs. Everywhere huge windows let in light and glimpses of river traffic and the city beyond. A gourmet coffee station in the upper atrium will become the centre of a morning ritual involving café au lait and chocolate croissants carried back to our cabin to expand our waistlines as we watch the world slide by and slowly start our day (big breakfast

in the dining room to follow).

One element this cruise shares with its big ship cousins is the focus on food. Served in a dining room that takes up most of the forward section of Deck 2, where not a single seat is deprived of a view, breakfast and dinner are a one-seating, join-any-table-you-like affair. Lunch is served buffet style, sometimes on the expansive sundeck, and every meal celebrates the cuisine of the four countries we touch: Switzerland, France, Germany and the Netherlands.

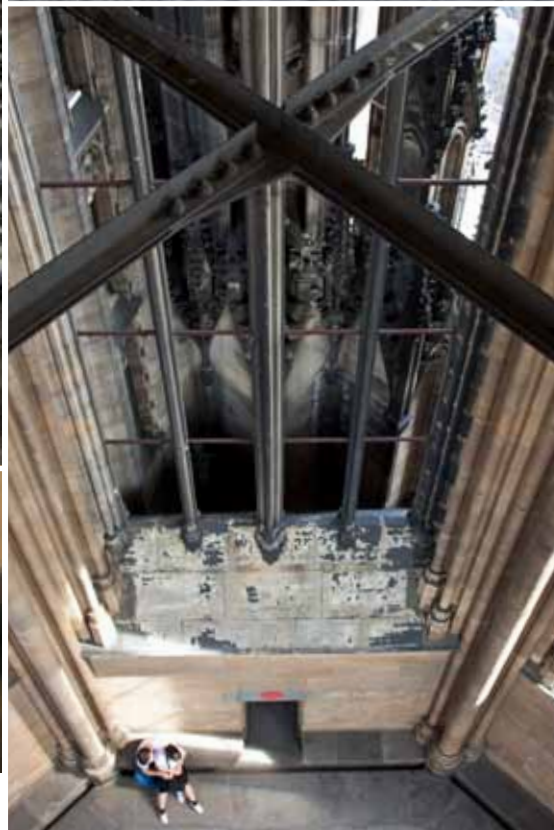
I've splurged on accommodations (this is, after all, Bruce's XXth

birthday bash) and sprung for the top deck French balcony stateroom with floor-to-ceiling patio door window. We have a small table and two chairs that we can turn to face the river; there's plenty of storage even for all of our camera gear and laptops (OK, so no travel journalist is ever completely off duty); and the bathroom actually provides enough elbow room for a reasonable shower.

Bruce is clearly delighted and I'm left with just one concern about how my cruise virgin will enjoy the trip. Knowing how overjoyed he is by group touring, I'm wor-

ried that this key element of the river cruise experience will turn him off. But I figure we'll give it a try and if he looks murderous after the first day, we'll ditch the group and do our own shore excursions.

What I hadn't factored into my worry-equation was Viking's most brilliant touring feature. For sure, the small number of passengers makes the whole exercise of disembarking, finding the right bus and getting away a snap, but the real kicker is the individual audio guide. On the desk in our cabin we find two audio receivers standing in chargers. As



instructed, we take them along when we join the group for our Black Forest tour. Then the magic begins.

For the first time in all our travels, Bruce and I know what's going on. Let me clarify. Being photographers, we're always pulling up the rear, straggling behind the group, miles from the tour guide who is pointing out a medieval fresco or the way to the nearest toilet. But with our personal radios tuned to the guide's frequency, we hear every golden word. Brilliant! No murderous looks from Bruce. We join the tours every day.

We're often given an overview by bus, then follow our guide through narrow cobbled lanes and gothic cathedral naves before exploring on our own. We see cuckoo clocks and stork nests, baroque angels and stone saints, hidden vineyards and lively squares. On the river we float past castles on the Rhine and a thousand barges loaded with the commerce of the European heartland.

I won't forget the creamy richness of real quiche lorraine with a glass of Alsatian white at a sidewalk café in Strasbourg, or sweating and scrambling for footholds on my personal

533 stone-step ascent of Cologne's cathedral bell tower while Bruce bravely researches the local beer at a nearby brauhaus. When I join him, quads and thirst burning equally, he recommends a tall cold one and an order of buttery schnitzel.

As we cross the Rhine on a cable car in Koblenz, the evening sun sets the river ablaze and in the lowlands at Kinderdijk we go Dutch and pedal our rental bikes among the windmills and tourists. Hard to believe that our arrival in Amsterdam is actually just the beginning of Bruce's special birthday present. **OL**