

Last year's announcement that Crystal was to launch a river cruise line marked a turning point for the company; a sign that the luxury operator was keen to make its mark on one of the industry's fastest-growing segments. But several months on, the company has further ratcheted up its ambition for Crystal River Cruises ahead of the big maiden voyage in June. Patrick Kingsland looks at how the lines will set themselves apart from the competition.

Crystal clear: the path to river cruising

Anounced in the auspicious circumstances of the company's 25th anniversary cruise trip around the Scandinavian coastline, the news that Crystal would be launching an all-new brand with an all-new focus, Crystal River Cruises, was one of 2015's real surprise developments in the industry.

"We continue to listen to what our guests, and the luxury traveller, want, and river cruises are what they've been telling us they want for some time," CEO Edie Rodriguez declared in July. "But more

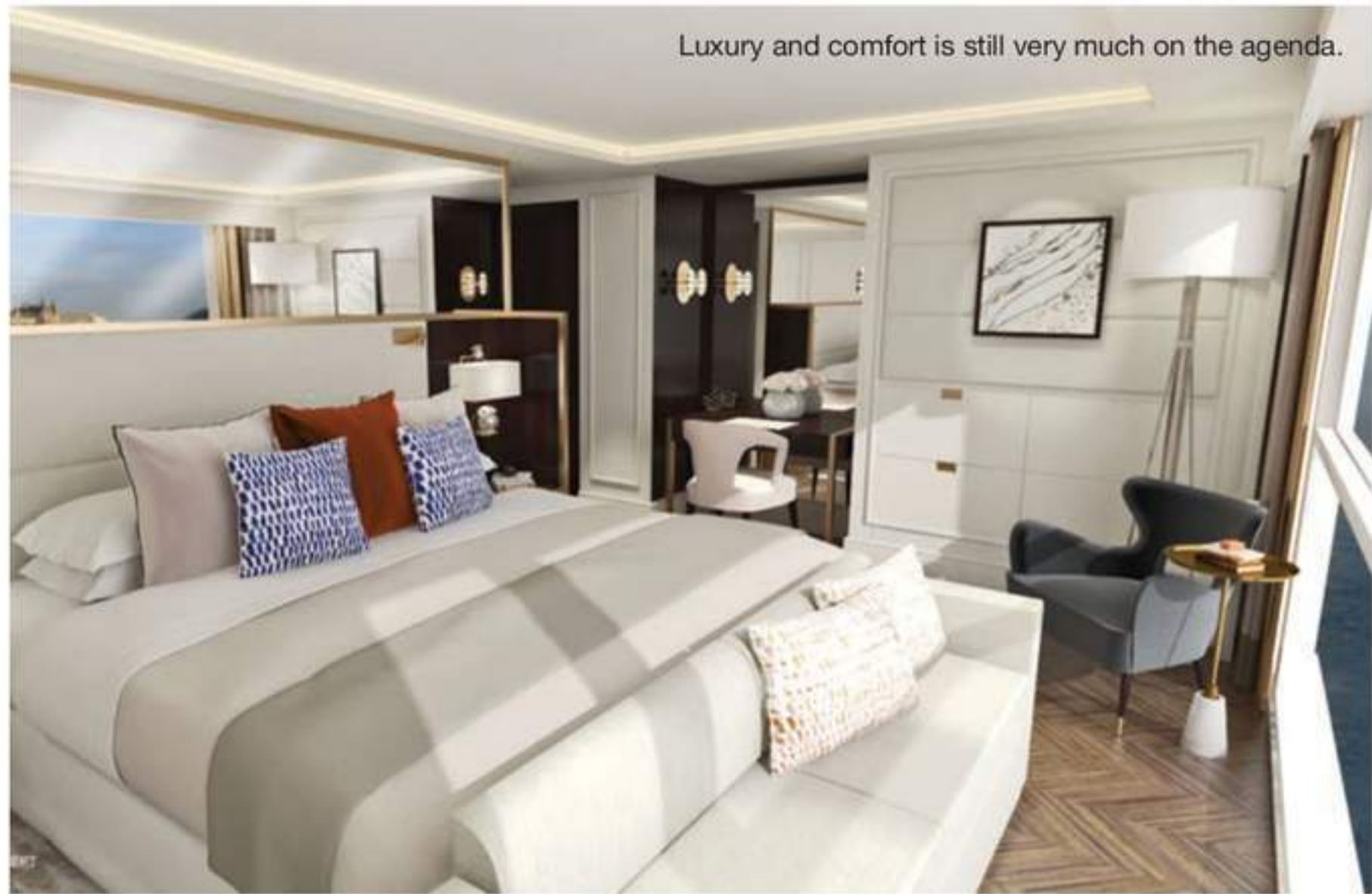
importantly, they want to experience river cruises on a luxury Crystal vessel. It's a natural extension of the exceptional ocean cruise Crystal has offered for the past 25 years."

The deal was part of a major expansion of the company's operations, which includes the building of three new ships (two of which will serve as river cruises and are Crystal's first new builds in 12 years), and adds a new yacht cruises division, a private airplane and a mini-submarine to its offering.

But it was the announcement in November last year that the operator would be launching not two but five new ships (four of which will be new builds) for its range of river cruises, and that the line would set sail a year earlier than expected, that really got people talking. The self-proclaimed "World's Most Awarded Luxury Cruise Line" is kicking off the brand on 13 July with *Crystal Mozart*, the result of the purchase by Crystal of *MS Mozart*.

A symphony of construction

Built in 1987 and refurbished as recently as 2010, the ship is currently under renovation



Luxury and comfort is still very much on the agenda.

by its new owners, before a tour of Austria's Danube River and the historic cities along the way, from Vienna to Linz, Salzburg and the Wachau Valley, and on to Budapest.

It's a route the ship is well acquainted with: it was designed specifically to fit the wide locks of the Danube, measuring

75.1ft, and it accommodates 160 guests in all, with window suites (203ft²), deluxe suites (215ft²), one penthouse suite (322ft²) and two two-bedroom Crystal suites (860ft²), the biggest suite on any river vessel, on board the largest such vessel in Europe. For a new brand looking to make

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its mark on the continent, statements of intent don't come much bigger.

"It's truly thrilling for us, as well as our loyal guests and new-to-Crystal travellers,

as more details of what's in store for Crystal River Cruises unfold," Rodriguez says. "We are going to deliver the most luxurious river experience in the industry

with a combination of innovative vessel designs, unmatched guest service and fascinating itineraries."

The rest of the specially designed all-suite river yachts are being built by German shipyard Lloyd Werft, and accommodate 84, 110 or 160 guests, depending on itinerary. With walk-in wardrobes and US king-size beds as well as, for those really wanting to shell out, two 500ft² penthouse suites and a palm court with a dance floor, it's safe to say that guests can expect the kind of luxurious service that's become synonymous with the Crystal brand.

"Crystal River Cruises completely reimagines the very notion of river cruising with the most luxurious, spacious state-of-the-art river yachts, marrying the award winning amenities of the all-inclusive Crystal experience with the nuanced exclusivity of river travel," is the official marketing line. "Spacious suites with exquisitely designed interiors and elegant public rooms will punctuate Crystal's entry into worldwide river cruising."



Crystal Mozart will take a new category of the company's guests down river.



Riverboats will soon be a major line for Crystal as they set sail down European canals.

Crystal Debussy: what we know so far

- Crystal Debussy will set sail in mid-2017 on the Seine, Garonne and Dordogne rivers.
- Crystal Debussy's 84 passengers can expect luxury-level dining, service and accommodations. Cabins range in size from 220 to 750ft² and boast walk-in closets and first-in-industry king beds.
- Cruisers can dance in Palm Court, the ship's glass-domed atrium area, find a new tome to read in the on-board library, or pay a visit to the gym or spa. All public areas will be housed on the same deck.
- In terms of activities, Crystal River Cruises offers active and cultural excursions on all of its ships. Tours also include night-time Michelin-starred dining onshore on evenings when the riverboats spend the night in ports.
- Those cruisers who enjoy water sports are in luck; Crystal Debussy carries kayaks and personal watercrafts for free passenger use. Electric bicycles are also available for anyone wishing to explore port independently.

Fleet management

The five river yachts each take their name from a famous composer related to their tour: *Crystal Mozart* will be followed by the maiden journey of *Crystal Debussy* in June 2017, followed by *Bach*, *Ravel* and *Mahler* between June and August. In all, the line will cover some of Europe's most recognisable rivers – the Danube, the Rhine, Main, Moselle, Garonne, the Dordogne and the Seine.

Each ship will include what Crystal claims will be its most "generous roster of all-inclusive amenities", ranging from its signature "six-star" cuisine with local flair and a range of tailored excursions available at every stop, all offering high-tech exploration aides like GPS Whisper Guides and electronically assisted bikes. Guests will even be able to use a luxury yacht tender to arrange trips outside of the predetermined cruise itinerary – all part of Crystal's ambition to create more "meaningful shore-side excursions and experiences" than what are usually on offer.

One of the most in-demand stop-offs on the *Crystal Mozart* trip will no doubt be the Czech Republic's Cesky Krumlov during the break in Linz: a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a historic medieval town with a towering castle and regionally

renowned wine. And oenophiles have plenty of other options, too. *Crystal Ravel*, for example, due to set sail in August 2017, will take guests on a round trip of the Bordeaux region, with excursions in the historic town of Pauillac, Cadillac and Libourne, among others.

While we'll have to wait until June for the first reviews to come in, it's obvious that Crystal is pulling out all the stops in bringing its renowned luxury experience and service to European river cruising. But it's the destinations that make the new line so in demand, with guests given the opportunity to visit some of Europe's most historic cities: the ships will make stops in Amsterdam, Basel, Munich, Budapest and Bordeaux, among others. The longest of the tours, the *Crystal Mahler* – named for the brooding Austrian composer and modernist pioneer – will set sail on 29 August 2017 and will take guests, over the course of 16 nights, down the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal, a trip stretching from Hungary to the Netherlands.

"With unmatched space and luxury, the river yachts of Crystal boast a butler for

every suite, superb cuisine, and expertly curated itineraries with an abundance of overnight stays and complimentary Crystal adventures ashore in every port of call," reads the promotional material. "Nothing is compromised, no detail too small, no experience too much."

It's a bold promise, and with this being the first time a high-end cruise company like Crystal is entering the river cruise market with its own ships, expectations are high. But the company's done everything in its

power to set itself apart from the competition, even purposefully deviating from traditional routes on these European rivers.

"The beauty of river cruising is not only that travellers enjoy close-up access to more fascinating inland locales, but also that the rivers themselves are coveted destinations that shouldn't be overlooked," says Rodriguez. "Our guests will have the opportunity to revel in the unique environment that sets river cruising apart from other travel experiences." ■

The growth of river cruising

Traditionally, river cruising was largely the preserve of the very wealthy but, since the 1990s, demand has grown rapidly as more operators have entered the European market.

Cruises on the Rhine and the Danube remain the most popular, according to River Cruises in Europe, but the Rhone in France is catching up.

CLIA reports that its members currently deploy 170 river cruise ships with 18 new river cruise ships on order for 2016, an increase of more than 10% from the previous year.

The sector has been a catalyst for new-build construction in recent years. Viking Cruises alone added six new 'longships' to its fleet in 2012, ten in 2013, 18 in 2014 and 12 in 2015. In a reversal of Crystal's move, the operator has also moved into ocean cruising. In 2015, its first seafaring ship, *Viking Star*, sailed itineraries in Scandinavia and the Baltic, and on the Mediterranean Sea. In March 2016 and 2017, the company will launch *Viking Sea* and *Viking Sky* respectively, the former of which had its first float out in June 2015.



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Building ships for over a century

Since 1889, **Shipyard De Hoop** has remained at the cutting edge of passenger-vessel design. Now, as the river cruising sector booms, *World Cruise Industry Review* talks to CEO Patrick Janssens about the capabilities and innovations on board the shipyard's latest creation, the *MS Amadeus Silver III*.

“Shipyard De Hoop has always valued a personal approach,” the company’s CEO, Patrick Janssens, reflects. “Although in some years we have sustained half a million labour hours, our shipyard is run as a flat, professional organisation. All in all, it means that we can devote extra time to cultivating our long-term relationships with our existing customers. And a crucial part of this relationship involves playing the role of a sparring partner by making custom designs suitable for our client’s future ventures.”

From its foundation on a site beside the Waal River, through to its wholesale destruction during the Second World War and its subsequent resurrection in the new Netherlands that emerged, the model of a small, tightly wound shipyard has sustained Shipyard De Hoop for almost 130 years. In 2004, Janssens was hired as the company’s CEO to instil a new emphasis on innovative shipbuilding. Now, as the European river cruise sector experiences a boom, De Hoop is set to roll out its latest vessel, which it hopes will become a template for the industry at large.

“The *MS Amadeus Silver III* incorporates innovations ranging from noise management and vibration reduction, to sewage management, fuel economy and the optimum use of public spaces.”

“In the past few years, we’ve seen the market explode,” says Janssens. “Many new vessels have been built for the sector and, consequently, passengers have been spoiled for choice. Fundamentally, however, they’re looking for greater levels of comfort than they would otherwise experience on an ocean-going voyage. Often this is sought in the form of more spacious cabins with full climate control, flatscreen televisions with accompanying entertainment systems, large closets, comfortable lounge chairs, and no interference from ships noise and vibrations.”

Under construction

Shipyard De Hoop has acted on all of these recommendations in its construction of the *MS Amadeus*

Silver III for Lueftner Cruises: 135m from stem to stern, the vessel includes 12 large suites with external balconies and 72 normal cabins with panoramic views of the river, complete with spacious bathrooms and walk-in wardrobes. “We also went to great lengths in keeping the design cost-effective, and easy for the crew to maintain and operate,” says Janssens. “By building and designing in close cooperation with Lueftner Cruises, the series of *Amadeus* vessels has developed a character of their own. The concept of these vessels links very strongly to the services of the company and this gives a distinct and special experience for the passengers. They belong to the ‘*Amadeus family*’, so to say.”

In fact, the *MS Amadeus Silver III* incorporates engineering and design lessons from all 11 of the predecessors in its class that Shipyard De Hoop has built for Lueftner Cruises. “The *MS Amadeus Silver III* incorporates innovations ranging from noise management and vibration reduction, to sewage management, fuel economy and the optimum use of public spaces,” says Janssens. “A continuous emphasis on research and development allows us to also surprise clients with our design features. We need and want to do more than only the initial commission from the client.”

Believe in better

All in all, the Shipyard De Hoop CEO believes that the order is reflective of a broad groundswell of enthusiasm for the European river cruise sector more generally, as passengers from across the continent stay away from ocean-going cruise destinations across the Middle East and North Africa in favour of journeys closer to home. “Inland cruising gives passengers the luxury feel of being on a small ship without having the disadvantages of extreme long journeys, which inevitably involve high winds and waves,” says Janssens. “As the main European rivers are getting busier, it will lead to other, smaller rivers opening up for cruise travel.” ■

Further information

Shipyard De Hoop
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