

# GROWING AUSTRALIAN MARKET DRIVES DESIGN OF NEW RIVER CRUISE VESSELS



Avalon in Budapest

By Ian McMahon

RIVER cruise operators agree that the design of their ships is severely restricted by such factors as the minimum width of rivers, the minimum height of bridges and the need to negotiate locks and weirs.

But despite this, or perhaps because of it, they also recognise that design features are key marketing factors.

For example, APT has built 10 river cruise ships since 2006 with another two under construction, and the company's founder Geoff McGeary acknowledges that Australian clients perceive balconies as added value.

He is personally sceptical about the real value balconies bring to river cruising where, by contrast with ocean cruising, passengers spend most of their time on deck viewing the passing countryside.

But the customer is always right and as a result, McGeary told last month's Cruiseco conference, his company's vessels now offer a choice of French balconies, open balconies and twin balconies.

This month APT has launched

the second of its Concerto class ships, *AmaVerde*, a 161-passenger vessel offering what APT calls its "revolutionary" twin balcony suites (one indoor and one outdoor).

Next month Avalon Waterways will launch *Avalon Panorama*, its new "suite ship" featuring two decks of all-suite accommodation, "offering wall-to-wall panoramic windows that transform the entire suite into an open-air balcony", according to the company.

Avalon's Sydney-based managing director for Australia Stewart Williams proudly told Cruiseco agents that he had crucial input into the *Panorama* design which was developed with the Australian market at front of mind.

He favoured panoramic windows "because you can enjoy them in any weather unlike open air balconies". And he was personally responsible for ensuring that suites have been configured with beds facing the water "so that when you open your panoramic windows in the morning, they open to a river vista".

Williams and McGeary were two members of a high-powered panel contributing to a session on river cruising at last month's Cruiseco conference.

Other panel members included Avalon's Los Angeles-based managing director Patrick Clark, Viking River Cruises Sydney-based managing director Teresia Fors and Uniworld Boutique River Cruises' Los Angeles-based president Guy Young.

Echoing McGeary's and Williams' insistence that the design of their companies' new ships is geared to Australian travellers' requirements, Young said the emphasis on balconies is being driven by Australia "more than any country in the world".

But he told the Cruiseco agents it is important their Australian clients understand river cruising is a different experience from ocean cruising and all companies have to balance a limited amount of space for cabins and public areas.

Why do Australians wield such market power? A large part of the answer came with this month's release of the International Cruise Council of Australasia's (ICCA's) cruise statistics.

These showed that the number of Australians taking river cruises in 2010 grew by 12 per cent to 28,587 – more than those buying Americas, Alaska or round-the-world ocean cruises.

Not that the Australian market is obsessively pre-occupied with balconies to the exclusion of other features.

McGeary, for example, noted "whirlpools becoming swimming pools" and the provision of a variety of dining experiences. (His company's publicity material for its new Concerto class ships points to their "onboard swimming pool, fireside library and intimate chef's table restaurant seating only 24 people complete with private chef".)

However Fors was applauded by the agents for her passionate address to the conference pointing out that, above all, it is experiences and destinations that motivate clients to take river cruises.

"They want to learn and do new things," she said.

"Yes, it is an older market but they are active and they want to immerse themselves in the local culture ... In Budapest, for example, we provide a local guide and arrange a visit to the local market where the chefs are buying produce for the evening dinner."

Nevertheless Fors also told her Cruiseco audience that Viking planned to launch four new vessels next year – and another four over the next three years – and she acknowledged that Australians are "first movers in travel" and "you can't get around" the fact that balconies are important to them.

Just a few weeks later Viking unveiled its new "Longship" class with three quarters of staterooms featuring a veranda, French balcony or both.

While Europe accounts for the vast majority of river cruise passengers – around 85 per cent in the case of APT – river cruising is also becoming a growing part of other destinations' product offerings. In China, for example, Yangtze River cruising is helping to underpin Australian market growth for the destination. (See China report, pages 24-28)

Companies are also aiming to diversify their Europe offerings beyond the Amsterdam-Budapest staple.

APT, for example, will next year introduce a Rhine-Rhone itinerary into its Europe program and McGeary said the company is increasing its presence on the Nile, planning a return to Russia and an entry to the Mekong in 2012. It is also studying the potential of the Amazon.

Viking programs, meanwhile, not only offer river cruises in Europe but also Russia, China, Southeast Asia and Egypt.

# Our new 'Longships' will have Europe's largest real suites says Viking

VIKING River Cruises will next year launch four new river cruise ships which, the company claims will have the largest real suites in Europe.

"By shifting the corridor one metre and reorienting the staterooms to create additional space, the new Viking Longships will boast the largest real suites in Europe – featuring separate sleeping and living rooms in each of its Explorer Suites and Veranda Suites – as well as more full-size rooms and full-size verandas than other European river cruise vessels," the company announcement stated.

"Plus, three-quarters of staterooms will feature a veranda, French balcony or both."

Viking says the launch of the four new state-of-the-art ships represents the next phase of its \$US250 million fleet development program.

Named after key members of the Norse pantheon, *Viking Freya*, *Viking Idun*, *Viking Njord* and *Viking Odin* will be the first of the line's "Longships" and will reflect the long and graceful design of ancient Scandinavian vessels.

But while evoking Scandinavia's proud seafaring heritage, Viking assures

that the new class of vessel "is marked by sophisticated and inviting design coupled with high-tech and patent-pending features ... and amenities that reflect guest preferences and travel trends".

Designed by celebrated maritime architects Yran & Storbraaten – the team behind the *Disney Dream* and the *Yachts of Seabourn* – they will be 443 feet (135 metres) long, and feature 95 staterooms per ship.

Major features include:

- Two "Explorer" suites, claimed to be the largest river cruise suites in Europe at 445 square feet, each featuring a separate living room, bedroom, bathroom and private wraparound veranda, offering 270-degree views;
- Seven 270-square-foot "Veranda" suites with full-size verandas in the living room and French balconies in the bedroom;
- 39 "Veranda" staterooms with full-size verandas at 205 square feet;
- Sustainability upgrades such as energy-efficient hybrid engines, solar panels and an onboard organic herb garden;
- A new all-weather indoor/outdoor

Aquavit Terrace with retractable floor-to-ceiling glass doors; and

■ Al fresco dining areas on the upper deck, adjacent to the lounge to present more dining choices to guests.

*'What has emerged are vessels that will deliver a peerless travel opportunity to aficionados of river cruising ...' – Torstein Hagen*

They are scheduled to sail four of Viking's most popular European itineraries, including the 10-day "Tulips and Windmills", eight-day "Romantic Danube", 15-day "Grand European" and eight-day "Danube Waltz".

"This is the second time in a decade that Viking River Cruises has engaged in four new ship builds in one season – an accomplishment that no other river cruise company has matched since Viking did it in 2001," the company's announcement said.

Viking chairman and chief executive Torstein Hagen claimed: "Innovation

has been a hallmark of how Viking River Cruises has grown its business from its inception.

"We were the first to introduce hotel-style beds in Russia, the first to design purpose-built ships to navigate the Elbe, the first to introduce hybrid engines that deliver a quieter and more peaceful experience to guests with *Viking Legend* and the first to operate Western-style ships on China's Yangtze, amongst many other firsts.

"For our 2012 new builds, we have stretched ourselves creatively and technologically, evaluating every aspect of the guest's cruising experience and asking ourselves how we can surpass it.

"What has emerged are vessels that will deliver a peerless travel opportunity to aficionados of river cruising and those that have yet to try this unique way to see the world."

Viking's Sydney-based managing director for Australia and New Zealand, Teresia points out that the company pays agents commission on everything they sell and agents earn their commission prior to sailing date.

She says commissions average more than \$1000 per booking.

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# 'Suite ship' gives a boost to Avalon's 'exceptional' 2011

NEXT month's launch of Avalon Waterways first "suite ship" comes during "an exceptional year" for the river cruise company, according to Christian Schweitzer, marketing manager Australasia for the Globus family of brands (including Avalon).

"Our 2011 European river cruise bookings are currently 20 per cent up on this time last year and we're on track to achieve one of our best ever years in the Australian market," he said.

The new *Avalon Panorama* is scheduled for a May 14 launch by Nine Network *Today* show host Lisa Wilkinson.

"The new 'suite ship' concept was designed with the Australian market in mind and has been extremely well-received here," said Schweitzer.

"Panorama's entire main season program sold out within a few months of its release last year and more than 50 per cent of its bookings are from Australia and New Zealand.

"*Panorama* is more luxurious and provides 30 per cent more cabin space than its average competitor, yet its pricing is only marginally more than other ships and the market has



Panorama Suite

been quick to exploit this. Its open-air balcony is proving very popular, effectively turning the entire cabin into a balcony without sacrificing space. We think the design of *Avalon Panorama* has set the standard for future river cruise ships."

The vessel includes two decks of all-suite accommodation, offering wall-to-wall panoramic windows that transform the entire suite into an open-air balcony.

*Avalon Panorama* will operate the 15-

day "Magnificent Europe" itinerary on the Danube and Rhine – Avalon's most popular itinerary among Australian travellers – sailing between Amsterdam and Budapest.

Each of her 64 suites will offer more than 18 square metres of space, designed to create a lounge area with room for entertaining and in-room dining.

The wall-to-wall panoramic windows are 3m wide and 2m from floor-to-ceiling. They offer sheltered views of

the passing scenery or can be opened to create a vast open-air balcony without compromising cabin space.

■ Avalon Waterways is offering savings of up to \$2000 per couple on select 2011 European river cruises.

The specials are available on dozens of departures between June and August, with nine different itineraries to choose from on the Rhine, Danube, Seine and Rhône.

They include six departures of the popular "Legendary Danube" cruise, an 11-day itinerary from Prague to Budapest, now priced from \$3348 per person (twin share).

■ For 2012 Avalon has released specials for groups of eight or more with a bonus offer giving one person the chance to travel free in every new booking of 10 on any European river cruise.

Avalon has also opened pre-registrations for individual travellers in 2012.

"In coming weeks we'll announce further new initiatives including new itineraries and destinations, with the release of Avalon's 2012 program," said Schweitzer.



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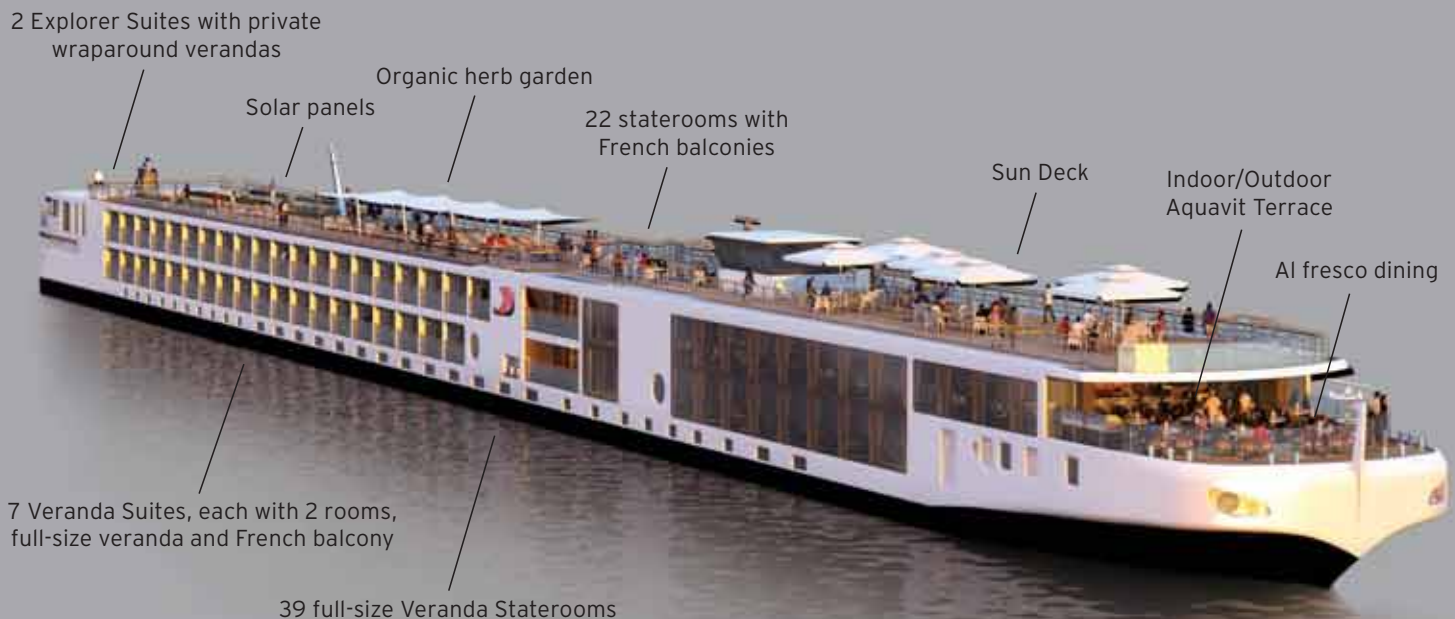
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## Special offers boost recovering Nile cruise demand

WITH the Australian Government watering down its advisory against travel to Egypt, demand for Nile cruises as a key component of Egypt tours is steadily rising. Helping to boost this recovering demand, companies have a number of attractive offers on the market.

For example, Abercrombie and Kent says its "Nile in Style Platinum" offer enables couples to save up to \$4200.

A&K's announcement pointed out: "In February, we watched as one of the most dramatic events in Egyptian history unfolded, giving rise to an exciting period of democratic change.

"Travellers have shown their support for the process by returning to this fascinating destination. The lack of crowds means that there has never been a better time to visit and enjoy the world-class sights, engage with Egyptian culture and feel the vibrant energy of a new Egypt."

Echoing this upbeat assessment, APT general manager marketing Debra Fox said: "Since the unrest, we are confident Egypt is returning to our market."

As also detailed in the Eastern Mediterranean feature, Insight Vacations, Tempo Holidays, Bunnik Tours and Bench International are among other operators who are again promoting Nile river cruises.

However, at press time, Avalon Waterways marketing manager Christian Schweitzer advised: "Avalon continues to monitor the situation in Egypt and will consider developments further before deciding upon a future resumption of Nile cruises."

## APT plans 'exclusive' Rhine-Rhone offering

APT is claiming an exclusive Australian market first for its 2012 Europe river cruising program with the introduction of new Rhine-Rhone cruises.

The cruises are detailed in APT's 24-page 2012 Europe river cruising preview brochure, launched four months ahead of its usual June release date.

The new Paris to Monte Carlo and Barcelona to Paris packages will include cruising on the Rhine in Germany and Switzerland and the Rhone in France, connected by an APT land journey through Switzerland.

APT will use Aria Class ships *Amacello* (Rhine) and *Amadagio* (Rhone) on 15, 18 and 21-day itineraries across a 2012 March-November season. APT connects the cruises with a land journey through Switzerland.

Other 2012 cruises listed in the brochure include 15-day "Magnificent Europe" (Amsterdam to Budapest), 18 and 21-day "Magnificent Europe - with Prague and Paris", 25-day "Eastern Bloc and Magnificent Europe", 28-day "Switzerland and Magnificent Europe", 31-day "Italy and Magnificent Europe" and 27-day "Croatia and The Balkan Peninsula".

The brochure also introduces the APT "Platinum Series", replacing "Exclusive Sailings", featuring inclusions such as champagne on arrival, room service dining and butler services (on select suites).

This year, meanwhile, APT has

Amabella with butler service



launched its second "Concerto class" ship for Europe cruising, released new themed cruises towards the end of the season and introduced new cruises over Christmas-New Year.

The themed cruises, based on the 15-day "Magnificent Europe" itinerary, cover food-wine, the arts, music and photography with hosts including celebrity chef Jacques Reymond, performer Rhonda Burchmore, historian Professor Charles Zika, and photographer Emmanuel Santos.

The White Christmas and New Year's Eve themed package will be hosted by art-culture-history raconteur Kenneth W Park. All depart during the September-December 2011 season.

For the Christmas season, APT has

listed 42 departures between November 22 and December 30 ranging from 10 days to 21 days.

This month's launch of Concerto class ship, *AmaVerde*, brings the company's central Europe fleet to eight vessels and has provided the company with additional inventory for a heavily-booked 2011 season, said APT general manager marketing Debra Fox.

"We're building our own ships for Russia and the Mekong River and have secured a Yangtze River ship that aligns with our standards," she added.

Fox said the initiatives were intended to establish APT as a leader in river cruising. "All this development has been driven by demand from customers," she said.

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Pandaw cruising in Mekong

## Pandaw to add 'safari' style cruises

PANDAW River Cruises, best known as a Vietnam operator, is working to add new Southeast Asian destination and new "safari" style offerings to its program.

Pandaw founder Paul Strachan says the safari cruises will be operated by new K-class vessels which will be smaller, lighter vessels capable of "deeper" exploration.

He envisages them sailing rivers in Laos, Burma, Borneo and does not rule out adding a longer expedition cruise to the "classic" cruises operated by Pandaw on Vietnam's Mekong with four ships of thirty-plus cabins.

The K-class *Katha Pandaw*, with 16 staterooms, will launch in January 2012 and operate

in Burma as an expedition vessel. Its ultra shallow draft will enable cruises into remote areas in the low water season of December-April. Its staterooms will have French windows opening onto the promenade decks.

In Borneo, meanwhile, the company is now offering a shorter cruise of six days called "Upstream to Kapit" with the option of an additional two nights in Kuching.

And Strachan has recently returned from Laos with the news that "it is a definite yes!" to river cruises in that country.

The company is awaiting final permissions from the Laos government before announcing a late 2012 start-up.