

# ‘I’ll be back!’

From the Rhine to the Dutch waterways, see all the cruises on offer at [arenatravel.com/river-cruises](http://arenatravel.com/river-cruises)



## New to the river cruising scene, Darren Calpin finds himself a convert...

**I**S THIS REALLY your first time on a river cruise?" The animated, silver haired lady sitting opposite me at afternoon tea looks sceptical. "Yes, really" I reply, eagerly eyeing up another slice of sponge cake. As she looks away, clearly bemused, to focus on the peaceful Dutch countryside

spooling past us, her friend treats me to a wink and a wry smile. "Bet it won't be your last though..."

This is a sentiment I've gotten used to hearing (and feeling) since stepping aboard Arena Travel's recently renovated flagship, the impressive MS Arena. Being a complete river cruise virgin, I can't

really say what my expectations were for this three-day 'taster cruise' from Arnhem to Amsterdam. As I kick back and finish off my cake in the convivial lounge bar though, it seems clear the multitude of passengers who've been quick to share their love of river cruising with me may well be onto something.

### SILENCE IS GOLDEN

Gliding along the Dutch Waterways at a stately 10-12kmh is, somehow, both an aesthetic and introspective

treat; the gently unfolding vistas of worked fields and cute windmills being utterly entrancing. And you really do glide as well; there's no hint of engine noise or, in fact, of any real movement at all, something I find quite surprising for a vessel that's essentially a four-star floating hotel. While the ambience is unhurried and relaxed, it's far from dull. Our engaging guides, Darren and Lisa, take it in turns to provide bursts of commentary to complement the scenery. Darren's encyclopaedic

knowledge is jaw-dropping ("26% of the Netherlands is below sea level") while Lisa's romantic tales of passengers finding love on previous cruises ups the feel-good factor handsomely.

At 443 feet long, the MS Arena boasts 98 guest cabins spread over two decks, all of which clock in at a roomy 140-square-feet each. I'm in an Upper Deck Superior which boasts a hotel-style bed. Main Deck cabins have one fixed bed and one that folds away to make extra space

during the day. All cabins benefit from delightful Juliet balconies, a luxury which I very much enjoy in the mornings and evenings. The info pack in my room informs me that Arena offers an on-board Premium Package which, among other things, affords passengers free use of the onboard fitness suite, 10% savings on excursions and free drinks with meals. Additional perks include complimentary toiletries, a welcome basket of fruit, and daily water delivered to the cabin. >>

# Tried & tested

## CHIC AND STYLISH

Exploring the vessel's Main and Upper decks, two things quickly become clear: 1, that I still don't know my port from starboard, and, 2; that the MS Arena does a very good job at retaining a smart/casual vibe.

All of the interiors are sleek and modern, with plenty of natural light helping to highlight the 'brand new' feel. This is especially true in the spacious lounge bar toward the bow, where panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows ensure the encompassing views never go amiss. It's also light, airy and open-plan, and undoubtedly the vessel's main focal and meeting point. It has a relaxed, communal vibe in the daytime, with passengers – most of whom are aged 55-plus – happily striking up conversations with strangers while watching the world ease by.

Afternoon excursions ashore are

**Floor-to-ceiling windows allow you to take in the sights**

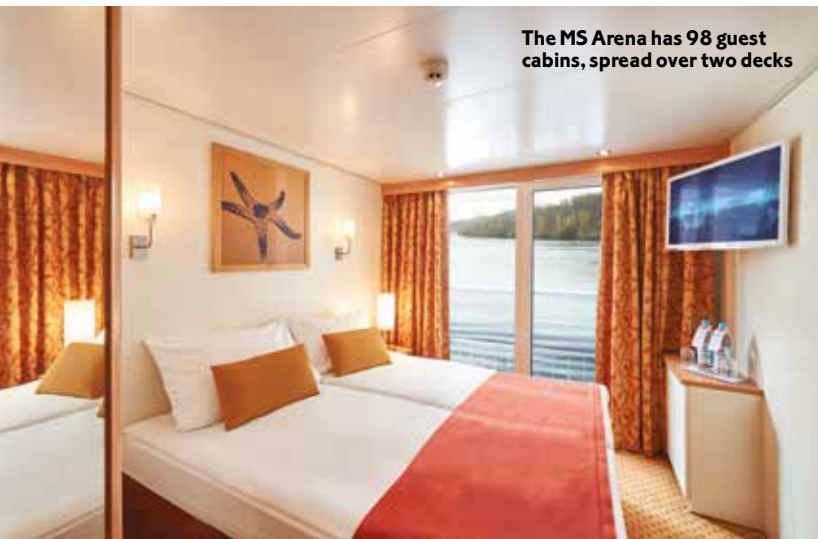


always popular, as is the much-loved and universally well-attended ritual of afternoon tea. Evening entertainment varies, with quizzes and musical acts topping the bill most nights. Passengers who're keen to pair their sightseeing with an al fresco drink and some fresh air can head up onto

the roomy sun deck. Being able to get out "on top" as we drift under Arnhem's landmark John Frost Bridge (the actual 'Bridge Too Far') is quite a moment for me. Gazing down to watch our 11.4m-wide vessel pass through some of the River Lech's 12m-wide locks is a highlight, too! »

**Daytime buffets and evening a la carte menus hit all the right notes for Darren**





The MS Arena has 98 guest cabins, spread over two decks

## SMOOTH SAILINGS

As we leave the pastoral peace of the Dutch countryside behind and ease through Amsterdam's industrial and commercial outskirts, I reflect upon the genteel manner and overt ease of our trip. Though I try, I honestly cannot think of a more pleasant way to travel between two European cities.

"It's just so convenient, isn't it?" says Mary, a very enthusiastic and possibly semi-psychic group travel organiser I'm chatting with in the lounge bar. A seasoned cruiser, she describes river cruising and ocean cruising as "totally different animals", then adds: "every day you're somewhere different" before

sweeping her arm toward the windows with a flourish.

I find myself nodding. I'm told this vessel also sails on the Rhine, Moselle and Danube. How wonderful it would be, I ponder, to take in the likes of Vienna, Salzburg, and Budapest, or tick off Belgrade, Bucharest and Bratislava in such a way.

A wry smile creeps over my face; that winking lady was right. I don't think this will be my last river cruise... [CTW](#)

## DINNER IS SERVED

The cheery and rather dapper-looking crewmembers are always on hand to bounce questions off, or just have a bit of a natter with. Indeed, I'd say the balance between professional courtesy and good old-fashioned hospitality is just about right (and I really like the way the cruise director's office is a welcoming, glass-walled affair). Adjacent to the office is a casual reading area, replete with comfy chairs and a modest book library with a nice selection of board games. A bijou reception area (manned around-the-clock) and a tea and coffee station stacked with English tea bags are also standing by.

But what about the food, I hear you ask... Well, the appetising meals served within the aptly-named Panorama restaurant on the Main Deck reflect how Arena caters squarely to the British and Irish market. Thus, daytime buffet meals and evening a la carte menus hit all the right notes with a mixture of home-from-home treats, international faves and regional dishes. While seating is allocated

on arrival, it's by no means set in stone so moving elsewhere if you make friends with someone at another table is unlikely to raise any eyebrows. It's nice how the head chef and his galley team come out to welcome diners, and I love how the waiting staff – who wear protective face masks – have name badges with their photos on so that we can get to know the face behind the mask. A nice touch, not to mention a very effective ice-breaker.



A room with a view