

A Scottish twist on a German river

A Hebridean cruise company has ventured into European waters. **Gabriella Le Breton** is impressed

This was a Hebridean Island Cruises trip – so why on earth was I on the Rhine? The answer is that after 24 years the company that made its name offering small-boat cruises around the Scottish isles on its own ship, the Hebridean Princess, has branched out with itineraries on the Rhine and the Danube. But how would it fare in foreign waters, and with a specially chartered and unfamiliar ship?

Not well, initially at least – our coach driver got lost en route to the Rhine and glacially slow service at lunch in Brussels wasted four hours that could have been better spent. But things looked up from the moment we were welcomed aboard the Royal Crown in Cologne. Hebridean chose this boat to offer as close an experience as possible to its Scottish cruises. It carries just 90 passengers (against the Princess's 50), making it one of Europe's smallest river cruisers, and in its glamorous look – think Thirties yacht with teak decks, arched picture windows and Art Deco rosewood and mahogany furniture – it has something of the cosy, out-of-the-ordinary style of the Hebridean Princess.

The ship having passed muster, I turned to Cologne, which, like many great European cities, owes its foundation to the irrigation, transport, trade and defensive lure of the river on whose banks it lies. Today, this translates into effortless river cruising, with ships able to

moor close to the city centre. After an informal dinner aboard Royal Crown, I walked along the attractive Rhine embankment and reached the city's Gothic cathedral in under 10 minutes. As luck would have it, that evening was the third Saturday of the month, coinciding with "Night Fever", which sees the cathedral open until midnight, and where visitors receive a candle to light and place in the sea of flames at the base of the main altar.

The following morning I took a guided walking tour of the city before returning to the ship for lunch, served while sailing towards Düsseldorf. The afternoon was spent listening to the first of several lectures given by historian Professor Ian Beckett and witnessing the industrious, multinational nature of "Father Rhine" – the river here was scattered with barges flying flags from the countries



Despite the rain, the dramatic beauty of the Rhine Gorge was mesmerising

which share it: Germany, Holland, France and, by way of the Moselle, Belgium.

Arriving in Düsseldorf, there was time for a stroll along the city's esplanade as it basked in evening sunshine before returning to the Royal Crown for the type of lavish welcome drinks and dinner for which Hebridean is renowned. Drinking champagne on the top deck, sequins aglitter in the sun as they swapped yarns, my fellow passengers looked entirely at home, already radiating the spirit treasured by old Hebridean Princess hands.

Our second day brought the first of several exclusive shore excursions – a visit to the 18th-century Rococo *maison de plaisance* Schloss Benrath. As the Royal Crown is chartered by various companies, each one endeavours to differentiate its offering from the others. Thus, Hebridean Island Cruises arranges unique shore excursions, such as this one, as well as importing some of its own food – in our case vast quantities of whisky, Pimm's, champagne and haggis. It also extends exceptional care to more mature guests, requests that more meals are served in the ship's restaurant and has an all-inclusive pricing strategy. And, of course, supplies one of Hebridean Princess's infamous pursers – the jovial Charles on this voyage.

Sailing upstream from Düsseldorf, we spent our third morning exploring Bonn before sailing to Koblenz, a name derived

from the Latin *confluentes*, reflecting the city's strategic location at the confluence of the Rhine, Moselle and Lahn. I fell under the spell of the lofty Drachenfels mountains, which rise abruptly above the meandering river, blanketed in vineyards and topped by crumbling castles.

While we spent the night at Koblenz, in the shadow of the imposing Ehrenbreitstein fort, we saved exploration of the city

for later, sailing the following morning for the wine-growing town of Rüdesheim. Despite heavy rain, the dramatic beauty of the Rhine Gorge was mesmerising – tree-tufted river islands, row upon manicured row of terraced vineyards, and clusters of traditional half-timbered houses, festooned with geraniums.

The afternoon brought an exclusive tour of Schloss Johannisberg, a vineyard



celebrated for its (accidental) creation of spätlese wine, which it still produces today, along with other late-harvest wines and world-class rieslings. Sampling the wines in the vineyard's 200-year-old cellars, it was easy to understand how Goethe, who did the same, wrote so passionately about the Rhineland.

That night, the Royal Crown sailed back through Koblenz to travel up the

Moselle, reaching the idyllic town of Cochem in midafternoon. For me, this was the highlight of the voyage: the Moselle – narrower and slower-flowing than the Rhine – and its lush banks are exquisite, and Cochem is a picturesque medley of crooked, half-timbered medieval houses, a lively market square and a tree-lined esplanade peppered with cafés and taverns. Above it all towers





Happy valley: Reichsburg Castle towers over the pretty town of Cochem, left; Benrath Castle, above; a garden restaurant in Rüdesheim, below; and Cologne, bottom



the 11th-century Reichsburg castle, whose turbulent history we discovered during a private tour with its enthusiastic keeper, Klaus. Our foray along the Moselle was sweet but short – with heavy rain forecast that night (the storm was indeed spectacular), our captain made haste for Koblenz, fearing the rise in water level would prevent us passing under the low, Gothic bridge that spans the Moselle just

before it joins the Rhine. We obviously passed under the bridge without mishap, for I woke the following morning in Koblenz on the final day of the cruise. The attractive Old Town, elegant Baroque squares and imposing Kaiser Wilhelm I bronze statue gleamed in the post-storm sunshine and a slick new gondola, which whisks visitors from the heart of town and across the Rhine to the Ehrenbreitstein fort,

rewarded us with sweeping views of the Rhine and Moselle valleys. Picking out the familiar shape of the Royal Crown below, I was saddened by our imminent parting of ways. But then I remembered Patrick Leigh Fermor's *A Time of Gifts*, which chronicles his walk from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople in the Thirties, including his time aboard a working barge on the Rhine. His reaction

to the local wines was particularly enthusiastic: "... simply by sipping them," he wrote, "one could explore the two great rivers below and the Danube and all Swabia, and Franconia

too by proxy...journeying in time from year to year, with draughts as cool as a deep well, limpidly varying from dark gold to pale silver and smelling of glades and meadows and flowers." If I bought some of the same wines, I reasoned, I would have the perfect way to remember my time on the Rhine. Next week is National Cruise Week. Find out more at discovercruises.co.uk

Have you been on a river cruise? Send your comments to yoursay@telegraph.co.uk or post them on at [telegraph.co.uk/travel](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel)



ESSENTIALS



Passing muster: the intimate MS Royal Crown evokes the glamour of the Thirties

GETTING THERE Hebridean Island Cruises (01756 704704; hebridean.co.uk) offers different week-long river-cruise itineraries on the Rhine and Danube from June to October in 2013. Prices will start from £2,750 per person, including transfers, full board and drinks, guest speaker lectures, daily shore excursions and gratuities. Prices are subject to change.

THE INSIDE TRACK Standard cabins aboard Royal Crown, all located on the lower deck, are fairly compact (145 sq ft); some also involve stairs; ask about premium cabins on the same deck or six Royal Suites on the upper deck for more room or fewer steps. Ride Cologne's gondola – 30 minutes' walk along the Rhine embankment – for unbeatable views across the city, cathedral and the Rhine. Don't stand too close to the Schengel statue in Koblenz – it spits water every two minutes. The diminutive for the statue, Scheng, is what Rhinelanders called the occupying French soldiers during the Napoleonic war; Schengel was what they called the children born to local women by the soldiers. Today it has become an affectionate term for Koblenz locals.

THE BEST HOTELS Das Kleine Stapelhäuschen, Cologne £ One of the few medieval houses to have survived the Second World War; located on Cologne's embankment, with a popular wine tavern

and restaurant (0049 221 272 7777; kleines-stapelhuschen.de; double b&b from €83/£66). Hotel im Wasserturm, Cologne ££ One of Germany's top luxury hotels, housed in Europe's tallest water tower. The 11-storey tower, transformed into an avant-garde hotel in 1990, boasts tremendous city views from its contemporary rooms and has a two Michelin-starred rooftop restaurant (221 20080; hotel-im-wasserturm.de; doubles from €164/£131, room only).

WHAT TO AVOID Avoid the bother of carting luggage around by using The Baggage Man (0800 023 2094; thebaggageman.com), a service which picks up your bags from your home and delivers them to your designated hotel/ship from £58 per case one-way (the return price is identical). Avoid the interior of Cologne cathedral during the day, when access is usually restricted for services, and visit in the evening instead. Don't feel you have to disembark at every city: do your research, and award yourself time off to enjoy the ship. Hebridean's 2013 itineraries will vary slightly, so check carefully.

Montague on the Gardens, London £££ An intimate hotel five minutes from St Pancras station, so ideal for those travelling by early Eurostar to join the Royal Crown. Rooms are comfortable and quiet, overlooking pretty gardens; superb restaurant and atmospheric wine bar (020 7637 1001; montague-hotel.com; from £290).

THE BEST RESTAURANTS Paffgen, Cologne £ A family-owned brewery, bar and restaurant, which has brewed Kölsch beer since 1884. Work up an appetite for hearty sausages, schnitzels and goulash with a tour of the old brewery (Friesenstrasse 64-66; 221 135461).

Gerhards Genussgesellschaft, Koblenz ££ This contemporary restaurant is set in pretty gardens by Koblenz's ancient city walls and Kaiser Wilhelm I statue in the Deutsches Eck. Combines classic Rhine and Moselle cuisine to produce light, seasonal dishes (Danziger Freiheit 3; 261 9149 9133).

Hanse Stube, Cologne £££ Consistently rated among Cologne's best restaurants for its intimate, elegant atmosphere and modern French cuisine. Signature dishes include quail stuffed with chanterelles on truffled summer vegetables and scallops on saffron jelly (Excelsior Hotel Ernst, Trankgasse 1-5; 221 2701).