

RIVER CRUISE

ASTA's first river cruise expo gives travel advisors firsthand experience

By Nicole Edenedo ✉ | Apr 01, 2022



The Scenic Amber in Budapest for the ASTA Global River Cruise Expo. Photo Credit: Nicole Edenedo

BUDAPEST -- How to market and sell river cruises was the theme of the inaugural ASTA Global River Cruise Expo and conference held here March 16 to 20.

Amadeus River Cruises, AmaWaterways, Avalon Waterways, Emerald, Scenic, Uniworld and Viking, the featured headliners of the four-day event, gave more than 500 travel advisors a crash course in how best to convey to clients that not all river cruises are the same and that there's a river cruise for everyone.

Through a mix of educational sessions at the Kempinski Hotel Corvinus and firsthand inspections of ships docked side by side on the Danube River, travel advisors could see for themselves the distinct differences and commonalities between the products.

For instance, sister brands Scenic and Emerald, both part of Australia-based Scenic Group, each had a ship at the expo. The Scenic Amber was on display for advisors to tour throughout the conference, while the Emerald Sun took advisors on a post-conference Danube sailing.

"I want advisors to understand the two brands we offer," said Ann Chamberlin, vice president of sales for Scenic Group USA. Scenic and Emerald, she said, "have different vessels that appeal to different clientele."

"The conference allowed travel advisors to see both our Scenic Space Ships, our truly all-inclusive ships, and Emerald Star Ships, our chic, contemporary, active and more younger-appealing ships, side by side," she said. "I wanted travel advisors to understand that we're truly dedicated to helping them understand both brands, feeling comfortable to sell both brands and understanding those differences."

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AmaWaterways' senior vice president of sales, Alex Pinelo, and newly appointed COO Jon Burrows led an educational session for travel advisors that broke down where their ships sail, itinerary details and travel trends.

Family travel, smaller groups and spending more on higher-level cabins were just some of the market trends Pinelo told advisors to tap into to better sell AmaWaterways to prospective and returning river cruise clients.

"Traveling as groups of friends or girlfriends, traveling with the family, reuniting after the pandemic as well as health and wellness travel are just some of the trends we're seeing," Pinelo said. "People want to travel on smaller ships, on less crowded ships, and a river cruise provides just that. Our ships carry a maximum of 156 guests, and they carry a lot of room for activity and don't feel crowded. The onboard dining experience, the excursions, unlimited WiFi -- we offer the immersion, the exclusivity and inclusiveness that guests are looking for."

ASTA's big event

ASTA CEO Zane Kerby said the river cruise expo was the largest international event ASTA has hosted in the past decade. The event was organized to put the needs of travel advisors first -- and putting suppliers in prime position to meet those needs to help bring back travel in 2022.

"I think our members understand that the pandemic is getting into the rearview mirror," he said, adding that river cruise is a good product to relaunch travel sales.

"Travel advisors sell a lot of river cruises; anywhere from 90% to 98% of river cruises that get sold are sold by travel advisors, particularly in the U.S. market," he said.

The Society wanted the expo to get "as many people in port as possible and see the ships all in one go."

Kerby said that ASTA put the idea of the expo out to travel advisors last year, and "they responded in enormous numbers." The post-expo river cruises sold out "within a few weeks."

The fact that so many people showed up, he added, "shows you how serious travel advisors are about their craft."

"The number of photos and social media posts shows how great their energy is to be able to come and learn so that they can go home and share with confidence," Kerby said.

The 2023 ASTA Global River Cruise Expo is scheduled to take place March 15 to 18 in Budapest.

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