

FINANCIAL TIMES

# Boats that rock

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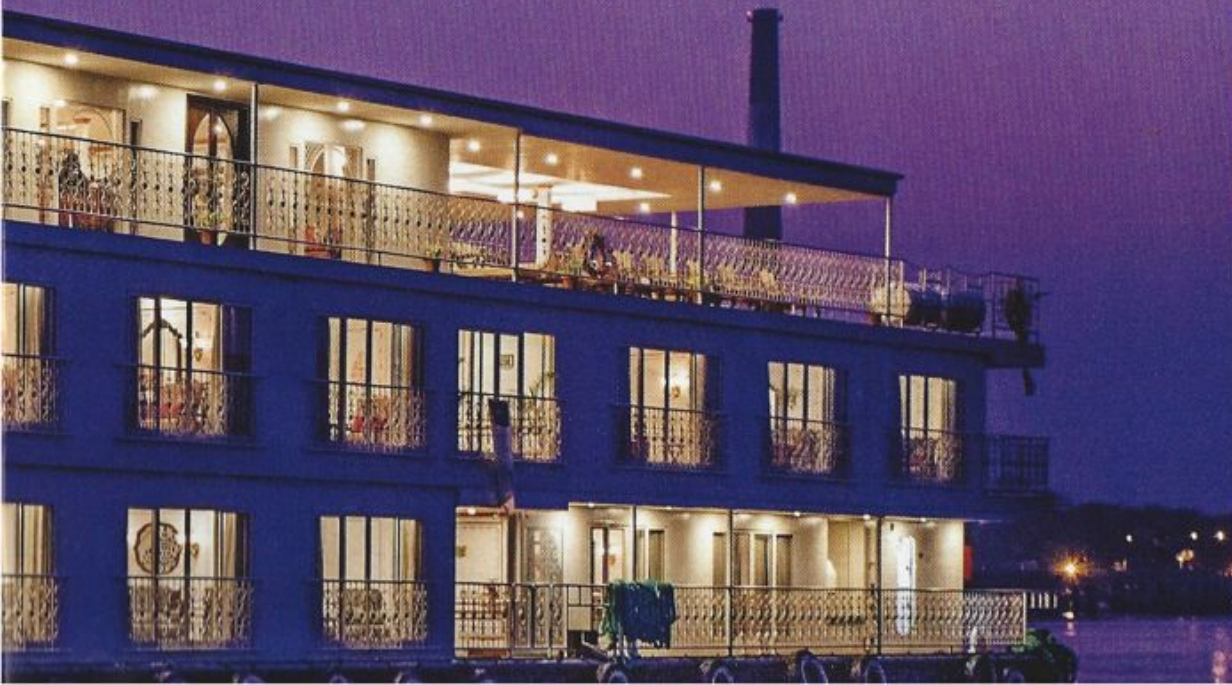


GANGES VOYAGER II



# *cruise me a river*

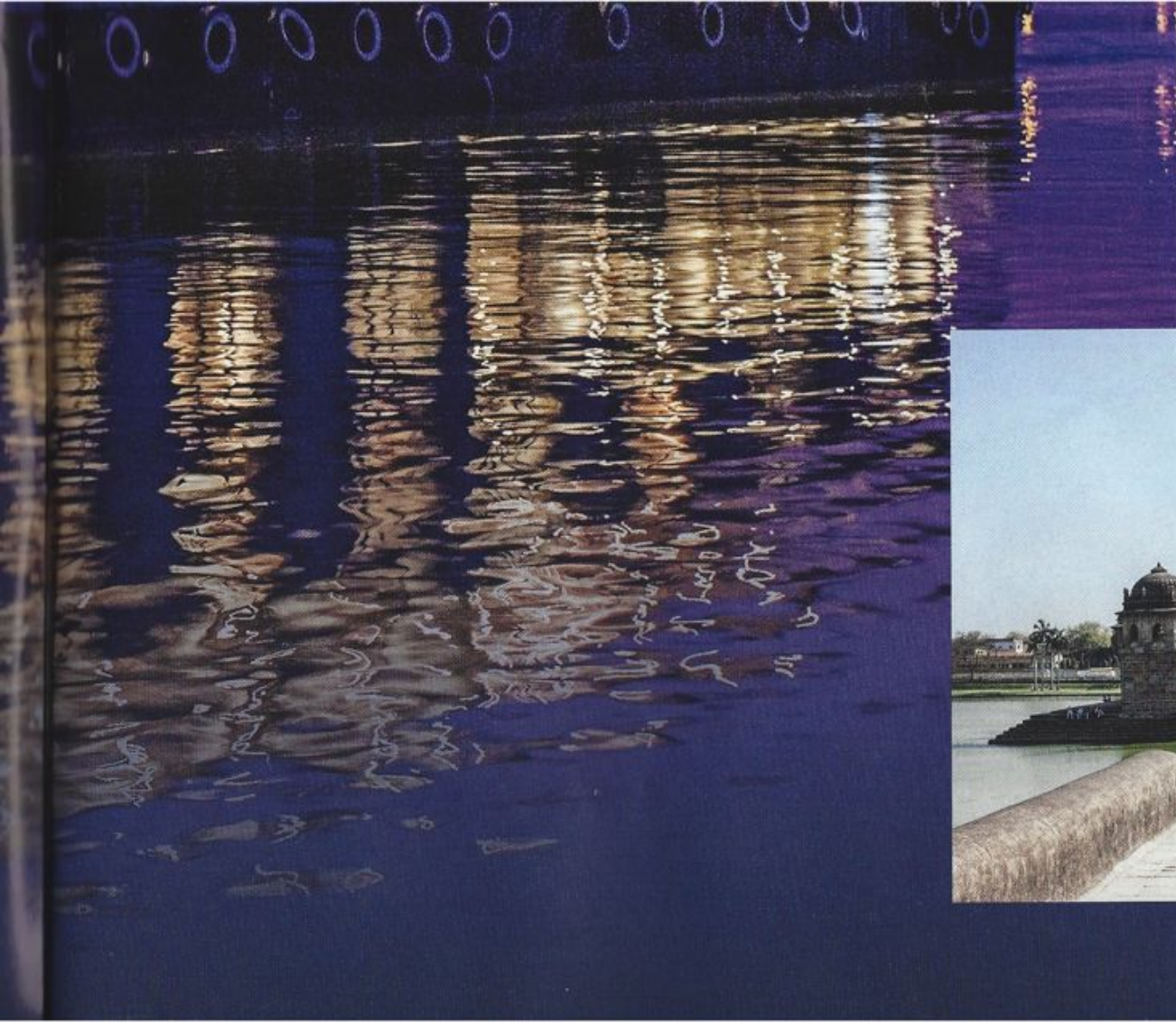
**From rock climbing on the Rhine to reviving Gabriel García Márquez's Colombian-jungle journeys, the river cruise paradigm is being turned on its head. Maria Shollenbarger reports on the boats, itineraries and fixers taking it to the next level**



From far beneath a glacier some 3,000m up in the Himalayan crests of the Indian state of Uttarakhand, near the border with Tibet, a stream called the Bhagirathi flows out and down a mountain. It widens as it goes, the frigid brown torrent eventually joining another stream, the Alaknanda, several kilometres away – from which merger India's holiest river, the Ganges, is born. It traverses some 2,500km of hill, plain and wetland across several states, most of that distance at a languid molasses pace that belies its cascading mountain source. It passes by or through some of the subcontinent's most culturally significant sites – Allahabad, Rishikesh, Varanasi, Haridwar – before emptying into the Bay of Bengal below Kolkata. One in 20 people on the planet lives within its drainage basin. During the monsoon, the Ganges can extend up to 12km in width, overflowing its banks and wreaking massive destruction. But for the world's Hindus, it is a centre of their faith, the most sacred of India's seven sacred rivers. To bathe in it, it's widely believed, is to be washed of one's sins.

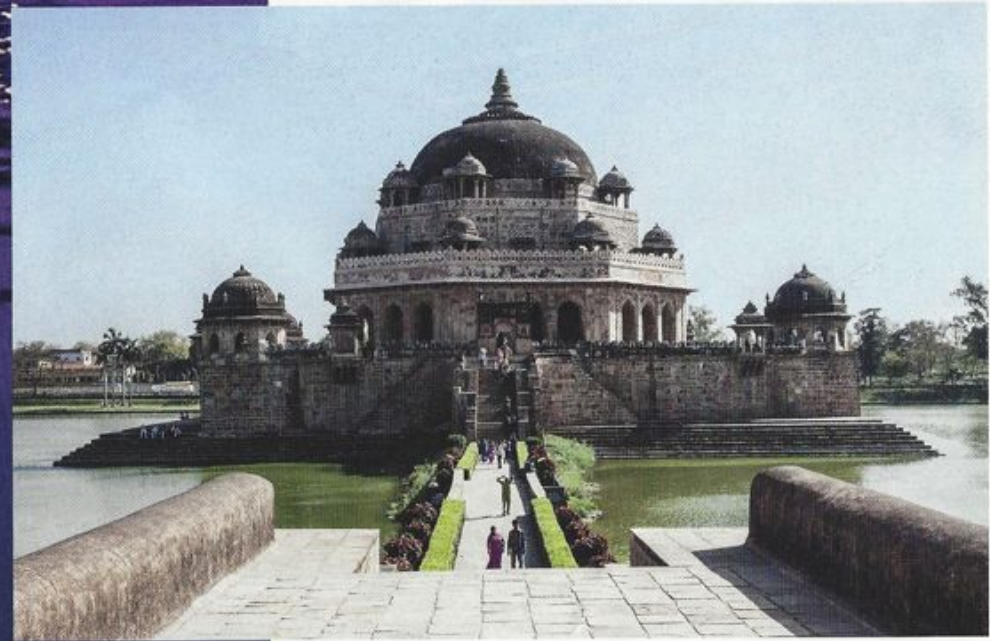
Such a microcosm of a nation's identity – a slow-moving route that traverses some of its most compelling monuments as well as its most prosaic expressions of rural life – merits some attention. "I think a river cruise is one of the most underrated ways to experience this country," says Tanya Dalton, owner-director of India travel specialist Greaves. "On a boat on the Ganges you have access to real, rural India in ways you don't elsewhere." Yet quality luxury cruising is still a fairly nascent business; it's only in the past few years that boats purveying genuine comforts combined with laudable guiding and experiences have come online.

One of the pioneers was Aqua Indica, a local brand whose two elegant riverboats, *Ganges Voyager* and *Ganges Voyager II* (pictured on these pages), launched in 2015 and 2016 respectively and brought to the subcontinent the high style and top-flight amenities of the finest "soft adventure" Myanmar and Amazon cruisers: spas, gyms and all-suite accommodation clad in silks and adorned with handpainted murals and tiles, each with its own terrace. "All along the Ganges you can find people who aren't accustomed to tourists, which lets you really engage with



Clockwise from left: Aqua Indica's Ganges Voyager boats brought the style and amenities of Myanmar and Amazon cruisers to the Indian subcontinent. The suites are all adorned with handpainted murals. The boats provide access to off-radar cultural destinations such as the tomb of Sher Shah Suri

local life – the villages and markets – as it's lived. And there are temples and cultural sites along the river that are virtually impossible to reach by other means," Dalton continues. *Voyager* and *Voyager II* visit mosques and temples on river islands, the 5th-century BC architectural ruins at Nalanda, and





## To see a destination at its most intimate is today's new imperative and river cruisers are evolving dynamically to meet the demand

Mahabodhi Temple, where the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment. But it also cruises at dawn through the city of Varanasi, a window on both sacred and profane rites of daily passage as they happen. "The cruise experience itself is the key to exclusive access to a true and authentic perspective on Indian art, music, architecture, textiles and culture," says Arjun Sinsinwar, founder of Exotic Heritage Group, Aqua Indica's parent company, noting that many stretches of the river are "a pristine India of 50 years ago, where there are no other tourists and no opportunities for shopping."

Such has been the positive response to his programme that later this year, Exotic Heritage Group will launch a new Ganges cruiser that will be a first on Indian rivers:

*Nauka Vilas*, an 18m one-bedroom, totally handcrafted wooden boat that will embark on tailor-made journeys along various sections of the Ganges, Bhagirathi and Hooghly. Teak floors, Bengal renaissance and campaign antiques, fine silver and china and top-deck private yoga will set the tone on board; guide-led excursions to untouched sites and communities will fill the days – unless what appeals most is to sit on the private deck and just watch India go by. In many ways, reckons Dalton – who has the *Nauka Vilas* on her own list for late 2018 – "it will be India at its most intimate."

To see a destination at its most intimate is the new imperative of contemporary travel. Mining the moments, people and places that deliver this up-close experience

has, perforce, become the core competence of the best operators in the industry. And like every other category of exploration, the top river cruisers are evolving, dynamically and creatively, to meet the demand. Where once, not so long ago, the Rhine and the Danube were the preserve of staid package tours, now there are specialist boats equipped with state-of-the-art tenders to make deep incursions into wetlands and wildernesses with biologists or conservationists – or ones furnished with top-flight shells and oars for morning rowing sessions with local champions. Whereas not so long ago a week spent gliding along the lower Mekong meant a gauntlet of temples and silk factories, now celebrity chefs lead sunrise market visits and nighttime street-food tours of Ho Chi Minh City or Siem Reap. And where once boarding a boat in Paris to cruise the Seine amounted to a few evening hours and some (hopefully) decent bubbly, these days it can mean several nights between Vernon, Rouen and Versailles in a suite with a Savoir bed and marble-clad bath, and with an escort of historian-guides with the keys to private collections and palaces.

The European river cruise in particular is taking innovative and intriguing new forms – arguably an imperative for a niche travel mode that sometimes struggles to attract a younger clientele accustomed to shared economies and increasingly inclined to turn

Clockwise from above:  
**Crystal Cruises' new *Crystal Bach* plies the waterways of the Rhine in Germany. Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte, near Paris, will be en route for Belmond's *Pivoine*, launching this summer. There is a plunge pool on deck**







## “I’m pretty sure there’s no other river where you’ll find a beautiful, deserted new white-sand beach every day of a week-long holiday”

to social media to research their travel (and whose response to the concept of a rote itinerary is increasingly sceptical). The next-generation European cruises capture the essence of each port of call via unique, and often unexpected, experiences: private fencing lessons in Heidelberg, say (available on request aboard Crystal Cruises’ new *Crystal Bach* – pictured on previous page – which plies the Rhine), or cognac-blending sessions in the famous Bordeaux town of the same name at Camus, a 150-year-old house with its fifth-generation scion as your host (on a Viking luxury ship that cruises the Garonne, Dordogne and Gironde rivers).

Belmond, the hospitality company (formerly known as Orient-Express) whose hotels, boats and trains span six continents, has set such bars for exclusivity and experience on Europe’s rivers and canals for decades. Its fleet of ultra-luxe small ships and barges – the latter ranging from two to six bedrooms and mostly exclusively available for private charter – skews to tailored or even totally bespoke itineraries. For those who

still desire the traditional châteaux tastings and Michelin-standard chefs, Belmond remains the one to call – but that’s only a fraction of what it now offers. There is a roster of specialist guides: historians for architecture buffs, antiquarians for decorative-arts enthusiasts, and fitness coaches for avid runners and cyclists, among others. And business is booming; two new barges, *Lilas* and *Pivoine* (pictured on previous page), launch this summer on the canals of Alsace (from Strasbourg to Arzwiller) and the Champagne region respectively. Besides the all-access itineraries, what sets Belmond’s barges apart is their exceptionally stylish design. There are top-deck sun terraces and (in some cases) plunge pools and the suites are huge and uncommonly chic,

Clockwise from above: Cazenove+Loyd charters the yacht *Tupaia* on Brazil’s wildlife-rich Tapajós river. A new Plan South America itinerary takes in the previously hard-to-reach Colombian town of Santa Cruz de Mompox. The route starts in Cartagena



with slipcovered sofas, sisal rugs and cashmere throws lain abundantly across beds and chaises.

Uniworld, considered one of a handful of luxury market leaders, with a fleet of 21 boats operating in Europe, Africa, Russia and east Asia, is this summer taking evolution a step further, with the launch of an entirely new brand concept in Europe. U by Uniworld consists, for now at least, of two completely stripped-down, scaled-up cruise boats – *The A* and *The B* – targeted at dynamic thirty- and fortysomethings in the market for slick design (the exterior is completely black to start with), contemporary cuisine and deep dives into local goings-on at every port of call. The concept was originally intended for millennials, but the realisation that the appeal of a more contemporary package has no necessary age limit (and that U’s price points, while lower on average than those of Uniworld cruises, were likely to still be prohibitively high for most of that demographic) has led to wider interest.





## European cruise outfitters have adopted the experiential travel mantras of access, exposure and even wilderness excursions

The *A* plies Germany's rivers (the Rhine, Main and Danube), while *The B* (pictured top and above) is currently cruising the Seine. Guests can go on guided pop-up bar crawls in Budapest, or to private supper clubs in Amsterdam. Adventurers are catered for as well, with white-water rafting and rock climbing on the agenda along sections of the Rhine. Back on board, there are rooftop yoga classes, local guest DJs and menus replete with chia pudding and green juices.

While European cruise outfitters have been adopting the experiential travel mantras of access, exposure and even wilderness excursions on the well-plied byways of Germany and France, those shaping the luxury cruise experience on the world's more far-flung waterways are borrowing liberally from the indulgence and service bars set in Europe. The 28-passenger *Zambezi Queen* (pictured overleaf) began cruising sections of Botswana's Chobe River in 2009, setting a new African standard (lots of cowhide, local textiles, framed fine-art photos and mixologists working the bar) melded with adventure and unique access to wildlife (watching dozens of elephants or a pride of lions drinking at the water's edge from the



comfort of a lounge on the viewing deck, drink in hand). Three smaller, houseboat-style barges, the *Chobe Princesses*, followed in rapid succession. Now, in 2018, comes the competition in the form of the 16-passenger *African Dream* and *African Dream II*, the latter of which launches at the end of this year. Both cruise Lake Kariba and the Sanyati in Zimbabwe, and the *Chobe* in Botswana; tenders ferry guests deep into near inaccessible inlets and along shorelines in search of wildlife.

The "black" waters – and magical white-sand beaches – of the Tapajós and Negro rivers in Brazil have increasing currency as an adventure destination with serious, and rather surprising, indulgence-holiday appeal. "I'm pretty sure there's no other river where you're basically guaranteed to find a beautiful, completely deserted new white beach every day of a week-long holiday," says Cazenove+Loyd co-owner and director Christopher Wilmot-Sitwell, pointing out that in the lower-water-level months of June to late January, there are literally thousands of kilometres of white-sand beach – often swimmable beach – for the taking. Wilmot-Sitwell charts various boats here, ranging from four to eight

**Clockwise from far left: Slick design is the calling card of Uniworld's *The B*, which is currently cruising the Seine. White-water rafting is available to adventurous guests**

cabins and from charming luxury to pull-out-the-stops yacht indulgence (*Tupai* pictured on previous page). There is wildlife – vast numbers of brilliantly coloured caiques and hummingbirds, anteaters,

river dolphins, the odd manatee. "Because you're on the black-water Amazon tributaries and not the 'yellow' water of the Amazon emanating from Peru, you've virtually no insects to bother you," says Wilmot-Sitwell.

To the north, meanwhile, Plan South America founder Harry Hastings has an expedition down the Río San Juan, originating on a private property on Lake Nicaragua and journeying to El Castillo, whose daunting fortress dates to 1673. Guests camp out in the forest with a local guide; there are sunset barbecues on the riverbanks accompanied by the finest Nicaraguan rum, and breakfast on deck to a raucous soundtrack of scarlet macaws and howler monkeys. If a South American cultural deep dive is more your thing, a new

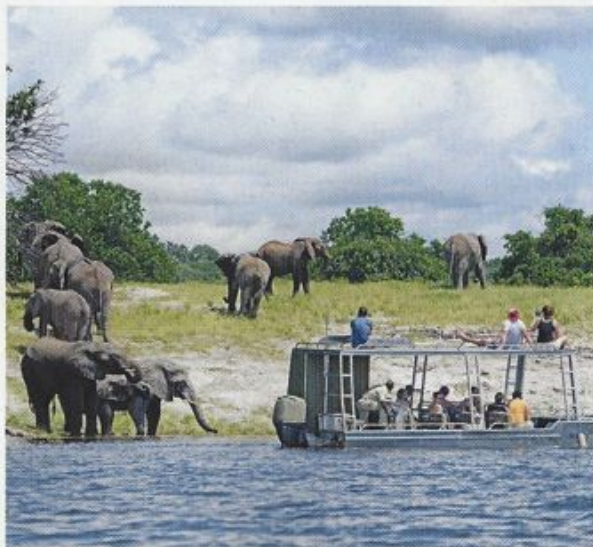


Plan South America offering, one about which Hastings is especially excited, might be just the ticket: a private charter (pictured on fourth page) along Colombia's Río Magdalena from Cartagena to the out-of-time 16th-century colonial town of Santa Cruz de Mompox, deep in Bolívar province, where Gabriel García Márquez spent several years. Until very recently it's been accessible only by an arduous overland journey paired with an hours-long public ferry ride. Mompox lived large in García Márquez's world, as did the Río Magdalena itself: a beautiful and evocative route to, and through, the identity of a place – as rivers, when travelled the right way, can be. ♦

From top: the **Zambezi Queen** set a new African standard in Botswana. A fresh twist on game viewing at **Chobe National Park**. The **Zambezi** offers the opportunity to catch tiger fish

#### RIVERS OF DREAMS

**African Dream**, see CroisiEurope Cruises. **Aqua Indica**, +9111-2612 4069; exoticheritagegroup.com and see Greaves India. **Belmond Afloat in France**, 0845-077 2222; belmond.com; from €5,650 per person for a six-night cruise. **Cazenove+Loyd**, 020-7384 2332; cazloyd.com; private, bespoke guided and hosted three-night cruises in Brazilian Amazonia from about £40,000. **Chobe Princess**, see Zambezi Queen Collection. **CroisiEurope Cruises**, 020-8328 1281; croisieurope.co.uk; four-day *African Dream* cruises from £3,713 per person full board, including flights. **Crystal Cruises**, 020-7399 7601; crystalcruises.co.uk; *Crystal Bach* Rhine cruises from about \$2,980 per person. **Greaves India**, 020-7487 9111; greavesindia.co.uk; seven-night cruises from £3,500 per person, including flights and transfers. **Plan South America**, 020-7993 6930; plansouthamerica.com; four-night Nicaragua cruise, £965 per night for up to eight people; three-night Colombia cruise, £1,185 per night for up to eight people. **U by Uniworld**, 0845-678 5656; ubyuniworld.com; cruises from £1,249 per person per night, including flights/Eurostar. **Viking River Cruises**, 0800-319 6660; vikingrivercruises.com; from £2,767 per person. **Zambezi Queen Collection**, +2721-715 2412; zqcollection.com; two- or three-night cruises from R9,075 (about £545) per person per night.



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