From the Mekong to the Amazon, Bordeaux to Budapest, river cruises are proving the new “nine-to-five adventure”. Qantas The Australian Way correspondents report in from the comfort zone.
IF PROOF WERE NEEDED that river cruising is the It Girl of 2014 travel, it came one crisp sunny spring day in March in the French city of Avignon, under the watchful eye of the imposing Papal Palace.

Three longships, festooned with more red-and-white balloons than an Arsenal versus Manchester United FA Cup Final, were docked side by side on the Rhône. It was a christening ceremony destined for the record books, a Guinness World Record for the most cruise boats launched by one company in one hit: three in Avignon, four in Rostock, Germany; nine in Amsterdam. And close behind them, two more in Portugal. So, 18 new ships launched across four countries in five days.

The occasion was celebrated that night with a glittering gala dinner underneath yet another architectural behemoth, the colossal 2000-year-old aqueduct and engineering feat that is the Pont Du Gard, which stands astride the Gardon River, some 25km from Avignon.

Among the 360 guests were Viking River Cruises executives, international travel agents and travel writers, and the longships’ godmothers, 18 women whose areas of expertise range from food to wine, medicine, travel, to ship-building, banking to singing. BBC wine commentator and Master of Wine Susie Barrie, invited to christen Viking Heimdal, guardian of the gods, was especially chuffed. “I have four god children,” she quipped during a wine lecture onboard a few days later, “but this is one that won’t be expecting gifts.”

The christening dinner was lavish: top-drawer food and wine, a performance by French superstar Mireille Mathieu, and breathtaking light artistry visited on the Pont du Gard itself.

Investment in the global cruising industry reached US$7.2b ($7.7b) in 2013/14, according to Cruise Lines International Association’s most recent global cruise industry report. River cruising is one of the fastest-growing niche markets. In 2013, European river cruising numbers increased by 23.4 per cent on the previous year. The Asian market is expected to expand significantly in coming years as more operators introduce the Mekong and Ayeyarwady rivers to their itineraries.

The Viking River Cruises fleet alone has, since 1997, grown to 53 – 30 of them longships. The company now claims 50 per cent of market share, and says its growth has reached 49 per cent with a revenue of some $1.5b a year. Destinations include Russia, Europe, China and Vietnam. Cruises along the Amazon and the Mississippi are being investigated, and an ocean cruiser, Viking Star, starts operating next year.

Also being launched in March was a new itinerary in France, called Châteaux, Rivers & Wine, tapping into the seemingly insatiable desire of American, British and Australian travellers for good food, fine wines, providore markets and centuries old towns and châteaux.

The Viking Forseti (all are named for Norwegian gods) is docked on the Gironde, at Bordeaux, in south-west France, a magnificent, almost radiant city whose famous vineyards tend to get all the press. Mayor Alain Juppé has overseen a rejuvenation of the waterfront, ordered mandatory care
of limestone facades, which gives the city a golden glow, and installed a smart tram system. Wide boulevards, including the pretty 1.2km shopping op Rue Sainte-Catherine, are pedestrian-friendly.

The 135m Viking longships can carry 190 passengers on three decks. Like Scandinavian design, the boats are elegant and minimalist, notable more for what they leave out than what they put in. There are no casinos, gyms, bathrobes, bathtubs, minibars or multiple restaurants. “No nickel and diming” as CEO Torstein Hagen puts the “extras” of cruising.

Indeed, Hagen’s enterprise finds parallels in the endeavours of Scandinavian Vikings, who ventured across Europe in search of new settlements, forging new trading routes. “There are three pillars to a successful company,” he told a press conference in the dining room of Viking Forseti. “Your customers love you, your employees love you and your competitors hate you.” He keeps a close eye on the competition and is a walking encyclopaedia of cruise ship minutiae.

The four pillars of this cruise are the wines, the food, the buildings and the rivers. There are three rivers that underpin Bordeaux. The Gironde (actually an estuary) is formed from the meeting of the Dordogne and the Garonne just below central Bordeaux. The Gironde divides the region into its left and right banks. Very French. The left bank’s soil is more gravelly and nurtures the heavy blackfruit flavours of cabernet sauvignon grapes. The soil of the right bank is better suited to an earlier-ripening merlot.

The new itinerary takes in beautiful towns such as Pauillac and Blaye, Saint-Émilion and Cadillac, and the pretty market town of Libourne, where asparagus, truffles, and cherry soup star on town menus with beef à la bordelaise, eel, pâtés and terrines. Pauillac is home to Château Lafite Rothschild, Latour and Mouton Rothschild. Saint-Émilion is a UNESCO site and noted for its wine-making heritage (Châteaux Ausone, Cheval Blanc, Pomerol and the nearby Château Siaurac) and medieval streets and buildings.

Much of what’s on offer focuses on family businesses that love to share their homes, wines and plans with people who care. As Joost Ouendag, Viking’s vice-president of product development and land operations, said over an onboard dinner of local lamb, sometimes he has to rein them in. “Once it stops being authentic, we don’t want it. The local characters are what makes a cruise so memorable.”

The tides and seasons ensure the unexpected. Guests can come and go as they please when the boat is docked, and bring aboard local cheese and wines to try, in tandem with more guided tours to the châteaux for tastings. Especially memorable is the optional excursion to the Camus distillery in the mediaeval town of Cognac for its opportunity to create a bespoke blend. Cognac was originally created to avoid a wine tax; it was boiled down to pay less tax, becoming popular when it was further distilled by Dutch traders. Your bottle is corked, labelled and recorded, in case you wish to reorder when you try it in three months. As mementos go, this has to be one of the more unique.

Châteaux, Rivers & Wine cruise, eight days with five guided tours, from $3195, for departures in 2015 (March-December). vrc.com/Bordeaux

Susan Skelly
WALTZ DOWN THE DANUBE

A new day, another opportunity to dazzle one’s Instagram followers with the splendid charms of Mitteleuropa, from Vienna to Budapest.

LESS LIKE A BUOYANT BINGO HALL, MORE LIKE A FLOATING BOUTIQUE HOTEL, RIVER CRUISING CAN SEEM LIKE A KIND OF MAGIC, SUCH IS THE EASE OF LIFE ON A LIQUID HIGHWAY

IF THERE’S ONE THING guests won’t be while on a luxury river cruise, it’s all at sea. With daily onshore interaction a large part of the appeal, there’s no chance of passengers developing cabin fever while gliding along the Danube, the Rhine, the Rhone or any of the other rivers along which some of the continent’s loveliest towns and cities can be found. Less like a buoyant bingo hall, more like a floating boutique hotel, river cruising can seem like a kind of magic, such is the ease of life on a liquid highway.

A recent Danube River cruise from Vienna to Budapest with Swiss operator Avalon Waterways aboard its newest vessel, the 83-cabin Avalon Illumination, sees guests torn between enjoying its comforts and disembarking to take in sights such as Dürnstein, a 15th-century riverside hamlet in the World Heritage-listed Wachau Valley.

There is a good case to be made for staying put. While there are three categories of accommodation available, the 183 sq m Panorama Suite stateroom is the standard, with full-screen views through a 3m-wide, wall-to-wall sliding door dubbed an open-air balcony, and a spacious marble bathroom. The queen-sized bed (twin beds, if required) faces out, and horizontal sightseeing is encouraged. Of course, there are Egyptian cotton sheets and a pillow menu.

For those who step ashore, there’s a walking tour of a town whose storybook aesthetic makes it one of Lower Austria’s most popular pit stops. The Wachau is renowned for its wine, and much of the surrounding countryside consists of terraced vineyards supported by dry-stone walls—the type of scenery likely to spark wild fantasies of dashing modernity to embrace a horse and plough. Add to that a toy box of a townscape where the architecture ranges from Gothic to Renaissance to Baroque, and a handsome main street replete with

Dusk in Budapest; Abbey Church, Dürnstein, Austria (inset)
with wrought-iron shop signs and flower boxes, and it’s well nigh impossible to take a dud photo.

Dürnstein, population 886, has history. High above the town on a craggy hill are the ruins of Castle Kuenringerburg, where Richard the Lionheart was held captive in late 1192 while taking a shortcut through the area on his return from a crusade in the Holy Land. The English king was freed three months later in return for an enormous ransom of 150,000 marks of silver. Dürnstein officially became a town, with its own coat of arms, in 1476 and the consensus among the snap-happy shore-leavers as they traverse the steep, narrow streets, taking in the streamer-strewn maypole in the main square, is that little seems to have changed since then. Well, not quite—the town’s pre-modern justice system in the form of an original pillory, complete with ball and chain used to punish thieves and adulterous women, is now merely decorative.

Apart from the ruins, Dürnstein’s most conspicuous landmark is the ornate blue-and-white belltower of the Abbey Church, once part of an Augustine abbey, which is now a popular spot for weddings and christenings. And arguably the choicest location from which to drink in the river scenery is the outdoor terrace of Schloss Dürnstein, a Relais & Châteaux property housed in a 17th-century castle.

Winning local drops to try include riesling and grüner veltliner; for something a little more belly-warming there’s Marillenschnaps, made from another local crop, apricots (marille).

Back on board, the Dutch captain executes a series of fancy turns—presumably to give everyone a photo op of Dürnstein—before moseying to the far side of the river. Here, in the town’s damsels mingle with diners, distributing shot glasses of Marillenschnaps as a digestive while the band plays on.

A new day, another chance to dazzle one’s Instagram followers with the splendid charms of Mitteleuropa. And Schloss Hof, a butter-yellow 18th-century palace near the border with Slovakia, built for the immensely wealthy Prince Eugene of Savoy, does not disappoint. For one thing, the Baroque gardens with their parterre de broderie design are reminiscent of Salzburg’s Mirabell Gardens, which featured in The Sound Of Music. For another, the attached Meierhof Manor Farm houses white donkeys, four-horn goats and Brahmas chickens, whose feathered legs resemble pantaloons.

**WHILE TOURING THE PALACE interiors, guests are bemused to discover that Empress Maria Theresa, who acquired the pile in 1755, was obsessed with hygiene—so much so that she bathed every three months, a practice regarded as downright bizarre for its time. By way of comparison, her husband, Holy Roman Emperor Francis I, came into contact with water exactly twice in his life: at his christening, and when he fell from his horse and landed in a ditch.

Back on board, thoughts of hygiene front of mind, it’s heartening to ascertain that fresh provisions from local suppliers are loaded onto the ship all along the route—no tinned peaches on this cruise. Such commitment enables executive chef Michael Baptiste and his 11-strong galley team to incorporate into the à la carte menu regional options and local wines. So, an Argentine black angus tenderloin of beef on sauce hollandaise and red wine reduction comes with Marchfelder spargel (seasonal white asparagus from the Marchfeld area) and violet potatoes, and is served with a 2012 Zweigelt, Austria’s most popular red wine, from the Carnuntum region.

The upstairs bar stays open until the last guest goes to bed. Those who stay late might miss the morning view as the ship sails into Budapest. But those who do make it to the Sky Deck are rewarded with a captain’s perspective of the capital’s riverside architecture, from the fairytale spires of the Hungarian Parliament Building to the slightly faded grandeur of the art nouveau Hotel Gellért.

Docking next to Liberty Bridge, which looks as though it could have been constructed from a green Meccano set, passengers disembark for the last time. Such has been the gently soporific motion of the good ship’s passage that quite a few of them might experience considerable difficulty getting to sleep tonight.

**TONY MAGNUSSON**
Francesco Galli Zugaro, CEO of Aqua Expeditions, has lived in 14 countries. Last year, he crossed the Nihim Desert in 14 days on a mountain bike. He launched one of the first Amazon River cruises and one to the Galapagos Islands before that.

Galli Zugaro likes to think outside the box. And he loves a good river – the Amazon, Nile, Ganges, Ayeyarwady – you name it. To that end, this month he is launching Aqua Mekong, a 20-suite cruise boat option that takes in Vietnam and Cambodia.

“These are for people who have been everywhere,” he says during a Sydney pit stop earlier this year. “They are willing to do whatever we can give them. It’s about soft adventure, wanting to do something different. Our passengers have done African safaris, the Galapagos, tiger trekking. They want turn-on, turn-off adventure, 9 to 5.”

Aqua Mekong is eye-level cruising, he maintains: having a glimpse into other people’s lives along the river.

“We have a very demanding clientele. They want local staff, an authentic experience. Some might want to go with a guide to shop for food at the markets to cook at a guest lecturer’s home; 10 might want to go on a bicycle trip around the backwaters of Cambodia. Or stay on board to hear a guest lecturer speak.

“We offer not haute cuisine, but family-style dishes. We have set up suppliers along the river and [Australian Michelin-starred chef] David Thompson gives me his right-hand chefs, always people who have trained under him.”

The 64m Aqua Mekong will carry a maximum of 40 guests and 40 staff. Cabins are 30sq m, with picture-windows, several with balconies. It has three decks, the third storey being a glass-walled observation lounge (with air-conditioning).

Asia is also a focus of Uniworld, whose 2015 program of 11 to 18-day cruises aboard boutique riverboats takes in China, Vietnam and Cambodia. Shore excursions include temples, art and theatre, water puppet shows, five-star hotels and fine local food (uniworldcruises.com.au).

> Aqua Mekong cruises will run over three, four or seven nights, from $3315 for 2015. aquaexpeditions.com
Cruising the Ayeyarwady provides a window into the everyday lives of villagers still embracing ancient cultures.

GOLDEN-SPIRED PAGODAS and ancient temples shimmer in the sunlight as passengers laze on sunbeds aboard luxe cruiser Orcaella, which trails a stylish wake on Myanmar’s tranquil rivers. Half a dozen or so itineraries are offered by cruise operator Belmond along the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy), the country’s largest river, flowing north to south along the backbone of the country formerly known as Burma and emptying into the Andaman Sea. Orcaella joins sister boat Road to Mandalay, which has cruised the same river for 19 years. Routes take in Bagan, Yangon, Mandalay and the Ayeyarwady’s chief tributary, the Chindwin.

A hearty chorus of “mingalarba” (Burmese greeting) becomes familiar on daily guided excursions to fascinating places such as Bagan’s colourful Nyaung Oo market, vine-clad monasteries, the Returning Home pagoda in Zalon (where a bronze Buddha statue stolen by...
the British Army was returned by order of Queen Victoria) and Myanmar’s only bespectacled Buddha at Shwemyatmyan pagoda.

Visits to more remote villages, where tourists are a rarity, are by unconventional modes of transport such as ox carts and flower-decked trishaws. Belmond (formerly the Orient Express company) launched the 50-passenger, four-decked Orcaella last year. It has 25 air-conditioned cabins, staterooms and suites, and floor-to-ceiling glass doors with Juliet-style balconies in all rooms.

River cruising in Myanmar provides a rich insight into the lifestyle of the people as much as the country’s history and architecture. Stretch out and watch river life unfold: women scrubbing clothes near the river’s edge, children splashing about, villages tending rice paddies, saffron-robed monks, fishermen waiting for a catch, and men transporting sand in small wooden canoes to sell for small building and farming projects, and as fertiliser.

Life on board may entail absorbing lectures from experts on Burmese history and art as well as insights into Myanmar’s turbulent heritage. The country, with a population of about 60 million, is enjoying a surge in tourism. It was governed by the British from the 1820s to 1948, then ruled by a military junta. Now it has a quasi-civilian government. Peace activist Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy, continues to work to bring change to her country. Passengers are immersed in local traditions and taught how to tie a longyi, the traditional long skirt, and apply thanaka, made from bark and used as both sunblock and make-up.

Dining is an adventure around spicy curries, delicate green tea-leaf salads, superb soups and decadent desserts created by Thai chef Bansani Nawisamphan. Daily feasts are served in the elegant liner-clad dining room, but a highlight is a gourmet barbecue small flickering candles in the ruins of Min Hla fort, villagers performing traditional Burmese folk dances and songs in the moonlight.

Take a dip in the plunge pool, work out in the gym or indulge in a spa treatment. View a film poolside on a starry night (with ice-cream and popcorn) or write a message on a fire-lit Shan balloon that disappears into the Myanmar darkness. That’s the magic and mystique of the waterways.

For cruise holiday packages call Qantas Holidays on 1300 735 542 or visit qantas.com/holidaysaustralianway.