



Tauck’s Rendezvous on the Seine river cruise offers a full cultural immersion of France’s beautiful Normandy region. *AARON SAUNDERS*

# A Seine to behold aboard Tauck river cruises

*Line offers a wide range of immersive cultural experiences to Paris and beyond*



**AARON SAUNDERS**  
*Ports + Bows*

From the Danube to the Rhine, some of the most memorable experiences I’ve had have been on river cruises with Tauck (tauck.ca). The Connecticut-based company, which also offers land and small-ship tours, prides itself on its all-inclusive nature and uncommon experiences, and its river cruises are among the very best in Europe.

I joined Tauck’s ms Sapphire in Paris recently to get a first-hand look at its 10-day Rendezvous on the Seine river cruise itinerary. With calls on Rouen, Honfleur, Caudebec-en-Caux, Les Andelys and Vernon, plus a day dedicated to visiting the D-Day landing beaches in Normandy, this river cruise offers plenty of cultural and historical pull. And at every step of the way, Tauck offered up plenty of evidence that how you see the world really matters.

Start with Paris. Tauck puts you up at the Hotel Pullman Par-

is Tour Eiffel — literally a block from the Eiffel Tower. They give you a balcony room that faces said tower. To top it off, a private welcome dinner is held on the hotel’s 10th floor, complete with a sunset champagne toast to the start of the trip and France’s famous City of Love.

Tauck gives guests three full days to explore Paris on this itinerary, including ample free time to discover the city on your own. You can opt out of the included excursions at any time (Tauck never sells optional journeys on its river cruises), but why would you when visits to the Louvre, the Musée d’Orsay, and Versailles are on the menu?

The river cruise on the Seine starts in great fashion, with a champagne sail away up on deck when weather permits. Tauck’s 361-foot (110-metre) long ms Sapphire (also known as the Swiss Sapphire) was totally refurbished last winter from stem to stern, and the results are striking. Tauck actually took the overall passenger complement down to just 98 guests in order to add 20 new Category 6 state-rooms that measure 225 square feet (20.9 square metres) apiece. I occupied one of these spacious rooms, and was impressed at the

level of detail and craftsmanship Tauck put into them.

Category 6 (and Category 7) rooms now feature enlarged, marble-clad bathrooms complete with rainfall showers; a proper sitting area with a full-sized table and two chairs; a super-comfortable bed; North American, European and USB power outlets; brand new lighting throughout; in-room Nespresso machines; and totally redesigned lighting that provides half a dozen different modes.

With just 98 guests on a ship that would hold up to 140 on any other line, there’s no competition for anything. The ship’s classy, wood-panelled lounge and dining room always feel spacious and uncrowded, and the ms Sapphire even boasts an alternate dining venue (Arthur’s) that’s positioned facing the stern on Deck 3. Open from 11 a.m. until 11 p.m. daily, it serves up more casual fare on a fixed menu, plus some incredible views. It sounds awful to say this, considering we were cruising in France with its many culinary delights, but the made-on-board hamburger was a runaway hit.

That doesn’t mean you’re going to lack for immersive cultural experiences. Three Tauck tour directors travelled with us, all of whom spoke fluent French, and two of whom called France home. Over the course of a week, we were treated to a private dinner

and cocktail reception at a French chateau near Rouen; a full-day tour of the D-Day beaches; visits to the quaint seaside towns of Étretat and Honfleur; fresh, locally caught seafood served buffet-style up on deck; and a private early morning tour to Monet’s home and gardens in Giverny. At sunrise. Without the crowds.

While the Seine season is over for this year (the ms Sapphire sails her last voyage for 2017 as I type this), Tauck starts up its 2018 departures on April 3. Sailings continue right through October of next year, and Tauck is really ramping up some of the special features. New for next year will be a private, after-hours visit to the Louvre on most departures, and a brand new excursion to Caen to see the Memorial de Caen, widely regarded as one of the best Second World War museums in France. Making an already great experience on the Seine even better for the coming year: that’s travelling well.

Happy cruising.

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## Stowe skiers: Nov. 19 deadline for Vail Resorts Epic Pass

**ROCHELLE LASH**

Ski and snowboard fans of the landmark Stowe Mountain Resort, now part of Vail Resorts, have an extraordinary opportunity to experience its new affiliates, among the top areas in North America and Europe.

At almost half the price of previous season passes at Stowe, the new Epic Pass is a steal.

A season pass to Stowe in 2016-2017 cost US\$1,600 for adults. The top-echelon, all-access Epic Pass costs US\$899, with unlimited access to 45 superior mountains in North America, Europe and even Australia. Nearly half-price discounts are offered for juniors, five to 12. The deadline to purchase is Nov. 19.

The Vail Resort portfolio also includes Vail and Beaver Creek, Colo.; Park City, Utah; Heavenly in Lake Tahoe, Calif., and Whistler-Blackcomb in B.C. Overseas, the Epic Pass covers Arlberg in Austria; Les 3 Vallées, Paradiski and Tignes-Val d’Isère in France; Skirama Dolomiti in Italy; and 4 Vallées in Switzerland.

An Epic Local Pass costs US\$679 for adults (valid in North America, with restrictions on dates at some of the resorts. There also are four-day (US\$459) and seven-day (US\$679) passes. A day ticket to Stowe in 2017-2018 costs US\$99 for adults, with 48-hour advance, online purchase.

“It’s fitting that Stowe is the first eastern destination of Vail Resorts,” said Bobby Murphy, Stowe’s new general manager. “We are the quintessential Vermont area, and we have modernized to add a sophisticated playground of après-ski fun.

“Stowe has a distinguished history, plus tough steeps on Mount Mansfield and mellow terrain on Spruce Peak.”

Stowe Mountain Resort, a two-and-a-half-hour drive south of Montreal, wrapped up a \$500-million development in 2016. The latest off-mountain leisure elements include: Stowe Rocks (an indoor climbing facility); a pedestrian plaza with family friendly eateries like Canteen; new shops selling upscale skiwear like Bogner; a skating rink and the Children’s Adventure Center; and the Ski and Ride School.

**Details:** EpicPass.com, 970-754-0008. Stowe Mountain Resort: 800-253-4754, [stowe.com](http://stowe.com), [sprucepeak.com](http://sprucepeak.com).

# Easy riding in Virginia

*Gentle downhill slope of state’s Creeper Trail makes for family-friendly rambling*

**KAREN TESTA**

DAMASCUS, VA. It was an invitation even teenagers who had hoped to be watching college football or playing video games couldn’t resist: a mountain bike ride — all downhill.

Visitors to the Virginia Creeper Trail will find a remarkably family-friendly ride, adaptable to any skill level, and with scenery to hold anyone’s attention. With its broad paths and wide curves, the Creeper encourages riders to take it at any comfortable pace, with plenty of opportunities for breaks along the way.

The trail runs about 34 miles (55 km) from Whitetop Station in Whitetop, Va. (about a mile, or 1.6 km, shy of the North Carolina border) into Abingdon, Va. But its most popular segment is the first 17 miles (27 km) from Whitetop to Damascus, on a stone dust and gravel trail that allows bikers to reap the benefits of gravity on a gorgeous, woodsy path over dozens of trestles and bridges back into town.

At least a half-dozen outfitters in the area rent bikes (including some with “comfort seats” for a slight upcharge) and provide shuttles to Whitetop Station. The shuttle trip up the twisting and turning mountain roadway — where speed limits reduce at several places to 20 m.p.h. (32 km/h) — takes a bit more than an hour from Abingdon and about 40 minutes from Damascus. It’s well worth the US\$25 fee per rider.

Note to procrastinators: Book

ahead during busy times, such as fall foliage season when rental shops sell out on weekends.

Once at Whitetop Station, riders claim their bikes and head out. On a recent October weekend, with low humidity, moderate temperatures and near peak foliage, the trail was heavily travelled and sometimes crowded with bikers ranging from toddlers in trailers to grandparents. But calling out a simple, “On your left!” got most of the slower riders to ease to the side and allow others to pass. Still, there was no hurry. Speed would be contrary to the spirit of the Creeper.

**HISTORY OF THE CREEPER**

The Creeper began as an Indigenous footpath. Later, it was used by colonists and settlers including Daniel Boone, according to a history provided by the U.S. Forest Service. By the early 1900s, it was a rail line, where steam engines moved coal, lumber, passengers and other supplies from Abingdon to North Carolina. The nickname, the Virginia Creeper, is said to come from the super slow speed at which the early steam locomotives navigated the many twists and turns and chugged up the mountain pass.

But the rail line struggled, and after decades of failing to turn a profit, the railroad company petitioned to abandon the line. The Creeper saw its last train run in the 1970s, and the U.S. Forest Service secured much of the land and started removing the track.



A cyclist rides through the Virginia Creeper Trail. Local outfitters rent bikes, including some with “comfort seats” for a slight upcharge. *KAREN TESTA/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS*

**ALL DOWNHILL**

The most popular segment — the 17 miles (27 km) from Whitetop Station to Damascus — requires only moderate pedalling given the gentle downhill slope. Signs along the route indicate when hikers or bikers are coming into the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area or moving onto private property.

There are plenty of spots to stop along the way, including restrooms.

Green Cove Station Visitor Center is the first significant stop, and is just three miles (five km) from Whitetop Station. One of the most picturesque areas along the path is the High Trestle, a little more than seven miles (11.3 km) from the top. The elevated structure stretches 550 feet (168 metres) and is 100 feet (30 metres) tall. Taylor’s Valley is about 11 miles (18 km) from the top, and a perfect spot for a break, especially if the volunteers from

the local church are set up on the green. Recently, about a half-dozen church members were offering hotdogs with homemade slaw and chili, cookies, fruit salad, pumpkin roll, chips and cold drinks — all for a free-will donation.

**TRAIL TOWN**

The final approach to Damascus becomes obvious for several reasons. The trail levels a bit, and pedalling requires more effort; cars can be seen along the adjacent highway; and signs along the path remind travellers they are only a short distance from a cold beer or margarita.

Damascus has come to be known as “Trail Town USA,” as at least a half-dozen biking and hiking trails intersect there, most notably the Appalachian Trail. The community’s economy is built upon hikers, bikers and anglers, and its downtown is dotted with bike shops

and sporting goods and outdoors shops.

**READY FOR MORE**

The popular downhill portion of the Creeper is only half of the trail. It continues another 17 miles (27 km) through a more settled area that will require a bit more exertion for the biker or hiker but is still family friendly. The path undulates from Damascus to the trailhead in Abingdon, where there is a visitor centre and an original steam locomotive on display.

And for a real challenge, the ambitious can always turn around, and take the path back up.

**IF YOU GO ...**

Virginia Creeper Trail: A 34-mile (55-km) route from Whitetop to Abingdon, Va. [www.fs.usda.gov/detail/gwj/specialplaces/?cid=stelprdb5312878](http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/gwj/specialplaces/?cid=stelprdb5312878).