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CRUISE MAGAZINE

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makes
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christens
10 longships**

going back to cali
**Vintage
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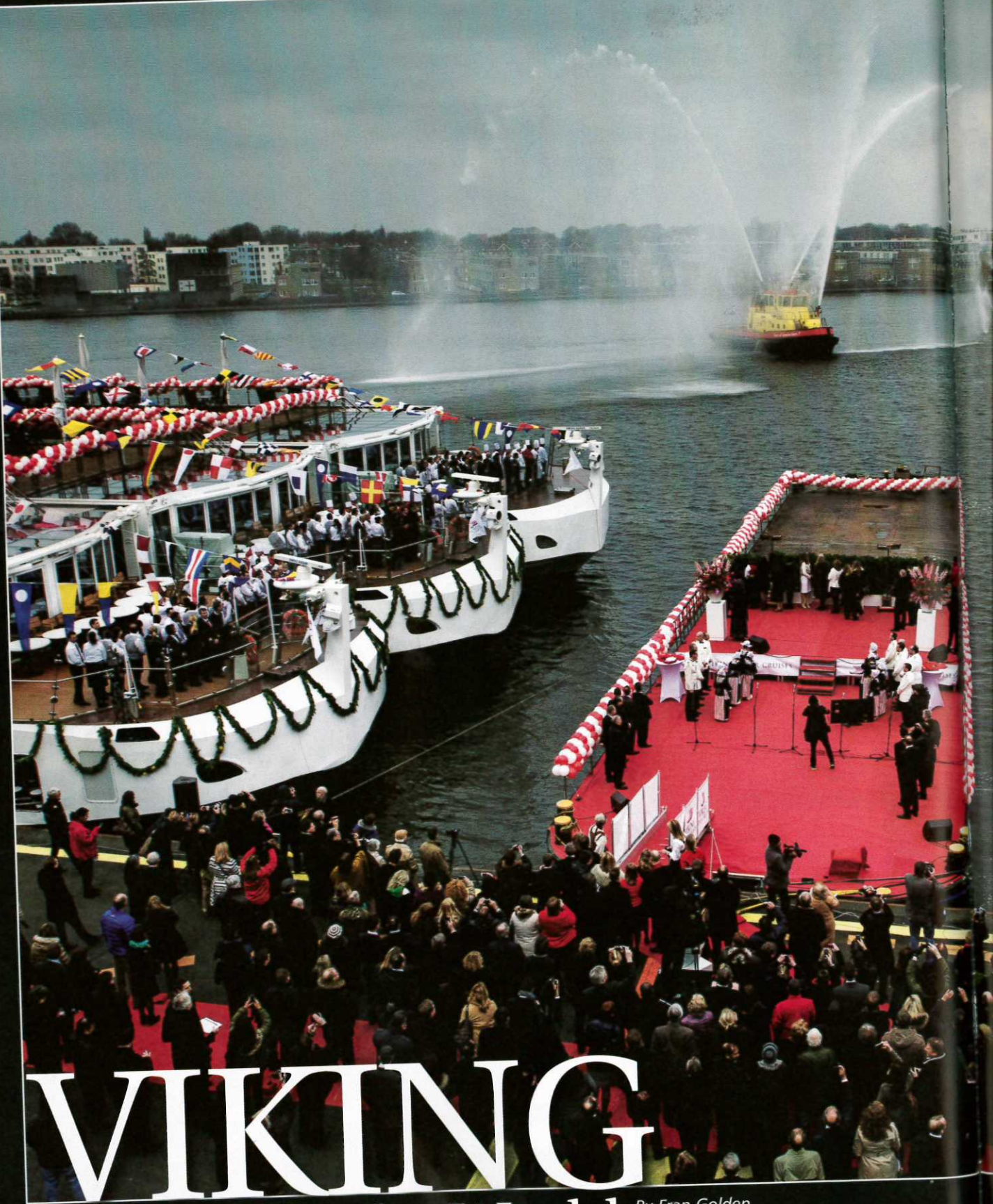
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DISPLAY UNTIL 9/10/2013

Photography courtesy Viking River Cruises



VIKING

Conquers the World

By Fran Golden

This spring, *Porthole* was on hand for the christening of 10(!) Viking River Cruises longships — who knows how many more there will be by the time you read this!



For anyone who doubts that river cruising is hot, hot, hot, consider that Viking River Cruises plans, by the end of 2014, to have introduced 28 nearly identical 190-passenger longships in three years on European waterways. The line recently christened 10 of the high-tech vessels in a ceremony in Amsterdam, a feat recognized by the Guinness World Records. That's on top of four ships christened simultaneously last year.

Clearly, it's good to be Viking.

Technically, Guinness counted eight of those ships toward the record (as two of them had been in the water since last year), but the point is clear: Viking is making a splash. Bringing on so many ships may seem risky, but Viking is the Big Kahuna of river cruising and, according to Viking chairman Torstein Hagen, the longships have proven "hot sellers" — the line's 2013 season nearly sold out by mid-March. National sponsorship of PBS's Masterpiece Theater, with its highly popular British period drama "Downton Abbey" has helped create considerable buzz about the line. And while leisurely river cruising has traditionally attracted an older crowd, Viking has managed to tap into the trend of younger baby boomers looking for an alternative, up-close way to explore inland destinations.

But the line's new ships are also an allure. Built at the Neptune Shipyard in Rostock, the ships are all named for Norse gods — "longships" being a reference to ancient Viking vessels. Despite tweaks in decor — some of the ships use more marble, others more wood — the vessels are virtually interchangeable. Pick the route you want; which longship you're on doesn't really matter.

So we discovered after touring several vessels and doing a two-day sample cruise on the newly christened *Viking Aegir*, named for the Norse god of the ocean.



LONGSHIPS LIKE AEGIR RUN WITH HYBRID DIESEL-ELECTRIC ENGINES THAT BRING A NUMBER OF GREEN ADVANTAGES, INCLUDING A CLEANER, QUIETER RIDE. SOLAR PANELS ON THE DECK HELP FUEL THE ENGINES.



Aquavit Terrace

Revolutionary design

When it comes to designing river ships, the sky is not the limit. River ships in Europe need to meet certain size specifications to fit under low bridges and into narrow locks. With a goal of adding more space — including river ship-rarities like cabins with verandas and an all-weather, casual alternative dining venue — the designers of *Viking Aegir* and its sister longships had to rethink the very structure of river ships. The result: These German-built ships are stunning for the fact they are so different than other river vessels. In the patented design, interior hallways were moved off-center, shifted to one side to provide more space outdoors, and suites were placed sideways. To create room for the café, the traditional pointy bow was scrapped in favor of a snub nose.

Green is in

River cruising tends to be calm; you are unlikely to get seasick. But engines on older ships can be loud and tend to cause vibration. Longships like *Aegir* run with hybrid diesel-electric engines that bring a number of green advantages, including a cleaner, quieter ride. Solar panels on the deck help fuel the engines. A deck-top organic herbal garden brings a visual advantage — and enhances supplies for the shipboard chefs.

Hip Ambiance

Stepping aboard *Aegir*, it's clear you're not on your grandmother's river ship. Immediately, you enter an airy, two-story atrium topped by a skylight that feels like a hip hotel. Tall, backlit marble panels and real flowers growing in planters decorate a wood staircase that rises above a terrazzo floor. At the top of the stairs is a striking, colorful, modern depiction of an ancient Viking ship. A glass elevator to one side makes the two main decks accessible to those with mobility issues. Throughout, the designers make clever use of light and glass, complemented by soft-toned Scandinavian décor and the best in modern comfort.

Dining alfresco and beyond

Serving up views aplenty, a favorite space on the *Aegir* is the Aquavit Terrace, the casual café located at the bow. The conservatory-style room has a glass ceiling and sides that open, leading to true alfresco dining at nine tables. On a sunny day, this is the prime spot for a small buffet lunch. There are three tables indoors, or you can take your meal in the adjacent lounge.

Glass windows line two sides of the Viking Restaurant, giving a more airy feel to a low-ceilinged space. Dining here is open seating, three meals a day at set times. Dinner, typically at 7 p.m., includes a choice of several hot and cold appetizers and three entrees, as well as always-available choices including grilled salmon and New York-cut steak. Soups are the standout, with such delicious concoctions as roasted tomato and artichoke. Breakfast and lunch both feature extensive buffets, but you can also order menu items from servers. Red and white house wines, beer, and soft drinks are complimentary at lunch and dinner.





Witness the record-breaking christening for yourself!



Cabins with verandas

A number of European river ships have French balconies — doors that slide open to a narrow ledge — but lack real veranda cabins. Viking changes the equation with 39 cabins (at 205 square feet each) boasting verandas big enough for two mesh chairs and a small drinks table, and larger suites with even bigger verandas. The ship also has 22 cabins with French balconies, but you won't miss views no matter what cabin you're in; even the lowest-category cabins have portholes. Done up in soothing tones, all cabins are equipped with a safe, mini-fridge, glass shower, L'Occitane bath products, fresh fruit basket, complimentary bottled water, hotel-style beds done up with fluffy white duvets, and other niceties.

Suite Life

Those seeking top-flight accommodations get special focus. Seven Veranda Suites (270 square feet each) have small living rooms with balconies, plus a French balcony in the bedroom. For those who want even more space, two 445-square-foot Explorer Suites are the largest real suites — with separate living room and bedroom — on any river ship in Europe.



Veranda

Sun, shade, and views

For 360-degree views, head to the sun deck, which runs across the entire length of the ship. Here, tables, chairs, and cushioned loungers are strategically placed both in the sun and in shaded areas under canopies. Stroll past the herb garden or test your skill on the two putting greens, shuffleboard court, or with the giant chess set. The only thing you can't do up here is get much exercise. Viking made a strategic decision not to have a gym, spa, or pool. Instead, the line has agreements at luxury hotels en route where guests can use health facilities.



Herb Garden

The program

River cruising is about exploring. Most passengers come for the destinations and take advantage of Viking's included shore excursions, such as walking tours with local guides. Otherwise, a whole lot of schmoozing goes on. Passengers tend to be well-traveled, with the mere absorbing of passing scenery being a popular pursuit. The spacious, windowed Viking Lounge, the ship's main indoor hub, has a nice wooden bar and is equipped with a grand piano where the resident pianist plays classical and modern tunes at a nightly cocktail hour. The lounge also serves as the venue for lectures by professors and performances by local folk troupes. Movies are shown some nights, as the lounge is quipped with pull-down screens and surround sound.

The other newly christened ships are Viking Atla, Viking Bragi, Viking Embla, Viking Forseti, Viking Jarl, Viking Rinda, Viking Skadi, Viking Tor, and Viking Var. The ships cruise on the Danube, Rhine, and Main rivers as well as on other waterways in Eastern Europe, Southern France, and Holland. For more information, visit vikingrivercruises.com. ♻️



Explorer Suite