

Proud Marie

Uniworld's new S.S. Antoinette brings glamour to European river cruising

BY KENDRA STREY



Any good decorator will tell you that your foyer makes your household's statement. Or that it should. It tells guests whether you're bold, sophisticated, classic, inviting, or that you don't follow tradition.

When I boarded Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection's new S.S. *Antoinette* in Amsterdam last March, the vessel's two-deck-high lobby told me a lot about the riverboat that was to be my home for the next few days. A stunning 10-foot sapphire Baccarat chandelier shimmered ever so elegantly as passengers circled it while descending a spiral staircase to the reception desk. Strauss fashioned the piece for New York City's famous Tavern on the Green restaurant.

COURTESY UNIWORLD (4)

"My father had eaten many meals under that chandelier," said the ship's interior designer, Antoinette (Toni) Tollman, as we admired the piece from the top of the staircase. She was referring to Stanley Tollman, chairman of the Travel Corporation, Uniworld's parent company. When Tavern closed in 2009, the Tollmans snagged the fixture at auction. "We didn't know what we were going to do with it," said Tollman. "I guess my father never thought we'd build a whole ship for it."

I inspected nearly every square inch of the *Antoinette* on a 3-night preview cruise between Amsterdam and Hoom, a few hours north. The regular 7-night Castles Along the Rhine itinerary (see "Rolling on the River," page 44) travels between Amsterdam and Basel, Switzerland, treating passengers to views of some of the 40-plus castles along the Rhine River, but even my short trip hooked me on river cruising.

Prior to this voyage, I'd cruised only in the ocean on a megaship carting more than 2,000 passengers. What a difference the 443-foot-long, 164-passenger *Antoinette* was. I enjoyed cruising with the smaller group of fellow passengers, and I felt as though I got to know them while socializing on the sundeck and taking day trips ashore. And I appreciated the ambience Tollman had created.



Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection's S.S. *Antoinette* sits dockside in Amsterdam, where she debuted in March. Antoinette (Toni) Tollman designed the interiors, which feature a Baccarat chandelier in the lobby (opposite page) and mirrored columns in the Salon du Grand Trianon (left and above).





Mosaics by South African artist Jane du Rand adorn the riverboat's indoor pool area (left and below).



European Elegance

"You need to give people a little fantasy," Tollman said, as she showed me around the vessel, explaining that she wanted her design approach to teach travelers about another time and another part of the world. "The ship design itself is part of your total Europe experience, not just the motor-coach tours and other shore excursions. You come back to the ship and the immersion continues."

Tollman explained that for inspiration, she drew on the glamour of 18th-century France. She modeled the main lounge, Salon du Grand Trianon, after the Palace of Versailles' Hall of Mirrors; mirrors adorn the salon's square columns, with a herringbone wooden dance floor in the center. Clustered furnishings create cozy nooks for small groups to enjoy tea and conversation or for solos to delve into a good book.

With every stroll around the ship over the ensuing days, I felt more drawn in by the artistic detail. That chandelier at the entry wowed, of course, but so did the hand-picked art books in the salon; the 1920s–1940s movie posters in the 20-seat theater; and original sketches, lithographs, and oil paintings selected from personal collections and showcased in the hallways. Even my cabin (one of the basic staterooms) had marble flooring and countertops and heavy glass shower doors in the bathroom.

Going With the Flow

I found that the *Antoinette's* dedication to quality extended to the food and activities. My friend and traveling companion, Rebekah Bryant, a Costa Mesa-based marketing professional,

LEFT TO RIGHT: COURTESY UNIWORLD

Rolling on the River



A QUICK LOOK AT UNIWORLD'S

S.S. Antoinette

LENGTH: 443 feet

CAPACITY: 164 passengers; 73 staterooms, 9 suites

2011 ITINERARIES: Europe. Fares for the 7-night Castles Along the Rhine itinerary (pictured) start at \$1,999 per person; fares for the 7-night Rhine Holiday Markets itinerary start at \$2,099 per person. AAA discount offered.

WHAT WE LIKED: The service was spot-on, and the vessel has a heated indoor water-propelling pool.

WHAT WE DIDN'T LIKE: The wireless Internet service was difficult to access, and the reception desk distributes passwords for access blocks of only two hours at a time.

CURRENT NEWS

Uniwold's 128-passenger *Douro Spirit* debuted in June, sailing on 10-night cruises in Portugal and Spain along the Douro River. Coming in 2012, the line's 60-passenger *River Saigon* will offer 7- and 14-night cruises in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Traveling solo? Uniworld waives single supplements on select departures.

was excited to attend the onboard art talk one afternoon. Historian Jan Oosterman discussed the masters of the Dutch Golden Age, focusing on pieces that were currently on view at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum.

"When traveling, I think it's important to learn something about the spirit of a place," Rebekah said after the lecture. "I don't want to only see paintings. I want to know who made them, why they were made, and what they mean. They patch together something about the character of a city. The more you explore cultural riches—be it through art, film, music, writings, paintings, cuisine—the more the heart of a place appears."

I took that afternoon to evaluate four intricate mosaics that adorn walls in the ship: two in the restaurant and two in the indoor pool area. It took South African artist Jane du Rand six months to complete them, from the sketching to the search for the perfect tiles to the actual composition.

Rebekah and I reconvened in the Salon du Grand Trianon for afternoon tea, which is offered daily. Being American, I don't "tea" all that often, yet by my third day, I found myself looking forward to sitting around, sipping Earl Grey, and snacking on the charcuterie and ornate miniature desserts.

The care that went into preparing those snacks carried over to our main meals in the Restaurant de Versailles. Breakfast and lunch were buffet style (braver souls than I ate the pickled herring, a Northern European delicacy), but dinner was always a grand yet comfortable affair. Multicourse meals showcased a mix of flavors and styles; I was equally impressed by the beef filet one night and a glammed-up shepherd's pie the next.

On our last evening, my party chatted at the dinner table until past 10 P.M., when we heard sounds of revelry coming from the salon. There we found that a contemporary jazzy songstress had already drawn several folks onto the dance floor.

Taking a seat on a chaise, I settled in for a good dose of people watching. I ordered a champagne cocktail and pulled out a cookie I'd slipped into my purse. Tollman had told me that, during her design research, she'd come across an image of Marie Antoinette with a table of the decorative sweets she was so notoriously fond of. Tollman asked the ship's pastry chef to create a dessert in the same fashion, and the result was this sugar cookie ornately decorated with a gold "A," presented in a delicate bag. As I nibbled on the cookie, I thought to myself, *Marie Antoinette would've giggled with delight.* **W**



An ornate "A" decorates sugar cookies served onboard.

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Your AAA travel agent can provide more information. Visit your local Auto Club branch, call (800) 814-7471, or go to AAA.com/travel.

KENDRA STREY

Great Dutch Treats

Plan a couple of days pre- or postcruise to explore Amsterdam. iamsterdam.com.

Canal Cruise. A variety of tour operators offer boat excursions, including narrated sightseeing trips and romantic dinner cruises. iamsterdam.com/en/visiting/things-to-do/canalcruises.

Anne Frank House. You can walk through the famous movable bookcase doorway into the secret annex where young Anne and her family hid during the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands in World War II. Another exhibit area showcases Anne's original red-checked diary. Save time by buying tickets ahead online. annefrank.org.

Van Gogh Museum. Along with the world's largest collection of Van Gogh works, the museum also displays pieces by his contemporaries. vangoghmuseum.nl.

Rijksmuseum. The entire Rijksmuseum collection, including drawings, prints, and photos, consists of about 900,000 items, with roughly 7,500 on display at a time. The main building is under renovation until 2013, but the Philips Wing remains open, and important pieces from the collection are displayed at other museums, locally and abroad, in the interim. rijksmuseum.nl.

Heineken Experience. Four interactive levels of the Holland brew's back story and immersion into modern culture end at a social melting pot: the bar. Two pints are included with your admission; try the Extra Cold version on tap. heinekenexperience.com

The Pancake Bakery. Don't be fooled by the name—it's not a breakfast joint. It opens at noon, so come hungry for lunch or dinner. The bakery serves giant Dutch-style pancakes (more than 75 different kinds); your best bet at a table for two is to split a savory creation for your main course and share a sweet one for dessert. pancake.nl.

De Negen Straatjes (The Nine Streets). Amsterdam's main canals are connected by nine side streets that together form this district packed with boutiques, restaurants, chocolatiers, and other diversions. de9straatjes.nl.

Bloemenmarkt (Flower Market). Operating since 1862 on one of Amsterdam's oldest canals, the flower market displays a variety of plants in bloom or bulb, from tulips to indoor cypress, on floating barges. The market is open year-round, Monday–Saturday from 9 A.M. to 5:30 P.M. and Sunday from 11 A.M. to 5:30 P.M. If you're planning to purchase flowers, plants, or seeds to take back to the U.S., the packets must have a CUSTOMS CLEARED stamp (check the date—stamps are valid for six weeks).