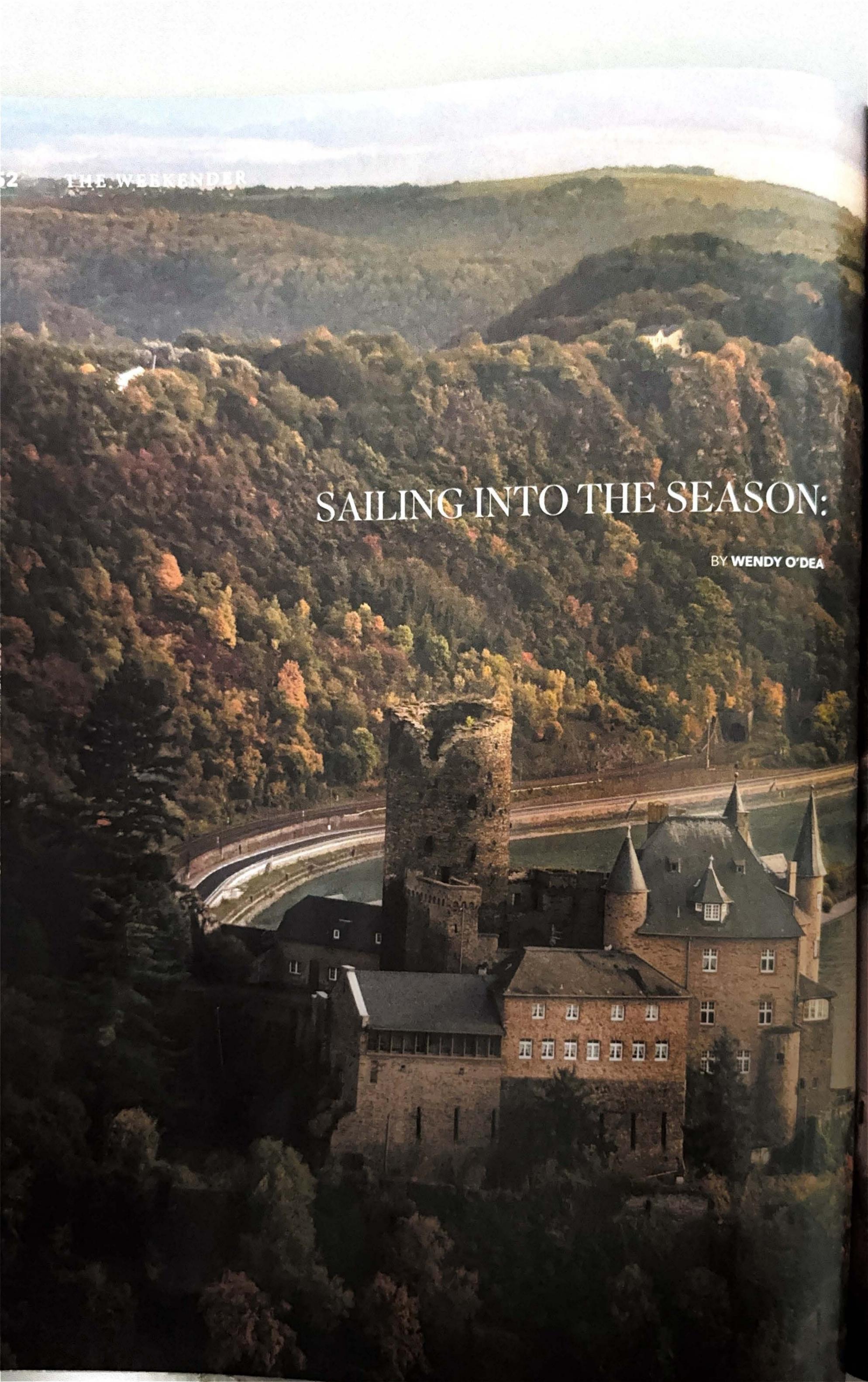
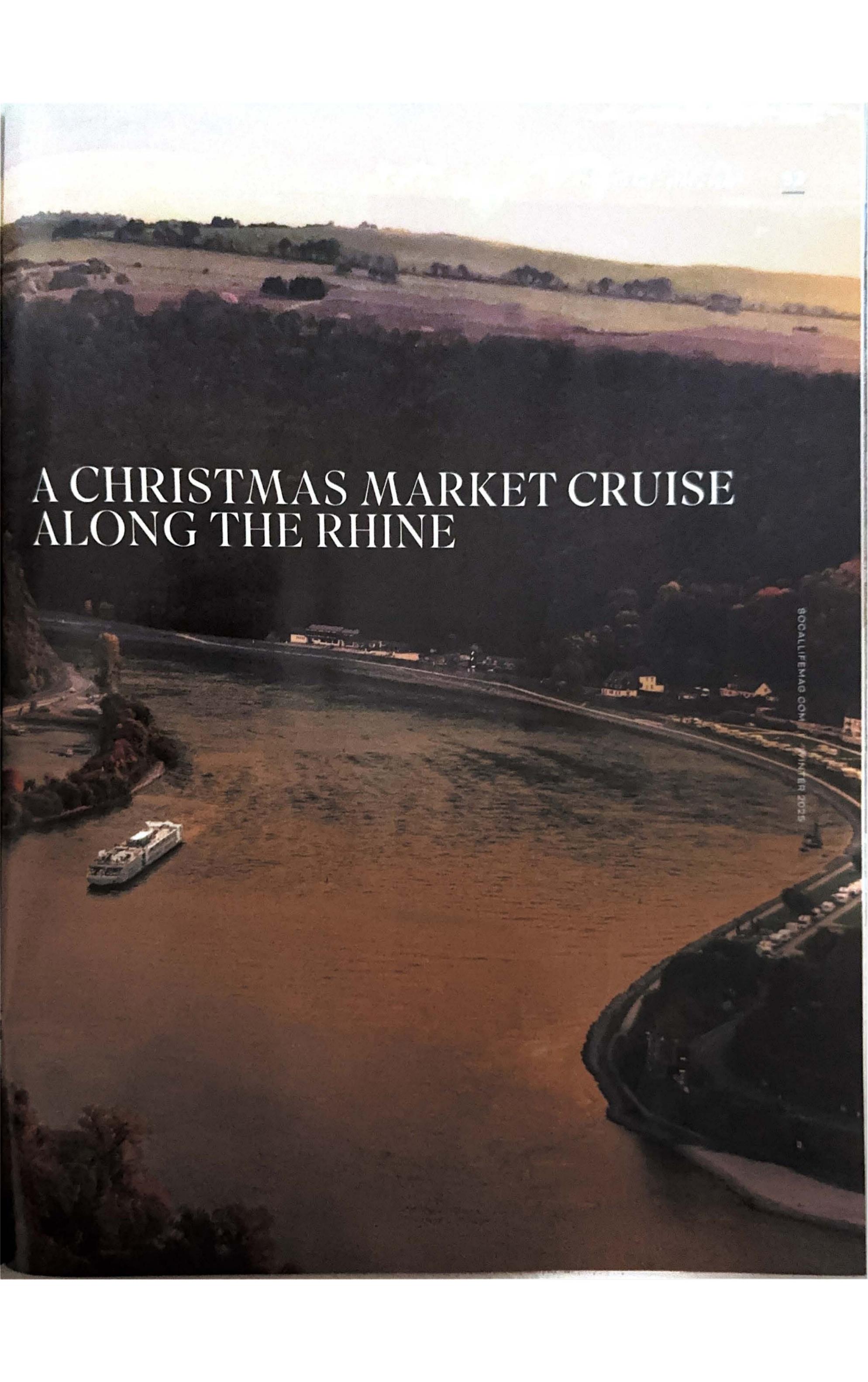


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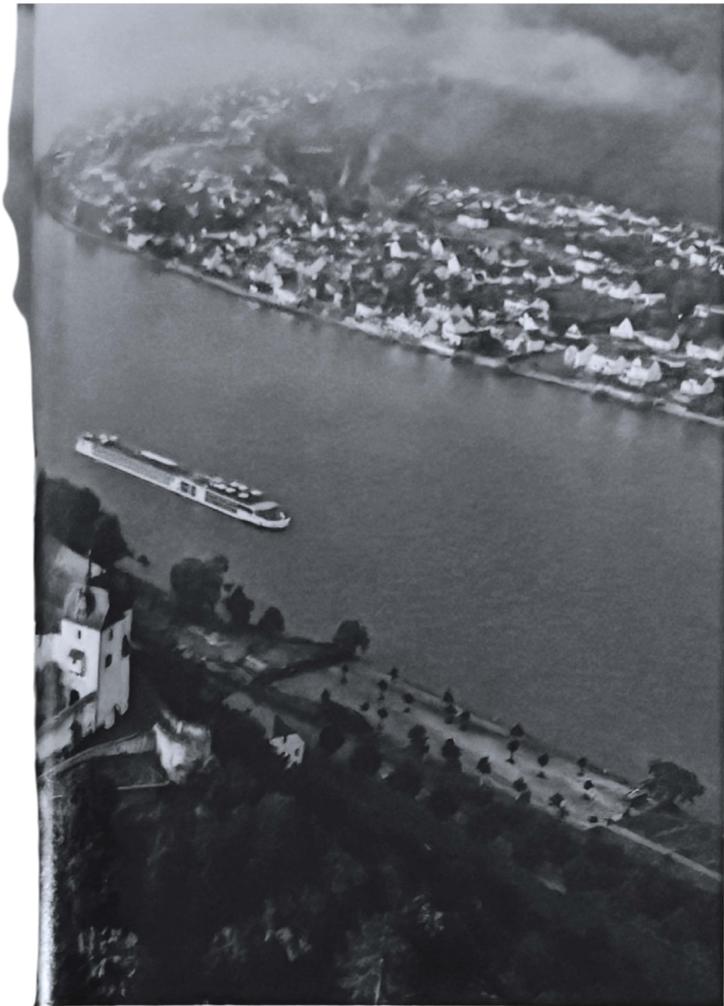
BY WENDY O'DEA



An aerial photograph of a wide river, likely the Rhine, during the golden hour of sunset. The water is a deep, warm brown. A large white cruise ship is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the river. The banks are lined with dark, dense forests and some buildings. In the background, rolling hills are visible under a soft, orange and yellow sky. The overall mood is serene and scenic.

# A CHRISTMAS MARKET CRUISE ALONG THE RHINE

SOALLIFEMAG.COM WINTER 2025



**E**urope's Christmas markets are magical, from Strasbourg's fairytale medieval architecture and Cologne's grand Gothic cathedral to tiny Rudesheim's narrow, winding alleyways twinkling with white lights. But it's hard deciding which markets to visit in which countries, and logistics can be challenging.

Not so if you sail on a *Viking Christmas on the Rhine* river cruise, where a longship transports you from Amsterdam, the Netherlands, to Basel, Switzerland (or vice versa) via Germany and France. En route, it sails along the historic Middle Rhine, a UNESCO World Heritage Site with castles, vineyards and medieval fortresses lining the banks of the river. It's a nice reprieve from the frequent chaos of the holiday season.

#### HISTORY OF THE CHRISTMAS MARKETS

The European tradition of the Christkindlesmarkt, or Christmas market, stretches back to the Middle Ages, when town squares in the German-speaking world began hosting markets each December so locals could stock up for winter. France eventually adopted the tradition, particularly in the Alsace region, where

control fluctuated between Germany and France for centuries. These practical fairs later evolved into festive gatherings selling crafts, holiday decorations, gingerbread, and a toasty hot mulled wine called glühwein. Those traditions continue today, but on a much grander scale.

#### JINGLE ALL THE WAY ... ALONG THE RHINE

Other than the ports in the Netherlands, which hasn't quite leaned into the Christmas market tradition just yet, passengers sailing on this eight-day itinerary along the Rhine can visit a different Christmas market in every port in Germany and France.

The main square of Cologne's Old Town, with its massive Gothic cathedral standing guard for centuries, is the first market on the agenda. One of the largest holiday markets in Germany, it blends history with modern-day tastes. More than a hundred wooden chalets spill out across the cathedral square, selling handcrafted gifts, wooden toys and serving regional specialties like Reibekuchen (crispy potato pancakes), oversized bratwursts on tiny buns, and mugs of steaming glühwein served in collectible, city-themed cups. For those feeling energetic, there are also areas for ice skating and curling.

Continuing south, Koblenz is the next stop on the itinerary. Not as well known to Americans, this Roman city is located where the Rhine and Moselle rivers meet. A walking tour meanders along narrow streets flanked with centuries-old architecture, including the baroque town hall on Jesuitenplatz, where illuminated, oversized numbers appear in the dormer windows to create the city's (and maybe the country's) largest Advent calendar.

The market is spread across six different squares with kiosks featuring handmade wooden nutcrackers, ornaments, and Herrnhut stars — a multi-pointed, illuminated star symbolizing the Star of Bethlehem.

A smaller and more storybook market (and the author's favorite) is found on the next stop in Rudesheim, where its Christmas Market of Nations features stalls representing more than 20 countries. Alleyways that can only be seen on foot create a particularly cozy and festive vibe. Although there are plenty of tourists, it's clear that this market is popular among the locals who are warming up with steaming bratwursts and potatoes and the village's signature Rudesheimer coffee spiked with brandy.

Mannheim and Speyer are next, with the morning spent in the former and the evening in the latter. The Mannheim market circles its famous 19th-century Water Tower, and the market's wooden stalls feature handmade gifts and treats, including trdelník (or chimney cake), a spiral dough grilled over coals and rolled in cinnamon sugar. On a much smaller scale, the Speyer market is built along one continuous street — Maximilian Street — stretching from the Romanesque

