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BARGE AT LARGE

A glorious, gastronomic gambol through Burgundy

This relaxing cruise explores France's scenic Burgundy region aboard an upscale hotel barge with comfortable cabins and wonderful fellow travellers.

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Barge along on Burgundy Canal

Relaxing cruise offers special chance to experience France’s unique way of life

Mike Grenby
SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

FLEURY-SUR-BOURGE, FRANCE - The morning mist rises slowly from the canal as L’Imperissable glides almost silently through the water. A grey heron watching for its breakfast fish takes off from the edge of the canal as the hotel barge approaches.

Depending on your temperament (and how late you were up the night before), you might still be asleep, or looking out your cabin window, or sitting on deck with a morning cuppa, or riding a mountain bike along the towpath as the rising sun flickers through the trees along the shore.

You and 10 or 11 others are getting to know a way of life here in France’s Burgundy region in perhaps the most relaxed way possible — that is unless you are powering along on that mountain bike before breakfast and after dinner every day to work off the three gourmet meals, featuring 18 different regional cheeses and 21 different fine French wines (plus an open bar) served during the weekend cruise.

It’s such an amazing feeling to have this experience on so many levels: educational as you learn about the people of this area — their lifestyle; self-indulgent as the crew of six anticipate your every need and want; scenic as you get up close and personal with the birds, fish and mating frogs (more on those later); above all, gastronomical as you feast on the specialties of the surrounding countryside.

So come along on what for me has been a particularly memorable travel adventure, something for almost everybody’s bucket list — and remember to bring your appetite.

I discovered this trip through Upmarket travel specialists Abercrombie & Kent, which specializes in personalized small group culture, wildlife and history travel with "extras" — abercrombiekent.com/travel.

Our adventure begins in Paris, where the 11 of us meet for the three-hour drive south to le canal Bourgogne (the Burgundy Canal). Lively laughter soon dispels any concerns about whether we’ll get along; six women who are either related or good friends plus two couples, all from the U.S., and I.

The cruise begins at the tiny village of Escommes, the high point of the canal 378 metres above sea level. And there she is, tied up at the side of a pond, the lady herself: our home for the next six nights. She’s 38 metres by five metres — a hotel barge with six cabins, all with ensuite bathrooms, and a crew of six to look after the maximum 12 passengers.

There’s a Jacuzzi up front, open and covered deck areas for sitting outside or doing yoga, and a dining room inside. Also on deck are the mountain bikes.

Dinner the first night sets the bar high. After a champagne reception with nibbles and then cocktails we dine on asparagus with quail eggs and homemade mayonnaise; duck with pay leekis (the green variety from this area), cherry and cassis sauce; two cheeses — Langres, Morbier; mouse au chocolate.

How impressive to see all of this is prepared by chef Into in a tiny galley with only two burners and a home-size oven.

The 33 glasses on the table are never empty: bottled still or sparkling water, Condeau white wine and a 2003 Moulin a Vent red. Plus three or four varieties of bread with that amazing salad of French butter. And ice/coffee.

After dinner I really do need to jump on one of those bikes to burn off at least a little of all that food and wine.

I ride around the lake as the sun goes down, past locals who sit in folding chairs with fishing rods angled out over the water, pasta, brie, white swan and some ducks, past a horse grazing in a field.

Together with the evening bird sounds and sweet grass fragrance, they all combine to create such a tranquil and relaxed feeling that after my ride sleep comes quickly.

I’m up early the next morning for another spin — this time on the towpath which runs along the canal, to check out the first of 42 locks we’ll be navigating.

I venture off the towpath toward a local village — but beat a hasty retreat when I run into a McDonal’d’s under construction.

I pick some mock orange blossoms and long grass for the breakfast table and return to the barge just in time to accompany Captain Rusty on the first of his daily forays to a local bakery to collect a variety of baguettes, croissants, brioches and sweet rolls.

Add cereals, fresh fruit, any kind of cooked breakfast — and several others decide to step ashore at the next lock to walk along the towpath, quickly getting far ahead of our barge which rarely reaches 4 km/h and frequently stops at yet another lock to be lowered to the canal’s next level down.

The canal even crosses a bridge over a river.

After a “light” lunch on board (chicken, ham terrine, a quinoa-like salad, broccoli, green salad, beetroot salad, cheeses, wines) we head off to visit the Château de Bussy-Rabutin, with all its peristyles including those of various historic notables’ mistresses.

We wander through the rose garden, and follow the twisting path of a labyrinth created from shoulder-high bushes.
This afternoon I am impressed by the 1999 Louis Jadot Les Bertins Pommard Premier Cru Cote de Beaune Burgundy wines served — costing at least $100 a bottle in a store, perhaps $200 in a restaurant. Of course, here on 17 Impressions site you can have as many fillls as you want. I definitely need another bike ride after this dinner, feeling the warm and cool air spots as summer’s late dusk approaches around 10 p.m.

Day 3 and the locks come every few hundred meters/yards on this stretch of the canal. Almost all are manual, some operated by the people who live in the lock houses; others by attendants who control several locks, riding from one to the next on a bike or scooter.

Welcome back on board. After yet another big feast of food and wine, it’s time for a bike ride.

So many historic sites to see along the canal, like the chapel at Chateau de Chateuneuf.

Enhancing cheese with a touch of champagne.

Oldest wine in cellar — six whites bottled in 1846, kept for research.

This evening we are serenaded by very vocal frogs apparently having a marvellous mating session — sound- ing our both high and low notes. Impressively it stayed open until 971.

Then back we go to the world of wine, for which the Burgundy area is so famous, with a visit to the Bouchard Pere et Fils cellars. Some 2.5 million bottles are stored here at a constant 13 degrees, including 2,000 bottles from the 19th century — the oldest: six whites bottled in 1840.

“We use these very old wines for research purposes,” says Laura Muller, our guide.

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