

French Fancies

Cruising the inland waterways of France is the perfect way to immerse yourself into local life and enjoy the regional delicacies

Imagine tying your boat up to a weeping willow in rural France and picnicking on local farm produce on a grassy bank under its shade; or mooring near a picturesque medieval village, among water lilies and swans, and enjoying a bottle of wine from a nearby vineyard.

Exploring the inland waterways of France not only means a slower, more relaxed pace of life and a historical and cultural experience. It also provides an amazing culinary one, with the opportunity to try a diverse range of regional cuisines with the added bonus that many of the canals pass through the world's most renowned vineyard regions.

Traveling in this fashion, you can explore the vineyards of Burgundy, and decide between a Pinot Noir red or Chardonnay white as you cross the largest canal bridge in Europe, or visit Arles, the landscape of Van Gogh and the vineyards of the Midi, considered by many to be among the most exciting in Europe today. In Anjodi, you can float through the world's oldest canal tunnel at Malpas and view the Pyrenees Mountains across the



The inland waterways are a relaxing way to enjoy France



2 Aerial view of the town of Bezier on the Canal du Midi
 3 Escargot, a french delicacy,
 4 The town of Arles

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vineyards or explore the diverse wines of the Loire Valley, where Muscadet, Chenin Blanc and sparkling wines excel.

Aside from France's popular canals, there is also Holland, where you can tour Delft and its famous pottery, and cruise the canals of Amsterdam; or Italy where you can vacation on the canals of Venice, visit St Mark's Cathedral and the Doge's palace and discover a side of the city rarely seen by tourists. Then there is Germany, rated for its clean swimming waters; Ireland, best known as a fishing retreat; and now Poland, which is the latest destination for regular inland waterway travellers. In fact, if you have the time, it is perfectly feasible to take a trip from Holland to Turkey via the extensive canal system that exists across Europe.

Hong Kong-based Peter Weiley, Rear Commodore of Hebe Haven Yacht Club,

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explains the attraction, “Having a history of off-shore ocean sailing and racing, we opted to captain our own ship on the River Saone, a branch of the Rhône in the area known as Franche-Comte in Burgundy. Each day you float past rural fields, small villages and waterfront houses. This is a wonderfully relaxed form of boating. There's no wash, no waves, no worries. When you find a place you like, it's very easy to find a decent place to moor up for the night, just a few boats together, far from the maddening crowds and hordes. These are very small one-shop, two-restaurant towns, where French life plays out in front of you on the streets. In



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such villages the biggest building is likely to be the grand church or chateau, with stone turrets and elaborate mosaics reminiscent of the Byzantine onion dome churches of Russia. Some date back to 800 AD.”

He advises arranging for basic provisions to be waiting for you when you arrive at the boat base, ready to be stowed on board. “One of the joys is having a supermarket-free holiday, and just popping into the local village boulangerie (bread shop) and charcuterie (butcher). The most interesting food purchases we made were from a lock keeper— gorgeous feta in oil and herbs in a jar, and a bottle of wine. When we asked him if he had any ‘salade’, he pulled a lettuce straight out of the dirt in the field beside the lock as we waited on board for the water level to rise!” But travellers should be aware that in rural France, nearly everything

shuts on Sundays and holidays, and local shops will close for a lunch that can quite easily stretch into the rest of the day. However, if you get into the rhythm of local life and shop in the morning, you will be able to stock up on baguettes, cheeses and some excellent vins de table. Seasonal fruits will sustain you through the day until the delights of a leisurely evening meal, perhaps fresh scallops and oysters, chops or a steak, followed by a tarte aux pommes at a small village restaurant.

For those with no boating experience it is possible to hire self-catering canal boats. These vary enormously in size, from those designed for couples looking for a romantic escape, to those that cater to groups of friends or large families and sleep up to 12. The boats are usually less than five years old, and well appointed, with galleys containing

decent refrigeration, china, quality European knives and pans, as well as all of the essential elements of a French kitchen. However, most will probably choose to forgo the kitchen in favour of dining in the character-rich restaurants that each voyage offers and enjoy the regional dishes and the travel tips of the locals.

Skippering your own boat is certainly the best option if you want independence and enjoy taking the helm, as you do not need any previous boating experience or even a license. The boats range from 15-30 feet long and travel at speeds between 6-15 km/h. The rental company will explain how to handle the craft and provide a written guide before you commence your voyage. However, it is worth noting that although the boat will be fully fueled when you collect it, it will need refueling from time to time and the costs can be significant.



5 Fresh pickings
6 Loire Valley

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“The inland boating fraternity is very friendly and novices are helped rather than sneered at,” says Weiley. “Mooring via anchor is not the done thing here. You simply moor at a riverbank. If you’ve chosen one without any bollards or individual wharves to tie up to, it’s no problem. Each barge boat comes equipped with a mallet and some stakes, so you hammer your own in under a shady weeping willow, pull out your gangplank to get ashore and call it home for the night.”

He says the mooring along the riverbanks rather than anchoring means that everyone gets on and off easily and can do their own thing. And he adds, “If you’re into the outdoors, choose a boat where you can steer both from on deck and inside, and make sure that it has a table on deck for al fresco dining.” Bikes can also be hired with the boat, which makes it easy when buying

provisions and you can also use them for sightseeing and touring vineyards.

If you would prefer someone else to skipper the boat and overlook the catering, a skippered barge might be the answer. Anyone who has seen the TV odyssey of celebrity chef Rick Stein as he took a skippered barge in mid-summer down major canals, such as the Midi, with a boat full of food and a shopping list of producers, will be familiar with this option.

John Liley, author of the acclaimed book on the French inland waterways, *France - the Quiet Way*, is the owner of the Luciole, a 100-ft barge boat with a 17-ft

beam and he explains that the advantage of this type of trip is that everything is taken care of. Passengers are picked up in Paris and then transported to Auxerre in Burgundy, where they meet with the boat and crew. Comfortable accommodation is provided for 14 guests. On board the Luciole, the itinerary covers the winemaking centres of Bailly and Chablis, as well as 12th Century basilica, the imposing chateau of Bazoches, and the 17th Century home of the Marquis de Vauban. Lunch on board might include a homemade caramelised onion and goat’s cheese tart; dinner, Roquefort soufflés on a bed of rocket followed by maigret

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of duck with Burgundy jus and potatoes Dauphinoise.

European Waterways, also known as Go Barging, also offers catered and crewed barge holidays but with a wider range of locations. It also offers a third alternative – luxury floating hotels, (‘bateaux hotels’) each accommodating around six to 13 passengers, with the air of a refined gentlemen’s club. The diverse itineraries include some of Europe’s finest scenery, fascinating history and local culture, with sideline excursions including visits to private vineyards, hot air ballooning and trips to local markets.

Golf, festivals, wine and walking cruises can also be arranged, as well as tandem cruises with more than one barge boat for larger groups. The menus, specially prepared by the chef, feature regional delicacies and local cheeses with wines and spirits selected to complement the food. ■

Text: Robby Nimmo Photos: AFP / Getty Images / Corbis / Inland Voyage

Tastes and Tipples

Before any dinner in Burgundy you will doubtless be given a small glass of kir, white wine with a splash of black currant liqueur called cassis. Burgundy is especially famous for one particular dish: boeuf bourguignon, also known as beef burgundy, a rich, hearty stew of beef braised for hours in the red wine the region is so aptly suited to grow and produce. A beef broth is cooked with garlic, carrots and onions, or sometimes bacon, mushrooms and onions. Whatever the base, a good full bottle of red burgundy wine from the regions of Chablis, Côte d’Or, Côte Chalonnaise, or Mâconnais is added and is served with a side of mashed potatoes. Other regional specialties include coq au vin, which is an old rooster, usually from Bresse—which many chefs say has the best chickens in the world—cooked in Burgundy wine. Many regions have their own

variation but the dish originates without doubt from Burgundy. The two kinds of grapes in the region are Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Red wine is the preferred accompaniment to big dishes involving game and red meat, including pheasant, boar, roast pork and delicate cheeses. White wines are reserved for grilled fish, shrimps, goat cheese and oysters, and some opt for a nice Chardonnay to go with the escargot of the region. To finish you should sample one of the last cheeses to be made directly from milk coagulation, called Epoisse it is salty and creamy with a rather pungent smell.

Useful Contacts

www.parisprovence.com.au
www.gobarging.com
www.leboat.com/hotel_barges/luciole