

LINGERING IN THE FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE

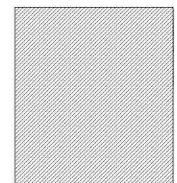
*Take your time and sip some wine as you cruise along
the canals of France* WRITTEN BY Jason Frye



SAILING THROUGH THE HEART of Burgundy, the *Venuphar* makes its way from one storybook village to the next, navigating dozens of locks and taking seven days to cover less than 40 miles of canal. Along the way you'll have ample time to relax and shake off the real world. Visits to wineries in Chablis; cathedrals in Auxerre; and postcard-perfect abbeys, châteaux and historic sites will ensure it. And if that's not enough, the wine—from Grand Cru and Premier Cru vineyards—and accompanying meals served on board will do the trick.

The cruise begins in Paris, where you meet the rest of the group at the Hotel Regina for a motorcoach transfer to Tanlay. In Tanlay you get your first glimpse of the *Venuphar*. Green and white, gleaming and pristine, it stands taller than the other boats, revealing something of the barge's personality and purpose. Stepping from the coach into an embrace or handshake from the captain, you start to feel at home.

Like the other barges in French Country Waterways' fleet, the *Venuphar* is built for intimacy and luxury. With six suites, there's room for 12 passengers; additionally, six crew—captain, matelot (think first mate), tour guide, chef and two hostesses—live on board. On the bow, a sundeck gives passengers room to lounge or dine outdoors.



while the stern is taken up by the wheelhouse (which you can visit, even steering the barge under the captain's supervision). Inside, a well-appointed salon and bar will serve as a cocktail hour, late night, or pre-and post-tour gathering space. Behind that are the dining room and galley. Belowdecks are the six suites, each with a sizable bathroom and king or dual-twin bed.

Your onboard chef prepares every meal of the week—save your visit to a Michelin-starred restaurant—from the galley. Dinner, a four-course, plated affair, lets the chef show off unforgettable recipes and techniques. In addition to two more outstanding wines and another trio of cheeses, each meal brings in regional ingredients—bought at nearby markets (you can shop with the chef at the market in Montbard)—and classic French preparations. Expect dishes like beef filet with morel mushrooms, duck breast with stone fruit, lamb, and fresh fish and desserts from the classic crêpe Suzette to fruit tarts with homemade ice cream to crème brûlée.

One evening during the sailing, you're in for a special treat as you dine at a Michelin-starred restaurant. On the Burgundy route, passengers on the *Nenuphar* dined at the two-star Le Relais Bernard Loiseau in Saulieu, enjoying an off-menu, three-course meal. Most passengers agree that while the service and experience there are unparalleled, the chef on board delivers meals on par with what you'll taste on your Michelin adventure.

Canal cruising can be as active as you'd like, as daily excursions to spots like Fontenay Abbey, the Grande Forge de Buffon, châteaux and wineries keep you busy. Or skip the tour and make one of your own by stepping off the boat at one of the locks and taking a walk or bike ride on the towpath beside the canal.

It's easy to outpace the barge, which goes only 2.5 miles per hour, and there are villages along the canal where you can shop in markets and patisseries, visit churches and cafes, or just explore the streets. Keep a few euros in your pocket in case you want to shop or in case you see the bakery delivery van driving around doling out hot baguettes.

Sailing through the countryside at this pace gives you an excellent feel for the place and people here, but getting off the boat and onto the towpath allows you to be part of the town, at least for a little while, so taking one morning or afternoon excursion is a must. fowl.com



clockwise from top: The bar and lounge on *Nenuphar*, a cozy space to gather at for evening drinks. Bottles of champagne aging and awaiting hand corking at Champagne Brigandat. Sailing the Canal de Bourgogne at a leisurely pace gives you long moments to soak up the countryside and even explore by bike or on foot. Fresh cheeses are brought in daily from local market. *opposite, top to bottom:* *Nenuphar*, your home for the week, takes you into corners of France that foreign visitors seldom see. The versatile dining room goes from a casual breakfast and lunch venue to an intimate and elegant dinner setting where the shipboard chef prepares meals that illuminate the flavors and traditions of the region.

