

# LIFE & ARTS

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## Lunch with the FT

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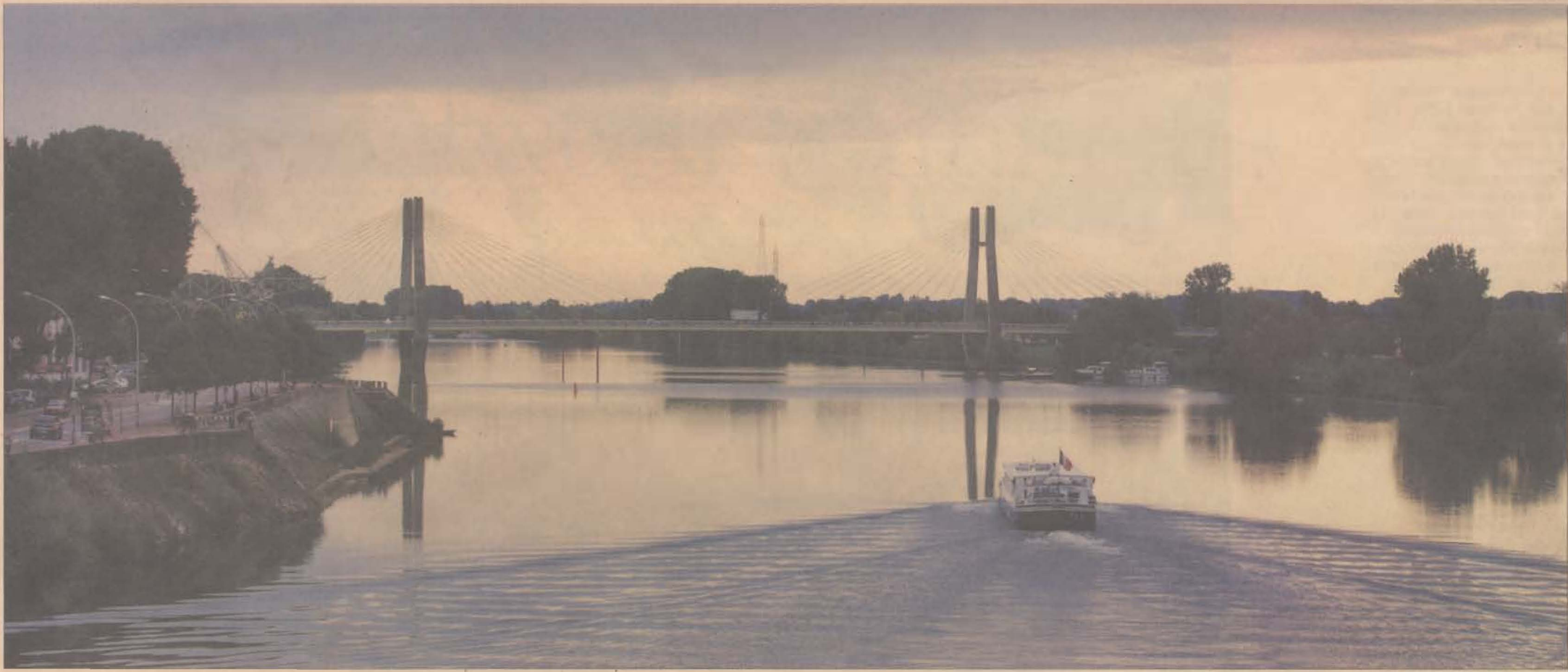
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# Rivers of wine

Ian Hargreaves samples the ultimate epicurean cruise – a blend of indolence, indulgence and the finest wines in Burgundy

The sign tells you nothing. At first glance, it could be warning you off a railway track. On inspection, it says, in English: "Many people come to visit this site and we understand. We ask you nevertheless to remain on the road and request that under no condition you enter the vineyard. Thank you for your comprehension."

What lies beyond is anything but routine. We are on the edge of the four-acre Romanée-Conti vineyard and looking at land worth \$1m per square metre. Once these grapes are pressed, vinified and kept, each bottle will be priced somewhere in the region of £10,000.

This Holy Grail animates the party of eight on board the Amaryllis, a luxury barge cruising 80 miles by canal and river between Dijon and Saint Léger, affording its fortunate passengers the opportunity to sample all 33 grands crus of the Burgundy region. Earlier this year the great travel writer Paul Theroux wrote in the FT that great travel writing involved "a really difficult trip, even better an ordeal". I am not bidding for the Theroux prize.

We are, however, almost pioneers. Ours is only the second Grand Cru Cruise undertaken by Afloat in France, a family business bought by Orient-Express in 2004 that is now exploring thematic tours for its five French barges to supplement the "floating house party" mainstay of the business.

The Amaryllis is a nice boat. At 39m, the hull only just squeezes through some locks on the waterway system that connects central France with the Mediterranean. That creates scope for four large cabins, which are comfortable in every detail. On a damp day, the barge salon is as cosy as a country cottage. When the sun shines, it's like sitting in a meadow with a swimming pool.

An unfussed crew of six shadows the eight guests' preferences with unerring instinct, whether proposing a game of pétanque on the gravel towpath or fixing a round of golf in Beaune.

Sam Pring, an Australian chef who has shared a kitchen with Rick Stein in Cornwall, has worked with the region's wine-

growers to design a week of menus as fine as the grands crus themselves, taking in escargots, scallops, lobster and a superb *filet de boeuf*. On the last day, he teaches me how to prepare duck breast in a jus of cassis, a dividend enjoyable long after the holiday. On the one evening we dine off the boat, we are guests at the Drouhin-Laroze vineyard. Here we feast on wild boar shot by Philippe Drouhin, the estate manager.

The essential magic of the barge is its ease. You can choose to billow in its comfort or, at any lock, step off to cycle, walk, run or explore. The countryside ranges between boatyard junk and utterly charming. When we wake in the morning, the green waterline laps two inches below our cabin port-hole – we feel like frogs on a lily pad. For those with trades to make in faraway places, mobile phone connectivity never falters.

There is, though, the question of the other guests. If you are the host of a floating house party, you make your choices. Here, who knows?

Our warm-up begins in Paris with a night at the Shangri-La Hotel, the Hong Kong group's first venture in Europe. Located in the Palais Iéna, once home to Napoleon Bonaparte's grand-nephew, the hotel offers fine views across the Seine to the Eiffel Tower, and fuses Asian delicacy with French display.

Here the minibus collects us and we meet four fellow *bargistes*; all Americans and good friends with each other. By the time we stop for coffee, we have the picture: Bob and Jean, who have planted their own vineyard in Pennsylvania, have invited Joe and Jan to join them in search of the famed Romanée-Conti wine.

When we reach Dijon, our party is complete. A British woman, who has just discovered that the trip is focused on wine, says she chose to celebrate her birthday in this way because she trusted Orient-Express to deliver comfort, peace and, on the waterways, closeness to nature. Her Scandinavian husband was expecting a golf holiday but is delighted to find himself among the grands crus. He has a cellar in London, devoted chiefly to bordeaux, bur-



**Vintage** The Amaryllis leaves the town of Chalon-sur-Saône, top. Clockwise from bottom left: building a wine barrel; the Château du Clos de Vougeot and its entrance. Guilhaem Alandry

gundy's more muscular rival. All these guests are repeat customers of Orient-Express. We glide south on the Canal de Bourgogne towards St Jean-de-Losne and our entry into the river Saône.

In the mornings we loaf, read, cycle or communicate with Planet Reality. In the afternoons we visit winegrowers, a barrel-maker and places such as the 16th-century Château du Clos De Vougeot, where the Chevaliers du Tastevin, an exclusive club of burgundy wine enthusiasts, hold gastronomic festivities.

Burgundian wine experts come on board to talk, drink and eat with us. Jean-Pierre Cropsal explains the infinitely complex Burgundy *terroir*, where holdings are tiny, fragmented and never identical. He fills flip chart sheets with drawings of alluvial sedimentation flecked with fossilised oysters but we get his point better over a dinner featuring the voluptuous white Criots-Bâtard-Montrachet 2009 of Fontaine Gagnard and La Grande Rue of Domaine Lamarche, a wine from land that nestles alongside the precious earth of Romanée-Conti.

*Terroir*, we think we have grasped, involves the precise distinctiveness of each patch of deep sub-soil, along with its microclimate and the personal history and skill of the winemaker. But whenever one of us puts this into words for corroboration by Cropsal, he grips his leather belt and pronounces: "Non." Admission to this mystery is not so easily purchased.

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That first evening, Jean talks to me about how she and Bob, city folk, have worked their own ground as winegrowers on a holding once bequeathed to William Penn, the state's founder. She talks too about Romanée-Conti – the climax of our trip, day six, is to be a bottle of this sacred wine.

Jacque Morrison, our day two wine expert, is full of vivid historical anecdotes, as well as her own highly discussable associations for each wine with film stars or other celebrities. So one wine is a Gérard Depardieu, another George Clooney, a third Grace Kelly.

On day three, there's a hitch. Jean has a business crisis and must fly home the next morning. The crew adapt plans for our dinner at Drouhin-Laroze to include a 1972 Romanée-Conti, along with an almost equally prized La Tâche 1992. So, just over half-way through our grand cru adventure, we divert to the trip's epicurean summit.

There are edgy moments to come. The Amaryllis hospitality team is present in force at the vineyard to help with dinner. As the big wines appear, everyone looks to Philippe Drouhin, who sips the La Tâche and declares: "Don't drink it yet – it's closed." A nervous 15 minutes later, we are savouring the wine's persuasive intensity. The Romanée-Conti proves more problematic. Quietly opened earlier, it has declined to respond enthusiastically to its first con-

tact with the air for 39 years. Drouhin says 1972 was a difficult year. Joe agrees: he was drafted for the Vietnam war.

Eventually we drink. Jean sobs at the greatness of the moment. Those less emotionally engaged acknowledge the mystery but do not feel we have just sampled the world's greatest wine. Perhaps the fault is with the drinkers not the wine?

It's an awkward moment. Drouhin's wife, Christine, suggests "Le Ban Bourguignon": a simple clapping song, popular at Burgundian feasts, which puts the matter to rest.

Where do we go from this elevation? We loaf, cycle and walk some more. We visit caves and the astonishing Domaine Ponsot, where Laurent Ponsot has built a reputation for using modern technology to uncover deep traditional virtues in his family's vineyard.

By now, the group, though depleted, consists of mates. Nick, our off-shore guide and on-board inspiration, suggests night angling. In the river Saône, where we are moored, he has seen a catfish big enough to swallow a football. Oh yes, and we've all flown without a parachute from the top of the Eiffel tower.

Two of us take rods. I am Huck Finn, bloated with riverside contentment, when the line tugs and tugs again. Twenty minutes later, I'm hauling a vast catfish, with the ugliest teeth outside of Shane MacGowan's mouth, up the side of the boat. Amazing what Orient-Express lays on for its clients.

A final council of guests confirms the unanimous verdict: a spectacularly successful week. We agree that if you want to make sure, it would probably be wise to choose your fellow guests. That way the crew can respond to a group agenda, of which the strangest to date came from a terminally ill American woman, who asked if she could die on board, surrounded by her family and the reassurance of the Burgundy slopes. This service is not available and she lived for a year after her holiday.

Judging by the Amaryllis guest book, many have come here in search of recuperation, among them (in 2008) Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones. From the sound of it, their barging experience was, like ours, unforgettable except in the detail of the wines. Michael Douglas turned up on our own barge in a magazine my wife picked up in London, where he was asked: "What do you consider to be the most overrated virtue?" His answer? "Wine tasting."

Now wine drinking, surrounded by friends and with Sam Pring's cooking, that's another thing entirely.

## Details

Ian Hargreaves travelled as a guest of Afloat in France ([www.afloatinfrance.com](http://www.afloatinfrance.com)). The Grand Cru Cruise costs from £6,675 per person, including Eurostar from London, one night at the Shangri-La in Paris and six on board Amaryllis, with meals, wines, tours, tastings and transfers. Amaryllis, which sleeps up to eight, can also be privately chartered from £37,200 for six nights. The names of Ian Hargreaves' fellow passengers have been changed.

