

# world of Cruising

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# Barging in *Burgundy*

**Gary Buchanan** is captivated by the cruising-with-a-difference style of a luxury hotel barge through the heart of France

**F**rom the geranium-embazoned sundeck of *Amaryllis*, dioramas of meringue-tinted châteaux and ruined fortresses atop rocky outcrops looked down from distant hills. Ancient oaks stood like lonely sentinels as avenues of poplars marched across landscapes resembling medieval tableaux.

Venerable villages clustered round churches with brittle-thin spires while rustic, stone farmhouses surrounded by herds of creamy-coloured Charolais cattle gave way to neat vineyards whose precious fruit was ripening in the sun. These cameo-like visions were created daily as I was transported through the enchanting region of Burgundy.

I joined this peripatetic halcyon at **St Léger-sur-Dheune** for a six-night cruise that would include a navigation of the impossibly pretty Canal du Centre. This conduit to pleasure traverses the hills that separate the Saône and Loire River Valleys. ➤



What distinguishes these hotel barges from their peers is space. While other barges of similar size usually accommodate 24 passengers, Afloat in France craft are designed for just four to twelve guests and offer a floating country house ambiance. They are a world apart from the modern cruisers that ply the rivers of Europe conveying endless holidaymakers in a package tour experience.

Created from the hull of a commercial barge built in Holland in 1962, *Amaryllis* was converted to luxury style in 2001 and decorated by some of the most respected names in France and Italy.

There are four generously-proportioned twin/double cabins with large baths or showers boasting L'Occitane Verveine



damp, hung with dripping ferns, moss and wildflowers rooted in the cracks.

Some of these locks even retained their antique wooden gates and had to be cranked open and shut by the exertions of keepers, whose adjacent cottages were the very confections that chocolate box covers are made of.

Adjacent to the canal banks are towpaths lined with fishermen – motionless stoics who rarely look up from their poles and seldom return a wave. Paved with smoothly packed gravel, these towpaths make ideal biking trails and I often pedalled my shiny bicycle to the nearest village.

Other times, I would disembark at one lock and climb board at another having strolled alongside the meandering river past hedgerows and fields of pillar-box red poppies. Occasionally, a smaller *pénichette* would pass, yellow butterflies fluttering across the deck, monsieur smoking his pipe at the helm, madame preparing lunch on the stern.

To experience the life of a canal is to escape the world of airports and motorways and reconnect with a world in which nothing moves faster than a duck.

Two decks high and 129ft long, *Amaryllis* is one of five boutique barges, or *péniche-hôtels* as they are known locally, operated by Afloat in France and owned by Orient Express Hotels, Trains and Cruises.



### MON DIEU!

As the original seat of the Dukes of Burgundy, BEAUNE became a city of power, culture, and wealth.

In 1443, as the Hundred Years War entered its last decade, Nicolas Rolin, Chancellor of Philippe-le-Bon, Duke of Burgundy, generously erected one of the supreme architectural and social monuments of the late Middle Ages.

The HÔTEL-DIEU is the finest example of that late-Gothic style known as Flamboyant.

The roof is a mosaic of colour: a complex geometric pattern of glazed tiles in yellow, green, rust, and black.

Peaked dormer windows and towers flaunt lacy lead finials, spires, weather vanes, and pennants.

The inside of this wonder is equal to the outside. Crowned by a massive oak-paneled, barrel-vaulted ceiling, the Great Hall of the Poor was where patients in the 31 beds received medical care as recently as 1971.

The magnificent Polyptych representing the Last Judgement, originally placed high above the altar in the adjoining Chapel, was only seen by the sick on Sundays and feast days.

The voyage continued along the ruler-straight Burgundy Canal to Dijon – capital of the Côte d'Or.

These waterways are testimony to the genius of Leonardo da Vinci, who invented the first lock. More than two centuries ago, Louis XV ordered French engineers to build a system of locks and canals. Not only were the canals to be routes for commercial barges, they were to be aqueducts as well, supplying local farmers with irrigation water.

France's history was forged around her waterways and the tranquil heartland of this evocative land still has 8,000 miles of navigable routes. My cruise negotiated 40 locks or, to give them their French name, *écluses*. Many were centuries old, eternally

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unguent. A beautifully-appointed lounge suffused with elegant armchairs, wood panelling and soft fabrics leads to a soignée dining salon. On deck, there's an outdoor dining table, terrace and 13ft square pool. A crew of five tend to the whims and caprices of the eight guests and are instrumental in engendering a floating house-party mood.

Getting to this sequestered corner of France is an essay in stress-busting logistics. A Eurostar whisks you from St Pancras International to Paris's Gare de Nord, where a smartly-dressed chauffeur awaits to drive you south in an air-conditioned Mercedes people-carrier.

After meeting my fellow bon-viveurs over a glass of refreshing Lechere Blanc de



Blancs Cuvée Orient Express Champagne, our chef, Sam Pring – now in his third season with Afloat in France – prepared the first of many memorable meals.

Dinner that night consisted of Foie Gras with pain d'épices, apricots, celery and apple salad; Cauliflower Soup with poached quail's egg and truffle oil; Charolais Beef fillet with tartiflette, braised red cabbage and a red wine jus.

This was followed by our charming hostess, Alice (who happens to be Sam's wife), presenting a Forme D'Ambert, Selles sur Cher and Delice de Pommard – a delightful ritual that would be performed each evening with a different selection of locally-sourced cheeses. The meal concluded with Vanilla panna cotta with passion fruit and candied pistachios. To accompany this culinary masterpiece Sarah, our other hostess, served a divine Puligny Montrachet and a sensational Vosne Romanée.

A good night's sleep, induced by the somnolent lapping of the quiescent canal, was followed by a morning amble. There was a cathedral stillness, streams of light slanted down as the early sun unwrapped the day from tissues of mist. The liquid call of countless curlews floated across an ensemble of vineyards and emerald hills.

After a breakfast of the freshest fruits and croissants, we began our journey into the fabled heartland of the Côte d'Or. In the wake of our barge, eddies rippled the surface of the tranquil canal as a breeze ruffled the tangle of buttercups and daisies at the water's edge.

Each reposeful sojourn, offering an unrivalled vignette into France's intricate system of inland waterways, was imaginatively coupled with tours to local attractions and renowned vineyards. Aboard the comfortable Volkswagen mini-bus that



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accompanied our péniche-hôtel throughout its journey, knowledgeable tour guide Jacque, who has been working on hotel barges for 24 years, turned out to be a font of knowledge.

Departing *Amaryllis* after lunch on deck, we drove along the celebrated **Route des Grands Crus**. Jacque explained the complexities of the Burgundy appellation system as we encountered the aristocrats of Bourgogne, glimpsing revered properties such as Aloxe-Corton, La Romanée Conti, and Puligny Montrachet. These noble châteaux dominated pale-buff and pink limestone villages, surrounded by serried ranks of gnarled vines bearing Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes ripening in the clay and limestone terroir.



We stopped at **Châteaux de Pommard** for a tour of their noble cellars, where more than 400,000 bottles and hundreds of oak casks stand silently at a constant temperature of 12°C. After touring their display of ancient tools used in viniculture over the past three centuries, we sampled the 2002, '03, '04 and '05 vintages. The euphoric oenophiles among us agreed the former was exemplary.

The following morning we immersed ourselves in the bucolic landscape surrounding the Canal du Centre before once again returning to the Bourgogne region aboard our trusty mini-bus. This time we headed to the idyllic Hostellerie de Levernois for lunch. At their quirky Bistrot du Bord de l'Eau, locally-sourced ingredients were cooked to perfection by Michelin-starred chef Philippe Augé. Later, we drove the short distance to the capital of Burgundy wines, Beaune.

Over the next four days we visited **Château Rully** and **Château Longecourt**. Each a serendipitous mix of the very fabric of viniculture, created out of the pale-buff limestone that makes this region's soil so perfect; each the very fabric of this esoteric corner of hidden France.

Our tasting sessions were an undoubted highlight, but sampling such fine growths in their cellars of origin merely heightened our appetites for lunches of salads, tartes, quiches, patés and cheeses back on board the incomparable *Amaryllis*.

Adding to the sensuality was the passing backdrop of timeworn trees overhanging the water and dappling the surface with patterns of light and shade, of gossamer reeds and pancake-flat lily pads engulfed in the mini-maelstrom of the barge's wake. If Monet set up his easel on the canal today, this is a scene he would surely fancy. I know I did.

At **Chalon-sur-Saône**, there was time to explore this charming market town before dinner. Famous throughout France as the birthplace of photography, it was here Nicéphore Niépce produced the first image of nature in May 1816; his statue is close to the excellent museum in his name.

Ambling along Rue aux Fèvres, I came upon the neoclassical Cathédrale Saint-Vincent. In the shadow of its magnificent frontispiece, I sipped a kir at Le Moulin à Café, overlooked by tiered, half-timbered houses, before ambling past 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century façades on the Grand Rue and Rue de Châtelet.

Nigel Bealing, our captain, and his trusty matelot Richard, negotiated the 14 locks between Longecourt and Dijon, the final chapter in our 450ft descent since leaving St Léger-sur-Dheune. After a farewell gourmet dinner, I sipped a postprandial cognac in the heated swimming pool – one of only two on France's inland waterways, the other being on sister péniche-hôtel *Fleur de Lys*.

We moored at the ancient turning basin in the city of **Dijon** on our last morning

and I reflected on this six-day incursion into provincial French life.

Evocative vignettes, brim-full of serendipity, were accompanied by a potpourri of history. At a seductive pace of around three knots we had covered only around 80 miles, but had transcended the centuries, opening magical windows on to a rare ethos. It was a journey full of ennui and indolence. ☺

#### AMARYLLIS FACTFILE

AFLOAT IN FRANCE péniche-hôtels cruise the Canal du Midi, Rhône, Canal Latéral à La Loire, Canal du Centre, Saône and Canal de Bourgogne from April to October.

*Amaryllis* is available for hire for a week-long fully-inclusive cruise through Burgundy from £33,600, based on eight people travelling.

This includes private car transfer from Paris to *Amaryllis* and back, six nights accommodation, all meals and drinks on board, private sightseeing and all local transfers.

While *Amaryllis*, *Fleur de Lys* and *Alouette* are reserved for charters, the *Napoléon* and *Hirondelle* can be booked either on a per cabin basis or hired exclusively.

**MORE INFO:** call 0845 077 2222 or visit [www.afloatinfrance.com](http://www.afloatinfrance.com).