



Float your own boat aboard a private, small ship cruise.

THE BARGE BONUS





Lockhouse



Rosa cabin



by STEVE LELAND



Enjoying wine and food (above right) aboard *Savoir Vivre*



Avid cruise lovers have combed the beaches, clamored among the ruins, visited cathedrals, and shopped till they dropped in ports of call. If you're part of the "been there, done that" club, it may be time to explore luxury barge cruising.

Many vessels originated as luxury retreats for European entrepreneurs, while others have been modified from commercial operations into floating boutique hotels. Capacity rarely exceeds 10 pampered guests, looked after by a dotting staff.

Although the majority of these floating sanctuaries allow you to book on a per-cabin basis, imagine chartering your own barge complete with a custom itinerary, staff, and crew.

Barging navigates calm canals and countryside rivers, allowing guests to explore fascinating towns and villages that are inaccessible to ships. Enticing routes incorporate captivating waterways throughout France, folklore-rich rivers in Ireland, or adventurous lochs of Scotland.

Check your thoughts about ocean cruising at the gangway and come aboard three barges with classic French itineraries. Each offers its own distinct approach to personalized pampering.

Rosa

Owner, operator, and master chef, Dominique Monclus, and a crew of three bestow their love of canal cruising upon no more than eight fortunate guests for six days on the tributaries of the Garonne River in the Gascony area of southwestern France. Their pride in the area and passion for their beloved *Rosa* are evident from the moment you set foot on this vessel.

Guests are transferred from the historic center of Toulouse to the barge's mooring near the village of Agen. Welcomed on board with a champagne toast and canapés, the ambiance of relaxation is front and center. The vessel's main salon with two sofas and a corner comfort chair further the concept of a home away from home. Family-style dining at the adjacent table proffers unique menu selections, expounded on by the chef and served by his accommodating and personable assistant.

Working double duty as the vessel's chef, Dominique relishes every opportunity to share the regional bounty of ingredients that he incorporates into his culinary creativity. Best described as a refined country style, mealtimes feature dishes designed for an adventurous palate. As expected, duck prominently appears on several occasions as confit, à l'orange, sausage, or magret. Esteemed wine, decadent desserts, and a superb selection of gourmet cheeses complete each dining experience.

Navigation plays an important role in the journey's appeal. While transiting numerous locks is always an attraction, this itinerary introduces inventive and unique components to canal travel. Cruising through the pastoral settings encountered on the classic *Rosa* is a true "over the river and through the woods" journey. Midway through the week, the vessel actually cruises over the Tarn River via the 1,000-foot aqueduct before resuming travel through more than 40 locks, which provide an entertaining sideshow as she carves her way through the countryside.

Excursions include visits to the hushed streets of hillside villages, escorted tours of captivating chateaus, and inquisitive wine-tastings. A trip to a village market



La Belle Époque and her sundeck, exploring the countryside

alongside the chef as he buys fresh farm-to-table products is a highlight.

Imaginative configurations of the four cozy guest rooms make the most of precious space. The welcoming sundeck provides front-row viewing of the wooded forests and is ideal for al fresco lunches or dozing off under the warmth of the French sun. *Rosa* offers an experience absent of the hustle, void of the bustle, and with an opportunity to relax and absorb a sense of personal exclusivity.

La Belle Époque

This well-designed nautical sanctum is one of 18 vessels in the European Waterways fleet. Guests are met in central Paris and transferred to the Burgundy Canal mooring location, centered in the remote Chablis region.

As the name so accurately implies, *La Belle Époque* summons up visions of a beautiful era of rural village life. The initial vista of an endless vineyard landscape serves as a prelude to the serene diversity ahead. Morning sundeck repose provides French countryside engagement, as the vessel slides through picturesque locks and under photogenic bridges priming you for the daily experiences ashore.

Initially designed for commercial operations and with a slightly larger-than-most capacity of 12, *La Belle Époque* was discreetly transformed into a vessel for luxury canal cruising in 1996 with a keen eye on detail. A large lounge area with twin, semi-circle settees provides a modern respite from the afternoon sun and doubles as a congenial gathering point for pre-dinner cocktails.

Family-style dining is served in the adjacent dining area with massive window viewing from every seat. Breakfasts incorporate freshly baked croissants and pastries alongside granolas and cooked-to-order dishes. Lunches are mild medleys of salads, quiches, and lighter fare, sparing room for the inven-

tive creations of the ship's talented master chef at dinnertime, which runs the gamut of seafood, poultry, and meats topped with a blend of characteristic sauces and spices. Every lunch and dinner provides an opportunity to experience the French world of cheese while an elite pairing of exceptional wines complements each meal.

The captain of the vessel personally escorts daily outings via a spacious Mercedes van to remote villages deep in the countryside. Exploring local markets enhances the charm of rural life amid rustic buildings. The medieval village of Noreys opens its gates to visitors searching for storybook portraits of history with a walk along its stone ramparts; a stroll through the cobblestoned streets of Flavigny delivers a scene of tranquility, just as it did for the film, *Chocolat*; an evening drive through the rural town of Chablis delivers guests to an acclaimed restaurant for a swank dinner and night out; and a return to Paris at the conclusion of the cruise facilitates extended stays in the City of Light.

Savoir Vivre

The classic canals of Burgundy beckon with outstretched arms as you board the custom-designed *Savoir Vivre*. The name loosely translates to "how to live life" and six days on board correlates perfectly to that description.

The itinerary begins with a transfer from the Dijon-Ville train station to the awaiting vessel in Escommes. Settling in for the welcome dinner facilitated by the staff's warm hospitality, it quickly becomes evident that the days ahead will offer total immersion into the charm of the French countryside.

Four small but immaculate and modern staterooms with picture windows establish home base as the vessel plies through wooded forests dotted with characteristic villages. Each day's relaxed itinerary is divided into two segments: three to four hours of leisure canal cruising through the countryside and three hours of guided sightseeing.

On the first day, the vessel is underway toward the charming village of Vandenesse-en-Auxois, where guests set out to Beaune for an intriguing tour of the famed Hospices de Beaune, a medieval hospital that dates to 1443. Each daily outing provides a glimpse into local culture, fascinating history, and photogenic scenery. Medieval villages, chateaus, and vibrant markets fill in the blanks of a touristic travelogue.

With a capacity of eight, *Savoir Vivre* provides an unparalleled social opportunity. The main salon doubles as the gathering center and breakfast and lunch room. Breakfasts offer freshly baked pastries, yogurts, juices, and cold meats. Lunches are catered by local restaurants with emphasis on salads, quiches, and hot dishes. A white and a red wine top off each delicious meal.

For dinner, guests are escorted to local dining venues and treated to gastronomic presentations with traditional dishes *de la maison*, each complemented by the premier wines of the area. This creates an opportunity to celebrate the culinary creativity of six different chefs in village bistros, elegant chateaus, and acclaimed Michelin-starred restaurants.

Savoir Vivre aptly captures the barge experience, transiting 42 standard locks, which provides the option of disembarking for a short walk or bicycle ride through the alluring countryside to rejoin the barge at later points along the route. Remaining on board during the operation is no less enjoyable, as guests can witness the procedure from an outdoor, canopied vantage point.

Whether traveling with family, friends, or new acquaintances, the congenial captain and staff infuse an unplugged ambiance fueled by the flavors of France and the embracing comfort of canal cruising. *Au revoir!*

European Waterways (europeanwaterways.com) and Barge Lady (bargeladycruises.com) represent diverse barge operations throughout Europe, Ireland, and the U.K., whether you're chartering the entire vessel or booking a single cabin. ●