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European Barge Cruises That Are Anything But Boring

Hotel barges have a sleepy reputation, but the itineraries on these vessels pair just enough lazy-river idleness with sporty excursions



BARGE AND IN CHARGE The charter-only Belmond Fleur de Lys, a luxury French barge, can customize itineraries for cyclists in Burgundy.

By Sara Tucker

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SMALL, flat-bottomed and slow-moving, hotel barges can access some of Europe's most beautiful rural areas, navigating 19th-century canals that are off-limits to larger boats. Carrying a handful of passengers, six to 12 at the most, they have a high crew-to-guest ratio: The captain picks you up at the train station; the chef pops out of the kitchen to chat about cheese platters. With free-flowing wine included in the price, you won't go hungry or thirsty on a barge cruise, nor lonely or seasick. You might, however, get bored.

The scenery rolls by glacially at 3 to 4 miles per hour, walking speed. You can read an entire page of your book and not miss a thing. For recreation, you'll find bicycles for onshore exploration, a towpath, maybe a hot tub; a game of Scrabble in case of rain. Once a day, everyone piles into a minibus and goes to a castle, a winery or a medieval monastery. Then it's time to eat again.

‘On the Canal du Midi, you can play tennis and visit Roman ruins.’

This laid-back regimen, for all its charms, tends to turn off restless travelers. The solution: barges with itineraries that let sporty types exert themselves enough to fend off tedium. Some programs are available only to groups that charter a barge. Other outings, such as a bicycle excursion to a wine château or a day of golf, can be arranged on certain barges even if you reserve a single cabin. To book a cruise, contact the boat captain (check the website for email addresses) or an agent who knows all the operators (some 70 hotel barges ply the waterways in Europe) like Barge Lady Cruises, based in Chicago. Either way: Specify your desired diversions. Here, a few ideas of where and how to beef up a barge cruise.

Angling in Ireland

The Shannon Waterway, a series of lakes connected by rivers and still-water canals, takes you through one of Ireland’s most memorably lovely areas (with the Cliffs of Moher a particular draw). At its summit is Lough Scur, a freshwater lake that anglers often angle to visit.

BARGE TO BOOK Beyond its standard itinerary, the 10-passenger Shannon Princess also offers a charter-only cruise for families with kids (age 12 and up) that can involve horseback riding, fishing, kayaking and zorbing. Golfers who book a charter have access to championship courses designed by Robert Trent Jones, Sr., and Arnold Palmer. *From \$4,390 per person for a six-night cruise; bargeladycruises.com.*

Tennis on the Thames

The Thames Path, a 184-mile national trail, follows England’s second longest river as it winds from its source in the Cotswolds to the sea, passing through meadows, historic towns such as Runnymede (where the Magna Carta was signed) and small villages ideal for a tea break. On a cruise from Hampton Court Palace to Henley, you can climb to an Iron Age fort with panoramic views or play tennis on a different riverside court every day.

BARGE TO BOOK The captain of the eight-passenger Magna Carta will arrange, whenever possible, golf, tennis and hiking excursions whether you book a cabin or the whole barge. *From \$4,550 per person for a six-night cruise.*



PHOTO: TOM TEXIER

Cycling for Sancerre

France, the country where hotel barging was invented (by an Englishman in 1966), has the most active options for barge travelers, many aimed at family groups that include grandparents and teenage children. “It’s about keeping the kids occupied,” said Penny Liley, a boat owner who introduced family-adventure cruises to the Nivernais Canal, in northern Burgundy, with activities such as trail riding on horseback, rock climbing, and kayaking on the River Yonne. Both the Nivernais and the Canal de Bourgogne, in southern Burgundy, are lined with cycling routes that fan out across the gently rolling countryside. On the Canal du Midi in Provence you can play tennis and visit Roman ruins in one fell swoop, and on the Canal de Briare, you can pedal to the vineyards of Sancerre for winetasting.

BARGE TO BOOK The Meanderer, a six-passenger barge, is captained by an avid cyclist and offers golf and bicycling excursions in the Upper Loire. *From \$5,875 per person for a six-night cruise; bargemeanderer.com.* Belmond’s six-passenger Fleur de Lys, available for charter only, combines high style (canopied four-poster beds, a baby grand) with a six-night customized itinerary on the Burgundy Canal. *From \$9,845 per passenger.*

Golfing in the Great Glen

Built in the early 1800s, the Caledonian Canal bisects Scotland from northeast to southwest, connecting scenic lochs—including the possibly serpent-harboring Loch Ness—and cutting through the Great Glen. The towpath connects with forest trails for mountain biking and hiking.

BARGE TO BOOK The 12-passenger Spirit of Scotland and the 6-passenger Scottish Highlander offer, beyond standard itineraries, charter-only golf cruises to Royal Dornoch, Castle Stuart and other sacred sites. *From \$26,500 for two passengers chartering the Highlander for a six nights and from \$44,000 for eight passengers on the Spirit of Scotland.*