

## Travel

# When it's time to cruise again, think small



Barge Lady Cruises' Luciole Barge docked in the Northern Burgundy region of France. (Lily Heise)

By **Elizabeth Heath**

July 2, 2020 at 2:18 p.m. CDT

If you're a traveler for whom the close quarters of a cruise ship dining room, swimming pool or casino are the stuff of pandemic nightmares, it might be time to consider a micro cruise. Voyages on these extremely small ships — as few as four passengers and often no more than 20 — offer many of the joys of traditional cruising but with virtually no risk of exposure to crowded ports, tour buses or lido decks.

Besides the sense of security they offer travelers, these small-ship experiences offer perks the big ships don't, including access to small towns and secluded natural areas and the chance to travel at a slower pace. So whether it's searching for polar bears amid

a field of Nordic sea ice, discovering storybook villages in England or France, or snorkeling in a remote cove in Croatia, a micro cruise can take you right there — and you'll never have to jockey for position at the buffet table.

## **Micro cruise 101**

There's no universal industry definition for micro cruises. The term can be used to describe any standard cruises of four days or fewer, or it can describe a boat with a capacity of anywhere from four to 100 passengers. "I prefer to think of ours as 'nano-cruises,'" says Stephanie Sack, who handles marketing for Barge Lady, which sells trips on leisure canalboats in France. She offers boats that hold between four and 12 passengers.

Barge and micro cruises, she adds, "were social distancing before it was a thing."

Nicola Caygill, managing director of Micro-Cruising, which brokers mostly seagoing motor yachts and sailboats, has two definitions for what makes — or doesn't make — a cruise ship micro. "Is there a line for the buffet, and can I dive off the side of the boat?" If the answer is no to the former and yes to the latter, then it's a micro cruise.





Micro cruises typically cover a limited distance, allowing guests to explore one region in depth. Barge Lady cruises may chug along just 50 miles of the idyllic canals in Gascony, France, in the space of a week, while expedition micro cruises with Secret Atlas explore a few hundred miles of coastal Svalbard — the wild, remote Norwegian archipelago that's halfway to the North Pole — in eight days. Travelers aboard a self-guided narrow boat in the canals of Britain might navigate just a few dozen miles in a week's time.

A boat that sleeps 12 guests may have a staff of anywhere from two to six, depending on how high-touch the level of service. These will include the captain (who is often the boat owner), a cook, and sometimes a steward or a naturalist/guide. Comfort levels vary vessel to vessel, ranging from the equivalent of a perfectly acceptable guest room at your in-laws' to a floating five-star hotel suite. Bathrooms are usually en suite, except on some budget-priced cruises. Onboard amenities are limited and typically include a dining room, a lounge, an observation deck and, with any luck, a hot tub.

Depending on the type of boat and itinerary, a day on board may start with a few hours of cruising through canals, tributaries and locks, where passengers have the option of biking or walking alongside the boat — whose top speed maxes out at 4 mph. On Secret Atlas expeditions, a morning excursion in a Zodiac raft may take guests up close to glaciers or seabird rookeries or to explore the remains of early human settlements. Plus, co-founder Andy Marsh says they've never run a Svalbard cruise where they haven't spotted polar bears.

Passengers are back on board for lunch, then off for an afternoon excursion — more nature or anthropological outings for Secret Atlas guests, and visits to castles, villages and wineries for barge-goers. Evenings are spent stargazing on deck or gathered in the passenger lounge to share stories and photos from the day.



Meals aboard range from simple and satisfying to full-on decadent — like grand cru wines and four-course meals on Barge Lady's upper-end cruises, with ingredients guests sourced that day as the barge passed a market town or an artisanal cheesemaker. Not to be outdone, luxury brand Belmond offers a seven-day Burgundy, France, cruise with daily pit stops at Michelin-starred restaurants.

## **Boats for different budgets**

As the level of poshness and individualized service might suggest, a hosted barge or expedition micro cruise does not come cheap. Secret Atlas's Svalbard voyages start at \$6,000 per person for an eight-day expedition. Barge Lady offers sailings on three-star barges from \$4,000 per person per week, while six-star barges begin at \$6,500 per person. A six-night Belmond cruise through the Rhone Valley with 11 other guests is priced at \$7,900 per person. Most vessels are available for exclusive buyout, though that doesn't result in much cost savings.

But micro cruises aren't just the dream of the wealthy or aspirational. Caygill, whose offerings can top out at \$250,000 aboard a luxury yacht, also offers a handful of relatively inexpensive sailings in Croatia and Greece aboard a 22- to 28-person gulet, a traditional wooden sailboat. These week-long cruises are for the "young and fun" crowd, whom Caygill describes as mostly "18- to 30-year-olds who party all night, sleep late and swim all day." A bare-bones private cabin for two or three, with no air conditioning and shared bathrooms, starts around \$800 per person. For more comfort and social distancing, and maybe a less raucous party, the company also offers similar itineraries on modern, 36-person motor yachts that are quite a few steps up from a gulet. Double cabins with air conditioning and en suite bathrooms start at \$1,400 per person per week.

Other less costly micro cruise options are of the DIY variety. British-based Drifters Waterway Holidays rents self-piloted narrowboats — traditional crafts that are no more than 7 feet wide and 70 feet long — the maximum dimensions that can navigate Britain's bucolic network of canals, locks and low bridges. A week-long offseason rental of a four-person narrow boat starts at \$900, while the same week for a 12-person boat — the largest available — runs from \$1,700 and up. All boats are self-catering, and most small towns along the canals have at least one grocery store and pub.

In fact, all the micro cruise and self-piloted boat purveyors interviewed for this article agreed that the kind of travelers drawn to micro cruises probably wouldn't set foot on a mega-cruise ship even if the novel [coronavirus](#) never existed. Caygill says her clients wouldn't consider the big ships, where, she says, "the ship is the destination." With the cruises she sells, "the destination is the destination. They just happen to have a nice ship to go back to."



## Not a traditional cruise

Hopping off narrowboats, bouncing along in Zodiac rafts, jumping into the Mediterranean Sea and biking along French canals — it all requires a moderate level of fitness, though Nigel Stevens, director of Drifters, says that “most people who think they can do it find they can do it.” What micro cruises might demand more than physical fitness is a sense of adventure, flexibility, and a willingness to slow down, open up and step away from the constant stimulation of a traditional big-boat cruise.

Secret Atlas’s trips are “designed for people who really want to explore Svalbard, learn about the natural environment and climate change, and travel in a sustainable way,” says Marsh, whose clientele ranges from millennials to baby boomers. “They might be from completely different walks of life, but they’re united because of the experience they have on board.” And while micro cruises often attract solo travelers, they’re probably not well suited to loners, or to those who prefer to blend in anonymously with 3,000 of their fellow passengers. The journeys are about forming new friendships and sharing moments. “You get on the barge as strangers on Sunday,” as Sack puts it. “And by Tuesday, you’re blood brothers.”

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