



TAKING IT SLOW: Cruise along the Canal du Centre. From top right, shop in Chalon-sur-Saône, recline in the *Grand Cru* lounge, and sample Château Belgrave Haut-Medoc.



Burgundy at a Snail's Pace

While in France, spoil yourself even more by pairing top wines with a laid-back vibe on a new luxury barge cruise

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IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG TO ADJUST to the unhurried gait of Burgundy, France. Float along one of the region's many languid canals on a barge, and life slows to a lollygag, just the right speed for food and wine lovers. After all, why hurry in the gustatory gut of France, surrounded by acclaimed pinot noir and chardonnay villages and vineyards whose winemaking roots go back more than 2,000 years? *Elegant Waterways'* new *Grand Cru* Cruise harmoniously marries this idea, and as I step aboard the appropriately christened *Grand Cru* barge, my shoulders pull away from my ears and my jaw tension loosens with the first glass of Crémant.

As a devotee of France travel for the past 30 years, I have explored much of *l'Hexagone*, but never by barge. Although friends who have "barged" raved, I snubbed the idea for years. Maybe the word "barge" itself soured me. It even sounds curt and uninviting, and conjures an image of sleeping in cramped bunk beds and eating canned tuna with one's nose pressed against a tiny



porthole. But the *Grand Cru* and its ever-smiling crew splinters every unsubstantiated opinion I had about a barge cruise — impersonal, cramped, boring, with inexplicably inferior food. I thoroughly marvel at the counter narrative I'm discovering.

More Spacious Than You Think

The French have used more than 5,000 miles of canals and locks that twist through the country to transfer commercial goods since the late 1700s. "Hotel barging" vacations came on the scene in the 1970s, with Chicago-based Barge Lady Cruises spreading the love and awareness of barging to North Americans since 1985. But the *Grand Cru*, just one of many vessels Barge Lady Cruises partners with, is the Burgundy region's first to focus entirely on superior elixirs knighted by the French wine classification. These new seven-day sailings run from April to October, traveling only about 50 miles between the towns of Dole and Saint-Léger-sur-Dheune, briefly gliding along the Canal du Rhône au Rhin, before settling into a relaxed rhythm on the Canal du Centre.

My hosts, Earl and Candy Robertson, have been at this for about 20 years, and the *Grand Cru* cargo is any group of eight bon vivants willing to book the entire vessel. Fueled by a love of travel, and several self-guided French canal tours, Earl and Candy launched Elegant

Waterways' first barge, *Prosperité*, in 2001. The 128-foot *Grand Cru*, their third vessel, formerly used for hauling commercial goods, took two years and more than \$1 million to refurbish. "Essentially, it was like custom-building a floating 3,600-square-foot house," says Earl.

Four staterooms come with king-size beds, TVs, large wardrobes, and bathrooms with a rain shower and separate soaking tub. Supersize windows replacing portholes invite in natural light, and I can stand up straight, even on tiptoe, in my room. Wide windows also encircle the main salon and dining room, and a deck with a Jacuzzi also has seating for eight to accommodate alfresco dining. Even small details summon a relaxed but luxurious ambience. Sheets and towels are as plush as at any luxury hotel, while the pale wood floors, fresh flowers, and neutral color palette trend more stylish beach house than boat.

Candy and Earl selected all decor items and furniture, buying from local artisans and French boutiques. From the silverware to the soup bowls to the art made from French wine labels, a custom touch prevails. "We host a beautiful cruise through the countryside, but we wanted to showcase authentic French products and art, too. It enhances the overall experience for guests," says Candy.

While it would be easy to linger indoors among all the Frenchness,



BARGE LIFE: Dock along the route on the *Grand Cru*, dine on fine dishes such as fillet of sole and leek, and bed down in one of four staterooms.

France looms large outside and I plant myself on the deck for much of the journey. Even the canal seems to be in cahoots with the slowed-down prescription of barge life, caressing the emerald-green banks so gently I can hear my own breath. We drift past stone houses and waving families, fields of cows, and neon-yellow rapeseed flowers that look preserved in a postcard-perfect state. In the distance, hillsides blanketed with vineyards invite future exploration, and bell towers of ancient villages reach toward a blue sky. Save for the occasional iPhone-toting teen who appears to time-stamp my 21st-century existence, I'm lost in yesteryear.

Onboard Wining and Dining

The idyllic scenery sends my senses into overdrive, but the pièce de résistance of the *Grand Cru* Cruise is the vessel's namesake — grand cru wine. At each gourmet lunch and dinner, two are served — one red, one white. A crew member presents them, often accompanied by an amusing anecdote. The

2013 Corton-Charlemagne, for example, a full-bodied white wine from Burgundy's Côte de Beaune, was allegedly named for the French king at the request of his wife. As the story goes, she complained to winemakers that the red wine her husband preferred stained his snowy beard and she asked them to create a bold white wine that tasted like a red. Eh voilà! Whether the tale is true doesn't matter. The wine and laughter that ensues result in the perfect pairing. We taste 24 French grand cru wines during the trip, including a Camus Père & Fils Charmes-Chambertin from Burgundy, a Château Belgrave from Bordeaux's Haute-Médoc appellation, and a Georges Vesselle Brut Rose Grand Cru from Champagne.

Any fear I had of starving aboard the *Grand Cru* proves baseless. Earl laughs as he assures me, "We've yet to lose a guest to lack of food."

Given our Burgundy locale, I expect to be stuffed like a foie gras goose with heavy local specialties such as boeuf bourguignon, escargot, and coq au vin. Instead, Chef Olivier Blengino, who formerly cooked on superyachts on the Cote d'Azur, brings his Mediterranean savoir faire and menu to the table each day, a satisfying surprise for my swooning taste buds. Among his light and healthy dishes: a flaky white fish with ratatouille; a tomato, basil, and mozzarella salad; and tuna tartare. At each meal, we also savor three French cheeses, tasting 36 in all.

Off-Barge Excursions

Though we plan our days around meals (it is France, after all), we do leave the table, and the barge. It's no exaggeration to say one can walk faster than the barge, making it easy to hop off and take a bike ride or saunter along the path skirting the canal. Thanks to the *Grand Cru's* dynamic tour guide, Anne Wuppermann, we have it made. Not only from the region, she also speaks perfect English and curates an itinerary steeped in local culture, seasoned with food and wine. We shop at a market in Chalon-sur-Saône; taste wine in Chassagne-Montrachet; visit the fairytale-esque Château de la Rochepot; take a guided tour of Beaune, the gorgeous walled city at the heart of the Burgundy winemaking region; and lunch at three Michelin-star Lameloise, in the village of Chagny.

To call the experience "fantastic" and "different" is accurate, yet does it a disservice. This slow-motion floating feast pleads with us to push pause on our hectic lifestyles. It's weirdly revelatory and poignant at times to realize how difficult it is to untwine. But a good dose of *Grand Cru* hospitality, paired with the best of French wine and food, proves as tasty a remedy as I'll ever find.

Details: From \$58,000 for up to eight guests, which includes van transfers to and from Paris, about 250 miles northwest of Dole. 800-880-0071; bargeladycruises.com



THINGS TO DO: From top, stroll along the canal after a market excursion, stop in Chalon-sur-Saône to check out local artisans and cafés, have a nightcap with barge mates on the *Grand Cru* deck, and explore charming Château de la Rochepot.

