

# PROVENCE & RHONE VALLEY ABOARD BELMOND NAPOLEON BARGE CRUISE

Cruises









## CRUISE

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by Olivia Liveng

As a travel journalist who has explored the world by water on over fifty ships, I'm acutely aware that "cruising" is a broad term. There are adventure cruises and themed cruises that resemble a moving city due to their grandeur and cruises that cater to the luxury crowd. And then there are barge cruises. A barge cruise is a different breed of travel. Their smaller size makes them uniquely personable and agile—often meandering into the small canals of interior Europe that larger boats couldn't fathom entering.

Recently I had the opportunity to explore the Rhone River on Belmond's Napoleon with Barge Lady Cruises. The largest of the Belmond fleet, Napoleon epitomizes elegance and grandeur, especially for a barge that only carries twelve passengers and six crew members. The barge cruise is ideal for those aspiring to immerse themselves in the gastronomy, wine, and fascinating history of the stunning south of France. Though barge cruising does come at a steeper price point than many holiday choices, the caliber of service, food, wine, and amenities are indeed worth it for discerning travelers.

#### **A Look Inside Belmond's Napoleon**

The warmth of southern France is reflected in the barge's interior, with ornate provincial colors—rich reds, golds, and greens—a welcoming invite inside. Napoleon consists of three separate floors, giving ample space for guests both to lounge and maintain privacy. I had no issues continuing my remote work, with plenty of free space and a robust wireless connection. The extraordinarily spacious salon

and dining room are optimal to hang out with other guests and sip wine (did I mention unlimited alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages?)—while slowly floating down the river every evening. Of course, a large observation deck is the optimal chill zones—with lounge chairs and even a hot tub. The hot tub is the perfect retreat to sit back, a glass of wine in hand, and watch the scenery pass by.

And each of the spacious and artfully decorated cabins makes you momentarily forget you're on a barge at all—each is stunningly decorated with large en-suite bathrooms and all above the water line—perfect for those prone to seasickness (like me!). Each stateroom comes equipped with both a television and a DVD player, though with so much to see beyond the room, it's unlikely they will get very much use!

### **Gastronomy Onboard Napoleon**

Napoleon's expansive menu showcases the freshest ingredients from local suppliers that line the Rhone river. All meals onboard are freshly prepared by an expert chef with fresh ingredients using local suppliers. They are served either in the dining room or up on deck, accompanied by carefully matched wines from the region. Served family-style in the dining room, they allow all barge passenger guests to unwind following a busy itinerary and truly indulge. Of course, waking up every morning with French pastries and fresh fruit is also tasty to begin the day. The chef takes pride in explaining his meal creations for guests, consistently making an appearance at meals to not only share what we were eating, but how he created and sourced it. (And a secret: most all ingredients are local, considering her ample armet trips!)

### **A Glimpse of a Week on Napoleon**

As Napoleon winds down the Rhone river, she continually showcases Provence's best sights for passengers. This historic route meanders past postcard-worthy scenes: bucolic hills home to some of the world's most famous vineyards, riverside villages and quaint towns, olive groves, and—of course—the famed lavender fields that span the horizon. It's no wonder that these landscapes served as the inspiration for iconic artists such as Van Gogh—inspiration is weaved in the region's nature.

My first day began with a champagne reception. We cheered with fellow barge cruise guests in Avignon, a southern French city long recognized for its architectural beauty and historical importance and as a UNESCO site. We also explored Arles, coveted for its Roman Ruins and charm found in every stepstone. This is also where Van Gogh spent many formative years painting and finding inspiration from the landscapes. Another highlight was visiting the world-famous Chateau-neuf-du-Pape, the summer home of Avignon's popes, where we indulged in an exclusive wine-tasting experience. Of course, the truffle is also prevalent in the area, and visiting a truffle farm for some of southern France's black diamond was also a delightfully tasty experience.

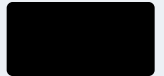
Another experience that showcased more local and authentic living was going to a traditional French market in La Volute, in the company of our barge's chef. Here we not only learned more about the

local produce but shopped alongside him to find the optimal ingredients for our leisurely lunch on board. Though the last day we bid adieu to Napoleon and traversed back to Paris via train from Lyon, the memories from our week floating on the River Rhone will be ingrained forever in our memories.

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