



Barge Rosa

Photos by Karen T. Bartlett



BARGE ROSA

SIX DAYS AND 700 YEARS IN GASCONY

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In an age when a 20-deck, 5000-passenger city at sea can slice through the ocean at 20 knots, what could possibly be the lure of a 117-year-old 8-passenger barge that travels at the speed of molasses? Or slower, if it's not in a hurry – which it isn't. For me, meandering through centuries-old canals in the bucolic wine and Armagnac-infused countryside of Gascony aboard the flower-bedecked floating hotel, *Barge Rosa*, is exactly the lure. Far from her origins as a Dutch clipper ship, the sleek 16-foot-wide hotel with blue and white vessel with touches of gold and a distinctive red chevron at her bow draws oohs and aahs along the Canal du Garonne, ascending and descending the dramatic stairstep system of locks and sluices in the less-traveled Occitanie region of southern France.

This is the land of Cyrano de Bergerac and real-life French Musketeer Charles de Batz de Castelmore d'Artagnan, as well as the 700-year-old Château de Lamotte

Bardigues, built by the nephew of Clement V, the first pope of Avignon; where, incidentally, 20th generation Countess Caroline de Boissésou has invited our small party to tea.

Unlike the cast of thousands needed to run a cruise ship, *Barge Rosa's* crew of four exists solely to indulge, feed and delight. The husband-and-wife team of skilled lockmaster/captain Julian and historian/guide/sommelier Nicole are multilingual globetrotters who return each spring, along with the exquisitely talented, classically trained Chef Stéphane, whose every plate is an artist's palette and a gastronome's dream.

Hostess/housekeeper/fairy godmother Agatha fluffs up our cabin and anticipates every wish. Nicole—who once owned a bar in Mallorca, was a live-aboard divemaster in Australia and managed a guest house in Yangzhou, China—opens doors of private wine cellars, iconic distilleries, and renowned local fromageries, and her gift for authentic storytelling evokes the soul



Nicole: Guide, historian, interpreter, storyteller, sommelier



Wine tasting at Château Bellevue la Forêt.



Cheese tasting at La Ferme du Ramier



A plateau de fromage: Tomme de Savoie from the French Alps, Saint Agur (milder than Roquefort), and the lusciously creamy Brillat Savarin

of Gascony.

Barge Rosa has four ensuite cabins, a chic salon/dining room, the chef's galley and a spacious lounging deck. The ambience is warm and friendly: food and wine sophisticated; dress code casual. When it's simply too gorgeous to lunch inside, Chef Stéphane may prepare a lavish Gascon buffet al fresco on deck, and a starry night calls for a soak in the hot tub at the bow —paired, naturally, with just the right wine.

Nicole has arranged a private tasting at the distinguished Château Bellevue la Fôret, the largest privately owned wine estate in the southwest of France, and an insider's peek into the Armagnac barrel cave at Domaine de Lapeyrade in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Dating

back to the early 1300s and produced nowhere else in the world, Armagnac is more fragrant and complex than its cousin, cognac. At La Ferme du Ramier, we sample the renowned regional cheeses produced the traditional way in copper vats by the 4th generation *famille Maraval*.

Of course, it's not all about the food and wine. We cruise the River Tarn atop (not beneath) the famous 1000-foot-long aqueduct, Pont Canal du Cacor. We immerse in antiquity at castle walls, medieval villages, and the cloisters of the 11th century Abbaye St-Pierre de Moissac, with its intricately carved columns and massive stone tympanum depicting demons and creatures from the Apocalypse. We can walk or bicycle along the towpaths (possibly meeting pilgrims hiking the Camino de Santiago), assist Captain Julian with the opening and closing of locks, shop the outdoor market with Nicole, learn the fine art of cheese slicing with Agatha or plating with Chef Stéphane. Or we can simply glide ever so gently through a landscape of sunflowers, plum and apple trees, weeping willows, and quaint old-stone lockkeepers' houses in an intimate world far from the open seas.



IF YOU GO

Barge Rosa and other independently owned barges throughout Europe are marketed by European Waterways and represented by Barge Lady Cruises. All-inclusive six-night rates from April to October (excluding gratuities): \$5,500-\$9,000 per person. | bargeladycruises.com

Top Right: A prized bottle of Armagnac des Roys de France from Domaine Lapeyrade
Following Photos: Creative platings by Chef Stéphane