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See France without the Hassle or the Crowds



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My fabulous friends, my wife doesn't like to cook on vacation. I don't like to drive in Europe. And we both hate the timetables, ticketing and confusion of travel on foreign trains. But we adored cruising on a barge in the canal system of southern France. We quickly fell into a lovely routine of cruising every morning, a shore excursion every afternoon, and an exquisite dinner with drinks and charming companions every evening.

The first transport network in Europe was not highways, my friends, it was canals. These canals were the original transport system of France before roads. And so we are traveling on the original "highways" of France. Imagine the countryside with no roads, and the best way to transport goods was like this:



--Sutori

In a stunning feat of engineering, the French built a network of over 200 miles of waterways that connected the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea for the first time. In the 1600's! All dug by hand. Remarkable:



--wikipedia

We enjoyed being able to walk and bike the beautiful paths along the canals, where the horses formerly towed the barges. We made many stops in tiny villages along the route, the wild flowers were blooming, and the vineyards were charming to look at.



I loved the social aspect of the cruise because we took our meals everyday with a couple from San Francisco and a couple from Chicago. We had wonderful social times, and the experience was much richer for sharing it, and comparing notes with the other two couples. We made some great travel friends and shared a lot of adventures and laughter. Of course, drinking wine is always a lot more fun in a party too.



Now my wife Karen wants to get a word in edgewise:

"I love how the driving and housekeeping is left to the captain and crew. And the cooking is left to the chef. So it's very easy and simple. We cruise in the morning for a couple of hours, and the time passes wonderfully on deck, sitting and looking out at nature as we glide by. It's super tranquil to be on the water. And you have a new surprise to look forward to every afternoon when you arrive at a new destination for your excursion. Then you return to the boat for dinner and drinks, after which the stargazing from the hot tub is really fun, and there's no light pollution to obscure the stars. Sitting in the hot tub at night reminded me of the Zen, mystical serenity of our hot springs experience in the Japanese countryside on previous trips."

Dearest Friends, our family has visited over 40 countries together, and this cruise ranks in our Top Five in the Fun-For-All Department (a very important department, indeed, non?). We turned this cruise into a family reunion with our adult kids. Josh is 24 and hails from New York City, while Rachel is 22 and resides in Germany. Our favorite family adventure was visiting the market in Narbonne:



The latest addition to our family folklore was Josh's experience of slurping down his first, raw oyster:



Rachel is a natural-born chef, so you can imagine she had plenty to say about French food:

"I enjoyed seeing and tasting the wares of all the local artisan bakers, cheese makers and fishmongers. And I really felt like we were at the height of French food quality, where you could sample what was in season--from fish to produce-- fresh from the local markets."

Friends, here are some tasty samples to view:





And it was fun for us to have lunch in the market with tapas that were very tasty. That's me on the far left, with the super-clever expression:



Our boat's Captain, Adrien Bramouille is Old School, a man of character. A former big-game vet with safari animals in South Africa, Adrien returned to his French roots when he moved to France many years ago. He is always thinking about us as his guests and you can feel his solid, honorable reliability in every interaction. When Adrien makes a promise, or when he offers advice, he very much puts us at ease. In fact, below is genuine, photographic evidence of his valuable advice giving. Note the rapt expressions on the face of me and Wifey:



The excursion that I liked the best was going to the Pennautier Chateau. They are wine makers, but they also open their home to guests and it's very historic. This is one of the very few Chateaus that was not gutted during the French Revolution, so it's a real treat to behold:



And what chateau could be complete without us standing in front of it?



It's a surprisingly intact chateau from the 1620s with the architect of Versailles, Louis Le Vau, doing some of the architecture and Andre Le Notre designing the gardens. The chateau is still lived in by descendants of the same family. So you can see many original books, antiques, and paintings.

I was fascinated to see a French poem framed on the wall that described what true happiness is, and this document dates from an author who probably wrote it around 1650. It was interesting to compare his perspective on what's important to happiness versus our modern perspective, almost 400 years later.

LE BONHEUR DE CE MONDE.

S O N N E T.

Avoir une maison commode, propre & belle,
Un jardin rempli d'espaliers odorans,
Des fruits, d'excellent vin, peu de train, peu d'enfans,
Posséder seul sans bruit une femme fidèle.

N'avoir dettes, amour, ni procès, ni querelle,
Ni de partage à faire avecque ses parens,
Se contenter de peu, n'espérer rien des Grands,
Régler tous les desseins sur un juste modèle.

Vivre avecque franchise & sans ambition,
S'adonner sans scrupule à la dévotion,
Domter les passions, les rendre obéissantes.

Conserver l'esprit libre, & le jugement fort,
Dire son Chapelet en cultivant les entes,
C'est attendre chez soi bien doucement la mort.

Imprimé chez la Citoyenne CLAUDE, au Salon de la Citoyenne Anonyme.

--National Library of Australia

Some themes would be familiar to our version of happiness, such as, "A pretty house, a loyal spouse, and not too many children. No debts, and no lawsuits or quarrels." But I also enjoyed a few unique, turns-of-phrase: "To master one's passions and make them obedient...to live with honesty and without ambition...and finally to gently await my death chez moi."

And on that theme of happiness: when we saw the ballroom, my new friend Jeanine and I of course had to do what makes us very happy:



Another fabulous excursion was our driving tour in antique Citroen 2CVcars, which are like the French version of Volkswagens, tough as nails. And very quirky. But as long as you can put up with all of their idiosyncrasies and capriciousness, they are pretty reliable in the long run. It was a real trip down memory lane for me, because the last time I had driven a 2CV was at a friend's house in Normandy 30 years before.



The following day, our excursion to Minerve allowed for a wonderful hike in a geological formation at the meeting of two rivers that carved out these canyons thousands of years ago.



Walking through these natural caves, formed by the river flowing through them, was spectacular. Wifey and I loved to ford the streams on these little bridges of stones that had been built by the local kids.



I felt like Huck Finn exploring caves as I bounded from one rock to another and waded through the rivers and made my way up the canyon.

Touring the Fort in Carcassonne was memorable too. There's a stunningly beautiful cemetery just in front of the fort that I could easily have spent an hour in.



--John Lacy

I find I learn a lot from visiting cemeteries in each country because it's an important part of a culture's customs to see how they choose to bury their dead. Here in the Carcassonne Cemetery, they had photographs of the deceased. And I remember in particular one man who died in 1936 and they had this beautiful photo of him in his prime in a tuxedo jacket. It really gave me a feel for the spirit of that person who had passed before us--another drop in the river of life and the history of humanity.

In the fort itself, we had a great guide who helped us understand the history of the fort and city of Carcassonne. This fort was actually one of the earliest sites of The Inquisition. Many people, myself included, are under the impression that the Inquisition began with the Spanish Inquisition in the 1400's. But I was surprised to learn that the Inquisition actually began when the Pope set his face against the religious "heretics" known as the Cathars. In fact, it was around 1209 when the Institution of the church that we know is the Inquisition was formed, a kind of "KGB" to make sure that people were sticking to the orthodox Catholic religion. The Cathars were an interesting sect of Catholicism who believed in reincarnation and also said the mass in their own local native tongue rather than the obscure Latin that people couldn't even understand.

In summary, my fabulous friends, if you don't like to cook, drive, or organize logistics on your vacation in Europe, have I got a deal for you! You will adore the lovely routine of cruising every morning, a shore excursion every afternoon, and a fun dinner with drinks and charming companions every evening.

But hopefully, you will always love me more than the vacations I plan for you. After all, my wife does...



Thank you to Barge Lady Cruises and the barge Savannah for our week on the Canal du Midi. For another first-timer's perspective about the leisurely life onboard the Savannah, [click here](#). For a luscious dessert recipe from Chef Valerie's galley kitchen, [click here](#). To book your own cultural and culinary cruise on the Savannah, [click here](#)