



## Cruising France's Marne Canal Aboard Raymonde



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In late April, I experienced a delightful six-night barge cruise on France's extraordinarily scenic Marne Canal, traveling from Paris to Epervain aboard CroisiEurope's handsome Raymonde. This vessel, which was built in 2014 and accommodates just 22 guests in 11 twin-bedded cabins, is perfect for upscale group charters, simply because there is much less risk involved in contracting for exclusive occupancy of a departure when filling such a small number of berths is required.

During this first-of-the-season sailing, there were only 14 passengers aboard in addition to the six-person crew, so we soon melded into one big, happy family. All my shipmates were English-speaking and represented not only the United States, but also the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Staff members, except for the captain and chef, were bilingual and spoke English, so translation was provided when necessary, including for the chef's twice-daily menu introductions.

This was quite a different, though equally enjoyable, travel experience than crossing the Atlantic on Holland America Line's newest ship, the 2,500-plus guest, 100,000-ton Koningsdam, which I had done just a few days earlier. The Raymonde's cabins are expectedly compact but quite comfortable once one settles in and discovers all the hidden storage spaces. Food, which consisted of a continental breakfast buffet and varied multicourse set menus for lunch and dinner, was very good, and service was excellent.

This is an all-inclusive program, except for crew gratuities, so there is no extra charge for shore excursions. There is an open bar throughout, and numerous French wines and cheeses are served with meals. Games, recorded music and other diversions were provided each evening to keep everyone entertained, although after dinner I usually opted for exploring the towns where we were docked. No specific guidelines were given on board for providing staff appreciation, but my contact at CroisiEurope had suggested in advance that 10 euros per person per night would be a fair amount for contributing to the crew's pooled tip box.

The French countryside is beautiful: Picturesque homes, villages, vineyards, farms and extensive fields of golden rapeseed line the canal along the way, plus there are numerous small locks and several historic tunnels to transit. The primary difference between French canal and typical European river cruises is that on the latter, locks and waterways are much larger; thus, so is the size of the cruise vessels. There is also far more commercial traffic on the rivers; the types of craft we encountered the most along the way were kayaks, rowing sculls and racing shells filled with youngsters honing their waterborne skills during the fine spring days.

After a guided tour of Paris that featured the city's unique covered walkways, itinerary highlights included lovely Lagny-sur-Marne, the handsome city and cathedral of Meaux and an opportunity to learn about and sample the outstanding "King of Cheeses," brie de Meaux. I enjoyed this local specialty so much that I went back for both seconds and thirds, and then was too full to eat dinner back on the Raymonde.

Next were a falconry show and sightseeing on foot in historic Château Thierry. From Dormans, home of a magnificent World War I memorial, we toured the ancient hilltop village of Châtillon-sur-Marne; saw countless vineyards extending far into the distance in every direction; and visited Hautvillers, the "Birthplace of Champagne," where Dom Perignon is buried inside the community's Roman Catholic church.

In Epernay, we toured the cellars of a major Champagne house, one of hundreds of wineries we passed on the famed Champagne Route and other area roads. Finally, our group embarked on an excursion to Reims for a tour of this historic city and its storied cathedral, where French kings were traditionally crowned.