



# Canal Cruise Tips



By Jason Frye, Cruise Critic contributor



Where most cruise passengers are familiar with exploring Europe's waterways on river cruises, a smaller set of waterways -- canals -- crisscross France, and to a smaller extent, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Cruising on canals differs from river cruises in several ways. First and foremost, there's the size. Unlike the well-trod rivers of Europe such as the Rhine or Danube, these canals are small -- 40 feet wide, give or take -- and shallow. They cut courses through the countryside, giving passengers a taste and feel for the bucolic life of small villages and rural regions. Once used to transport building supplies and market goods, these hand-dug canals have been modernized (a little) and follow their original courses, passing through locks as they make their way up and down the canal.

Both the rural nature and size of the barges that cruise the canals lend intimacy to your sailing. This applies to the ship, where you'll find somewhere between six and 12 passengers plus your crew, as well as the villages and sites you visit. Out-of-the-way markets, small wineries, chateaus and castles, and historic sites that seldom see foreign visitors give your trip an air of authenticity.

Only a handful of companies offer canal barging in Europe. In addition to river cruises, CroisiEurope has barges. The two largest lines that specialize in barging are [French Country Waterways](#) and [European Waterways](#), though [Abercrombie & Kent](#) and [G Adventures](#) also offer a few canal cruises on chartered ships. Speaking of chartering, there are also a few options of piloting -- and navigating those locks, cooking for yourself and having a self-reliant getaway -- your own barge on a number of canals.

The advantage of sailing with one of the specialty companies -- French Country Waterways or European Waterways -- is simple: luxury. On these sailings, you'll find menus with high-end and hard-to-find wines; personalized service; and an onboard chef who plays with regional flavors, market-fresh ingredients and often takes requests. On our sailing with French Country Waterways, one of our fellow passengers requested morels one night for dinner. The next night, there they were, bought fresh at the market that morning and on our plates as one piece of an impeccable dish.

Overall, you'll find that barge cruising is a balance between decadent and perfectly relaxing (just where it falls is, in part, up to you). To ensure you get the most out of your canal cruise, here are a few tips.

## Study Regions Before You Book

As you're booking your barge cruise, you'll look at different regions: Champagne Valley, Alsace-Lorraine, Burgundy, the Loire Valley. Study each and make an educated decision on where you'd like to go. Interested in a particular style of wine or type of cuisine? You can find the right place to go. Want to visit a certain medieval site or village, battleground or location your favorite painter spent time? Choose your itinerary accordingly. It's wise to have one or more conversations with someone at the barge cruise company who can help you refine your choice and get you on the right cruise.

## Research Your Itinerary

When you get your itinerary, don't do what many of us do and glance at it then put it away. Study it. Look at the names of the places and find the region on a map. Do a little research into the cities and villages, the restaurants and wineries, the historic sites you'll visit. When you familiarize yourself with the plan for the trip, it's easier to relax and carve out those blocks of free time that will make your vacation special.

## Know Thyself

The barges are small and there are only a few passengers, so for the enjoyment of everyone onboard (you included), be the best you that you can be. This means you have to know yourself and be honest about yourself. Not a morning person? Fine, not everyone is, so talk to the crew and make accommodations for a pastry and cup of coffee in your room. Up early? Great, you can make arrangements for coffee or tea before the usual breakfast time so you can get that morning to yourself that you crave. Are you the lampshade-on-the-head party person? Maybe take it easy the first lunch and dinner (where the wine flows freely) and get a feel for your fellow passengers; let this guide you in your intake as you adapt to the pace and tone of the cruise. The same holds true if you're a trivia wonk, a history buff or an amateur standup comedian: Take a cue from the rest of the group and strike a balance that lets everyone have a good time.



## Come Hungry

The food on the barges exceeds the expectations of even the most hardened food critics. Fresh pastries are delivered every morning. The chef or someone from the ship shops in markets along the route daily, purchasing ingredients for the lunch buffet and plated dinner; longstanding relationships with cheesemongers and butchers ensure you'll eat well at every seating. On most sailings, you'll have one dinner when the chef gets the night off and the passengers head away from the canal to visit a lauded eatery nearby. Often these are two or three Michelin-starred restaurants.

## Expect cheese.

Apologies to the lactose intolerant, but if you're on a French barge cruise, be ready for cheese. The crew will do their best to wow you with a trio of cheeses at lunch and dinner (and a few a breakfast for good measure), explaining each before serving. A critical part of French culinary culture, you can't miss the seemingly endless cheese courses.

## Try Everything

And we mean everything. The wine? Of course. Even if you're a die-hard "bold reds only" or "oaky whites" or "I don't do bubbles" (who are you?), take a small pour, give it a swirl and a sip and see what you discover in the glass. The same lesson applies to the plate: try it, just a bite or two of some dish indicative of the place will enhance your experience there.

## Drive the Boat

Trying things applies beyond the culinary. Ask your captain or the matelot (think first mate, but French) and they'll find a time to bring you up to the wheelhouse and let you take the helm. Sure, it's a little unnerving at first, but they'll be right by your side. This one-of-a-kind experience will give you an appreciation for their jobs and give you a look at the canal and countryside from a different vantage point.



## Learn a Few Words of the Language

This tip applies to any sort of foreign trip no matter if you're sailing, flying, driving, biking or hiking to or through somewhere: show some respect to your host country and use the language. Or try to. Dust off that high school French, download that language tutorial app a few weeks before you depart and refresh your vocabulary, watch a movie or listen to music in the local language to get a little bit of an ear for it. Then, when you're in-country, give it a whirl. Unless you're well versed in the language, your accent will be off, your pronunciation slow and your grammar atrocious, but the very act of speaking or trying to speak in the native tongue will earn you some respect and show the locals you're not just here to observe, you're here to be part of their culture.

## Get Off the Boat

Barges are slow, averaging 3 to 4 km/hour, and most of the locks are hand operated, so you'll have nothing but time as the barge makes its way from here to there. At each lock, you'll have the opportunity to step off and amble along the canal's tow path, or take one of the onboard bicycles and pedal your way through the countryside. Given how slow the barge travels, you'll have no problem keeping pace or, in most instances, outpacing it; they'll find you resting on a bench by a lock somewhere ahead on the route. Talk to your captain or matelot about the timing, as the distance between locks can vary from less than 1 kilometer to more than 3 kilometers. They'll be able to give you an approximate arrival time at the next couple of locks (along with their phone numbers). Sometimes you'll want your camera, other times a few euro to visit a cafe or market. And sometimes you'll need nothing but your walking shoes (or that bike) and a little time to soak up the countryside.