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River Cruise Review: CroisiEurope's Raymonde

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Barging France's Marne-Rhine Canal is one of the unsung delights of river cruising

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Europe

River Cruise



CroisiEurope's Raymonde river barge carries just 22 guests. // © 2017 CroisiEurope

Feature image (above): Raymonde sails the Marne-Rhine Canal, beginning in Paris. // © 2017 CroisiEurope

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The Details

CroisiEurope
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by language group.

I think I will always associate plum and orange with CroisiEurope's charming Raymonde river barge on the Marne-Rhine Canal from Paris. Carrying just 22 guests and six exceptional crew members, Raymonde is cheerfully decked out in white, plum and orange from its carpet and cushions to the pattern of geometric dancers at its staircase. Everything is scaled down to charming proportions, from the staterooms' small vases of flowers (purple and/or orange, of course) to the little stars scattered across the charming dining room's dinner tables.

Staterooms are small at 118 square feet, but they're cunningly arranged with more storage space than meets the eye — tell clients to press on panels and drawers, and they will pop open. Each room has a small desk; several outlets (bring converters); an internal phone; a flat-screen television; bathrooms containing glass-enclosed showers; and nice touches such as a small light bar behind the bed.

Public spaces include a patio with umbrella tables and a generous-sized Jacuzzi, an indoor lounge with books and games, a light-filled dining room and a sundeck. Bicycles and umbrellas are available for guests at port, but we really had neither time nor need for them on our cruise.

Raymonde sails serenely half the day on the canal among lovely homes, draped willows and locks, sometimes accompanied by flocks of swans. There is usually time for a half-day of exploration and plenty of opportunities to take independent walks in the morning or evening, as the boat is docked all night. There is also a nightly short talk over coffee to explain the next day's activities and excellent shore excursions. Yoga and games are offered onboard, but, on our barge, the main pastime was conversation among the congenial guests, who are booked on specific cruises

Raymonde's dress code is casual, but guests are encouraged to wear dresses or jacket and tie on the final night for the five-course gala dinner.

The meals focus on classic favorites mixed with regional specialties and a barbecue on deck. Breakfasts are a combination of buffet and cooked to order; lunch and dinner are set menus, but CroisiEurope accommodates even the most restricted diet. Sauces and desserts from the hands of chef Remy Deremetz were outstanding — nobody shared even a spoonful of their profiteroles (cream puffs).

The wines at lunch and dinner drew compliments from the knowledgeable American and British guests. If a passenger fell in love with one particular vintage, it became magically available at another meal — and if there was a leaning toward Bordeaux (cruise director Laure Mortret's home), nobody complained. Since the itinerary wound through Champagne country, there were wonderful tastings.

The cheese courses during dinner, featuring two French cheeses from different regions each night, were introduced with panache and obvious enthusiasm by Mortret, who was constantly available, charming and kind. She even took guests shopping for what they needed onshore and attended to everything they could want onboard.

The internet connection on our cruise was surprisingly consistent — much more so than on most river cruises — and it's offered complimentary.

The shore excursion package is included in the fare for North American passengers, as are wines, spirits, soft drinks and very good coffee and teas. Complimentary still and sparkling water is constantly stocked in the staterooms.

One of the shoreside highlights of our cruise from Paris was the Brie cheese at port in Meaux. If your clients want to taste a bit of heaven, suggest they sample Brie de Meaux, unpasteurized, exquisite and regulated to perfect size and quality. There are weekly markets and a very attractive cheese interpretation center, where one of the members of the ceremonial brotherhood of the friends of Brie de Meaux explains the ancient traditions and techniques that yield the unique regional specialty.

Finally, docked at Epernay, France, we all reluctantly left the barge with very full stomachs, strong resolutions to return and bags clanking with pastries, mustard, wine and cheese.