




10 Reasons French Barge Cruises Are Picture-Perfect



By Chris Gray Faust
Cruise Critic Managing Editor

Share   

Save 

While we all love Paris, there's nothing like time spent in the French countryside to capture the country's true joie de vivre -- and a barge cruise is the perfect way to see it up close. A typical barge cruise meanders through France's smaller canals and waterways, bypassing the big-ticket tourist sites for small towns, leisurely afternoons and plenty of outstanding food and wine. Here's why we think a French barge cruise needs to be pinned to your vacation to-do list.

On This Page

1. [Scenic Canals](#)
2. [Very Small Ships](#)
3. [Personal Service](#)
4. [Authentic Towns](#)
5. [Lazy Afternoons](#)
6. [Biking](#)
7. [Fabulous Food](#)
8. [Great Wine](#)
9. [Cheese](#)
10. [New Friends](#)

Updated April 24, 2018

1. Scenic Canals

Most river cruisers are familiar with the Seine, which flows through Paris, and the Rhone in Provence. But the country has other major rivers, with soaring stone aqueducts and countryside canals that, although they were built to encourage trade, have become picturesque attractions. The Briare Canal, for example, connects the Loire and Seine rivers and has France's oldest lock, dating to 1604. It's also the starting point for barge cruises on the Loire Canal, where your first Instagram-moment comes when you view the aqueduct's graceful steel art nouveau lamps designed by Gustave Eiffel, of Eiffel Tower fame. Other canals, in Burgundy, Languedoc, Champagne, Bordeaux and Alsace, are equally attractive for their rural settings and morning mists.

2. Very Small Ships

Even experienced river cruisers may be surprised at how small a hotel barge can be. While a river cruise might have 120 to 190 passengers, barges may carry as few as six cruisers! French river cruise line CroisiEurope's barges hold 22 people, but that's about as big as they come. The small sizes make them attractive for family and group charters. Even though the boats are small, they usually have a thoughtful layout so you don't feel cramped. If you like intimate settings with quiet conversation instead of crowds, you'll appreciate "barge life."

3. Personal Service

With fewer passengers onboard, barge cruises run by cruise lines (as opposed to self-catering rentals) provide a high level of personal service. Often, you'll have your own chef, cruise director and cabin stewards who double as wait staff and bartenders, as well as the captain and the deck crew. On many barges, you'll enjoy a 1:1 ratio of crew to passengers. In such an environment, you'll get to know the staff -- and they'll get to know you. That means your favorite cocktail will always be ready when you return from a stroll, and your waiter will know that you prefer sparkling to still water at dinner.

4. Authentic Towns

When you're on a barge cruise, you'll visit smaller towns, many that you only recognize from the side of a wine bottle. For example, we knew Sancerre produced deliciously crisp sauvignon blanc, but we had no idea it was a hilltop medieval town with views overlooking The Loire river. Many river cruises stop in Strasbourg, but it's also where an Alsace canal tour begins - meaning the towns that follow are much smaller and charming, with activities that include a visit to a local bakery.

5. Lazy Afternoons

On a barge cruise, excursions usually take place in the mornings, leaving the afternoons free for the boat to putter to the next town. This is the perfect time for passengers to sleep off the robust lunch (more on that below), catch up on their reading or hang out on the forward deck, possibly with a coffee or glass of wine. Barges travel very slow -- 4 miles per hour -- so you'll have plenty of time to check out the scenery.

6. Biking

You might think you can walk or bike faster than 4 mph -- and on many canals, you can. Most French canal barges carry bikes onboard, so you can go off and explore while the vessel follows. Be sure to check with your line about the status of the waterway's adjoining bike paths, however, as some might not be in great shape for a bike ride (as we found along the Loire).

7. Fabulous Food

Perhaps the biggest lure of a French barge cruise is the chef who comes with it. In France, food isn't taken lightly -- and the midday meal can last more than two hours. Expect four courses, including one of cheese, and regional specialties such as duck, foie gras, escargot, salmon en croute and beef bourguignon. It's all very rich and delicious and one of the main draws of the trip; if you're a picky eater, you'll want to make doubly sure that a boat this small can accommodate any food allergies or intolerances before you book.

8. Great Wine

Wine is another hallmark of a true French experience, and barge cruises do everything they can to immerse you in their region. You'll likely visit vineyards along the way, meeting winemakers and learning about the terroir that makes the local varietal special. Regional wines are usually paired at lunch and dinner, so if you're an oenophile, a barge cruise could be your dream come true.

9. Cheese

The French take their cheese very seriously and have appellations for them, just like wine. On a barge cruise, cheese is a course unto itself, usually coming after the entree and served with a green salad as a palate cleanser. Expect to find types of cheese that you've never seen before; because many are unpasteurized, they aren't available in the United States. Among some we discovered in the Loire: Sainte-Maure de Touraine, a goat cheese held together with a straw that's been rolled in wood ash; and Langre, an orange washed rind cheese that is served with schnapps poured on top.

10. New Friends

Because barges carry only a handful of people and the cruises have lots of downtime, expect to socialize extensively with your fellow passengers. Most barge lines do their best to put travelers with similar interests and nationalities on the same cruise; it's rare to have a situation where you'd be the only English speaker. Luckily, the type of people who are looking to immerse themselves in the French countryside likely enjoy the same things you do (i.e., everything on this list!) and you'll come away fast friends.