

European canal journeys fit for king

By **Emilie C. Harting**
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Yearning to take a European river cruise, but afraid of being cooped up on the boat? Consider luxury barging, once the preferred getaway for royal families.

Barging is different from river cruising, but can be just as luxurious. On a barge, passengers have the option of walking or biking on the towpaths while the boat moves along the canal; on a river cruise they can only get off the vessel when it is docked. Barges carry bikes; river cruises do not. Also, most barges carry from six to 20 passengers, while river cruises often have more than a hundred.

Since barges travel on canals rather than rivers most of the time, they journey into more remote countryside. On these routes, the calls of birds, the grasses swaying in the wind, and



EUROPEAN WATERWAYS

La Dolce Vita's luxury barges cruise Venetian Lagoon, islands of Torcello, Burano, Murano, and the canalized Brenta River.

the waves lapping the side of the boat can be the only sounds.

A luxury barge is a floating hotel with an experienced chef who cooks the meals, purchasing fresh meat, fish, vegetables, and fruit from purveyors along the way. Some have themed trips such as golf, wine, family, art, cycling, and antiques. Most have minibuses that take guests on daily excursions to villages, vineyards, castles, chateaus, archeological sites, and artisans' shops.

Barge trips usually start in cities such as Dublin, London, Paris, or Amsterdam. Guests go by van or train to the locks, and are returned to the starting city.

The season for most barge trips is April to October. However, spring and fall are the favorite seasons in countries where it is hot in summer.

Luxury barges are represented by a number of brokers and travel companies: Abercrombie & Kent, Barge Connection, The Barge Company, Barges in France, Barges in Germany, European Waterways, Go Barging, Lynott Tours, Special Places, and many others.

Prices range from \$2,850 to \$6,795 per person or \$19,000 to \$54,000 for a whole boat for a week's cruise. However, check discounted rates for early and late seasons, for booking more than one cabin, and for children.

Adrienne is one of five barges run by French Country Waterways, an American firm that has English-speaking crews on a number of routes in France. The Adrienne often travels north and south in the Upper Loire Valley, from Châtillon-sur-Loire to Nemours and back on the Briare Canal. The boat crosses over the Loire River on an aqueduct designed by Gustave Eiffel, and moors one night at Rogny-les-Sept-Ecluses below a historic staircase of locks used from 1642 to 1887.

Typical day trips by van: wine town of Sancerre; 15th-century chateau and village at St. Fargeau; 17th-century Chateau La-Bussière, with vast gardens and a fishing museum overlooking a lake; Pouilly-Fumé, an area with some of the richest wine soils in the world; ceramic factory at Gien; and medieval walled village of Château-Landon by horse and carriage. For the 2009 season the Adrienne will switch to the Cote d'Or of Burgundy and its sister barge, the Nenuphar, will journey the Upper Loire Valley.

Other itineraries: Champagne; Burgundy Côte d'Or; central Burgundy; northern Burgundy; and Alsace-Lorraine.

Fleur de Lys has a Classic Bur-

IN STYLE

See how to live large in a barge at boston.com/travel.

gundy route through the famous Côte d'Or, meaning "hillside of gold," one of France's richest wine regions. There are frequent stops for tastings at such vineyards as Meursault, Montrachet, Clos de Vougeot, and Pommard. Since the boat has a pool and a grand piano, and there are frequent day trips to well-known landmarks on the way, it is appealing for family charters.

Other itineraries: River Saône and Canal du Centre with stops en route to such towns as Beaune, Dijon, St. Jean de Losne, Chalon-sur-Saône, and Dole.

Golden Odyssey's Paris to Champagne trip begins near the Eiffel Tower, makes a circuit around Notre Dame Cathedral on Île de la Cité before leaving the city, and continues to the Meaux Valley, where Impressionists Monet, Renoir, and Sisley painted. Once in the Champagne District, the barge can easily travel through northern France to medieval towns in Flanders, land of Bruegel, Frans Hals, and Vermeer. Golden Odyssey operates as a private yacht and voyages are tailored to clients' wishes, from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

La Dolce Vita cruises on the Venetian Lagoon and the canalized Brenta River in Italy. Guests visit Venetian landmarks such as the Doge's Palace and St. Mark's, and also sail along Roman trade routes to the nearby islands of Torcello, with its ancient mosaics; Burano, with its lace museum; and Murano with its glass blowing. Near the end the boat passes Renaissance palaces on the Brenta River.

Other itineraries: historical regatta, Riviera Fiorita, opera, Vogalonga Regatta, and honeymoon cruises.

Magna Carta's classic Family Cruise on England's River Thames usually stops at Hampton Court Palace, once the home of Henry VIII; Runnymede, where King John put his stamp on the Magna Carta in 1215; Windsor Castle, the countryside described in "The Wind in the Willows"; boat-building shops along the Henley Regatta course; a river and rowing museum; and a castle and manor house.

Other itineraries: golf, theater, health and recreation, art discovery, antiques, gardens, murder mystery, walking, and World War II cruises.

La Nouvelle Etoile's Amsterdam Tulip Trip hits major flower and cheese markets. Starting in the village of Zaanse, Holland,

with visits to clog makers and a cheese farm, the barge moves on to the flower auction at Aalsmeer, to Gouda for cheese and 15th-century architecture, to Delft, where Jan Vermeer lived and painted and the Dutch East India Co. began, and the Delft ceramic factory is located. After a stop at Leiden, where the Pilgrims lived before coming to America, the vessel makes stops to see Old Masters at the Franz Hals Museum in Haarlem.

Other itineraries: Holland to Belgium; Belgium to France; Germany, Moselle River. Within France: Chalais, Champagne and Brie, and Alsace-Lorraine cruises.

Roi Soleil travels on two world heritage routes in France. The Provence trip starts at Avignon with the 14th-century Palace of the Popes, makes stops at Roman ruins, and passes vistas painted by Van Gogh and Cezanne before entering the Camargue region, known for its wild birds and horses. On the Canal du Midi cruise, the barge travels through the wine region of Languedoc with its Roman ruins and medieval sites, and at the final point, Carcassonne, a medieval walled city and World Heritage Site.

Other itineraries: gastronomy, wine, and family charters.

Savoir Faire takes a two-week trip through Belgium, Holland, and France with many chances to bike. Excursions include homes of Napoleon in Malmaison and Monet's house and garden in Giverny, France; Antwerp, Belgium, known as a world diamond and fashion center and city of 17th-century artist Peter Paul Rubens; Bruges, Belgium, where ladies used to sit in doorways making lace; and, in Holland, the Delta Project of dams, sluices and surge barriers to protect the Dutch coastline.

Other week-long itineraries: tulip cruise in Holland; France: French wine trip; Burgundy, Champagne, and the Upper Loire Valley.

The Scottish Highlander's Standard Cruise travels from Dochgarroch to Banavie along the Caledonian Canal in Scotland, with a passage along the southern shore of Loch Ness. Passengers learn about clan lore, sight wildlife, and, of course, sample whiskey. Visits include Macbeth's Cawdor Castle, Eilean Donan Castle, set in highland countryside, a ladder of locks called Neptune's Staircase, local mills for tweed and wool, and the Ben Nevis Distillery.

Other themed trips in addition to the standard cruise: honeymoon, cycling, family, fishing, golf, Christmas, and New Years.

Shannon Princess II travels on the Lower River Shannon and Lough Derg in south central Ireland, stopping at towns such as Terryglass, the supposedly haunted Leap Castle with its musical performances, and bog and Iron Age sites. After an excursion into Galway, a university city known for its music, the boat weaves in among the hundreds of islands on Lough Ree, and stops at Athlone for a visit to Clonmacnoise, one of Ireland's top ruins, with a 6th-century university, a number of early stone crosses, and a castle.

Emilie C. Harting can be reached at echarting@hotmail.com.