



TRAVEL MINDSET
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FLOATING THROUGH THE LOIRE: A TRANQUIL WEEK ON A HOTEL BARGE

Our week on the [French Country Waterways](#) barge Adrienne was certainly a serene vacation. “Trip of a Lifetime,” my husband Rob keeps saying in a soft, nostalgic voice.

Minutes after stepping off the dock in Cotillon and walking through the boat, I began to feel the tranquil rhythms of the barge on the water. Commodious and compact, the 129 foot Adrienne was completely rebuilt two years ago, and has six suites for guests. Upstairs there’s an ample front deck for lounging, a living room with puffy chairs and couches for reading and socializing, a dining room, and a kitchen. Below our room had a large bed, a wall of closets with drawers and storage space, a state of the art bathroom, and several small windows where we could peek up at the grassy shoreline as it passed by. One of the company’s five boats, it travels north and south from Cotillon to Nemours and back on the glasslike Briare Canal.

The barge started moving in the morning and docked before dark. Several times a day, when we were not eating, walking along the towpath, off on an excursion, or sleeping, I would plunk myself down in the lounge or deck and study our winding journey on a series of maps. We covered eighty miles during six days of cruising north, and passed through forty-three locks. (Barging is distinctly

different from river cruising. On a barge you can get off and walk or bike while the boat moves along the canal; on a river cruise you can only get off the boat when it is docked.)

It was not long before the crew seemed like our good friends.

The skilled captain Mark, British, but a long time French resident, was often at hand for short chats when he wasn't steering the boat through a lock with only a few inches to spare, mopping a window, or making various arrival and departure times work. Remy, the French boatman, would acrobat off the roof and tend to the ropes when we approached toll stations. Ellie and Jessie, delightful young Englishwomen, helped out with details, cleaned our rooms, and gave lectures on the two French wines and three cheeses that accompanied lunch and dinner. Since there was no assigned seating in the small dining area, the twelve of us got to know each other fairly quickly.

After a meal or two the consensus was that Paris-trained Cyril Bedu was a master of nouvelle French cuisine and a three star chef. (They had credentials to judge: five had lived and worked in France for extended periods. Another was a native of Holland who was about to open his own restaurant in Switzerland.) Cyril would emerge from the kitchen just before each meal to tell us about the dishes, pause briefly, and then bless the food with a "Bon Appetit. Voila!" Among his specialties were salads, often with six or eight blends of fresh vegetables and herbs, dressed with olive oil and lemon; luncheon quiches with sautéed leeks, mushrooms, and a cheese from a different region each day; and light fricassees of vegetables. Cyril glazed roasts with sauces and cooked them in a rack over bubbling white wine. He baked herbed fish just to its tender point. His dessert repertoire included pralined fruit blends laced with champagne and orange liqueur, fancily decorated cakes, and succulent tortes. He prepared excellent vegetarian dishes for those of us who were not carnivores. Along the way Cyril would buy local produce, meat, and herbs from favorite purveyors. One early riser says she saw a woman pull up alongside the barge on her bike to deliver fresh bread and pastry.

Each day we took an offshore trip in the van that accompanied the barge. There were jaunts to moated chateaus such as Fargeau, where we climbed through an ancient attic with a solid stone floor, and Ladoucette, at Pouilly-Fumé, an area with some of the richest wine soils in the world. Rolling hills of meticulously cultivated vineyards fold into each other in that area of the Upper Loire Valley. At La Bussiere, set on a lake, we strolled through vast gardens, and visited a small fishing museum. At a factory in Gien we saw women painting ceramic dishes. The last day we toured the hilly medieval village of Chateau-Landon by horse and carriage, and, at one point looked over to a small waterway with flat stations of rock, like modern bus stops with overhangs, built so that village women of past centuries could walk down the steep hills to do their wash.

That evening we dined at the Auberge des Templiers-Les Bezards, a restaurant highly rated by Michelin, we had appetizers of foie gras, snails set in gelatin, entrees such as fish marinated in artichokes, filets of beef with garlic and duck fat, young wild duck with pointed cabbages, and, of course, cheeses of France. Desserts were soufflés, tarts, fondues, and petits fours made by the restaurant's chef. Though I enjoyed the surroundings and presentation, I was a bit overwhelmed by the heaviness of the meal. When we got back to the boat, the former French residents among us made a point to tell Cyril that his food was three star, and we would have gotten better food on the boat.

Among my favorite memories of the trip are the rural landscapes. We would be floating along with forests on either side when around the bend a village with its pointed roofs would appear. Almost every lock had a tollhouse. All different, they were usually cottages with small flower and vegetable gardens. Some were unoccupied. Others had bikes and toys strewn about the yard. At the village of Montbuoy we walked over to excavated remains of locks dating back to the 1600s when most cargo was transported by barge. With grass growing up through the rocks, the older locks looked like a

series of terraces leading up to the top of a hill. Until the advent of railroads, the canal system was the main way of moving cargo. Horses and mules would pull the barge along. Now most of the barges on the canals, including the Briare Canal, built in 1896, are pleasure boats.

Through conversation, observation, and reading, I came home knowing more about the techniques of nouvelle French cooking, and the pairing of wines and food, which is much more about lightness and heaviness and flavors and aromas than simply red for meat and white for fish. I also gained a better sense of geography by learning which provinces produce certain wines and cheeses, and where rivers and canals appear on the map of France.

Most of all, I don't think I'll ever forget the tranquility of the countryside by day, and the stimulating conversations at dinner after darkness folded in around the boat.

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