

La Belle Epoque & Canal de Bourgogne Barging

An Article of 900 words by Hazel Edwards
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'Is that the same barge Rick Stein used for his TV cooking programme?
'Almost. Same company. Different canal.'

After holiday-barging on the French canals, the common questions are:

'What's the difference between a canal and a river?

'How does a lock work?'

With my new-found knowledge of locks and water levels. I've had to explain the difference between sloping rivers and man-made canals and why the water level doesn't fall naturally. After watching lock keepers buzz on mini motor cycles between locks to open and shut them, every half an hour or so, I'm an expert...watcher.

Why take five days of barge travel on a French canal to cover a distance which takes an hour or so by road?

Water views. Overall ambience of relaxation. The rhythm of the barge chugging. Lazy reading. Drifting along. Having gourmet meals and wine provided.

By train, you only see the spire of a village. From the barge you can cycle into the village, explore, meet the locals, return to the next lock, and the barge is still behind you!

The 'La Belle Epoque' barge travels the Canal de Bourgogne, Tonnerre to Venarey les Laumes one week and the reverse the following week. An hour on the TGV (very fast) train from Gare de Lyon, met at the Montbard station by the barge captain who drives guests to the tethered barge where you're given a welcoming Kir drink made from champagne and blackcurrant liqueur, and canapes. Hard to adjust to the luxury. Attentive bi-lingual crew including host-stewardess, matelot/deckhand, captain, chef and deputy skipper.

Barges used to be the main means of carrying cargo on man-made canals, via locks which coped with the watery falls or rises. Now barges carry tourists through wine-growing areas and picturesque villages and the working locks have become photographic attractions.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner are included daily. Crusty French bread, rye and local patisseries such as pain au raisin, soggy Swiss bread (a delight) and chocolate croissants. Hard to return to plain oatmeal at home.

Cabins are comfortable with a double bed and bath or two single bunks and a small shower and toilet. Usually up to twelve passengers on board.



'Duck!' is on the menu as 'canard' but it usually means keep your head down, as the barge slips under the bridge.

Occasional double parking (mooring) occurred.



Highlights for me were the crew's skill in mooring and negotiating locks and the visit to the village of Flavigny sur Ozerain, location of the film 'Chocolat' .



At local markets, our crew bought the cheeses, fruit and farm fresh vegetables which we later ate. We also observed the traditional making of black puddings in the marketplace.



Daily, the menus are written up. Simon the English chef, who cooked French dishes superbly, introduced each course.

Barge owner Derek Banks, joined us one evening and we learnt behind-the-scenes-stories of the Rick Stein barge cooking programme filmed on board.

Food becomes a full time occupation, but portions are moderate and pleasure is in the anticipation and the eye as well as the taste.



Sunday's welcoming dinner was an entrée of chargrilled mackerel with crushed potatoes. The main course was Chicken goujons (strips) with Greek salad and the best Crème Brulée I have ever eaten, with a hint of orange. Local cheeses, always the third course, were provided with a little explanation of their history. Monday déjeuner we had a genuine Quiche Lorraine, with superb, galley-made pastry. All were accompanied by red and white wines, this time introduced by the hostess Kayeleigh who told a little story.

Tastings of 2-3 cheeses are served and my husband loved the goats cheese, but I preferred the lemon tart with crème anglais and the chocolate sauced profiteroles.

Experimenting is one of the pleasures and although I'd had snails before, the escargots, a dish of garlic snails in their shells, was different. The goats cheese and beetroot salad with honey dressing were intriguing taste combinations.

Everybody 'dressed up' for the final dinner with the captain (most of us lived in casual, drip dry clothes) and even the table was 'dressed' in petals. Crew joined for a drink also.



Scenery changes slowly and sideways coach-driven visits are possible to the market, chateaux, abbey and even the local butcher. Wine tasting of Chablis wines at Saint Bris de Vineaux in the Bersan cellars and a meal in a local restaurant of the Domaine Laroche in the town of Chablis were memorable.

Watching the crew manoeuvring the barge into the crowded moorings rivalled a film script in exchanges of dialogue.



Laurent the captain-guide's historical knowledge was impressive and added depth to conversations about the Abbaye de Fontenay, a UNESCO World Heritage site or the 18th century Forges de Buffon.



No TV. E-mail not possible unless you visit a hotel WIFI en route and internet reception weak. But after all, you are on a holiday!

Tipping is suggested at the end, and the staff deserved this as they often did extras unasked and with enthusiasm. Checking through the Guest Book indicates clients from Russia, USA, Australia and even the two Welsh guests on board with us.

Maybe Rick Stein will return for another cooking programme on the barge? I'd be delighted to eat there again, even if only via a TV screen. Or listen to the audio, much easier on the waistline!

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