

TRAVEL

Great Escapes

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Barge Right In

SOAK IN THE LAP OF LUXURY AND SEE **BURGUNDY** BY TAKING A LEISURELY CRUISE THROUGH THE LOCKS, IMPLORÉS CAROL WRIGHT

SMOOTH SAILING

Closed to commercial traffic, the canal is a serene way to see Burgundy

ROMANÉE-CONTI, Aloxe-Corton, Bâtard-Montrachet, Charmes-Chambertin – mighty names for grand cru wines gilding the finest wine lists. A luxury hotel barge trip along the 18th-century Burgundian canal is the most sybaritic way to discover the lands behind these labels, moving at a pace that allows time to savour their taste among the lush, rolling forested hills and river-cut valleys.

Six-night cruises on L'Impressionniste follow the loop of the River Ouche from Escommes to Fleurey, near Dijon. The pace of life slows serenely to the 5km/h speed limit of canal traffic. It's a progress so leisurely that you can watch herons stalk waters alongside the boat, soak in the tall trees festooned with mistletoe mirrored in the canal, and gaze at grazing Charolais cattle in fields as defensive castles sneer from above.

Cruises start on Sunday evenings after a transfer from Dijon's station or the nearby Hotel Sofitel Dijon La Cloche, which is a good place to begin exploring the city. In the spacious upper-deck lounge, the crew welcomes passengers on board with champagne and canapés. This lounge becomes the hub of daily life and gossip on board, with its deep sofas, communal dining table, ever-open bar and library of books. It's the perfect place to settle down with your notebook or iPad to keep an on-board diary of your experiences and watch as the canal slips past.

The six snug double cabins all have shower rooms, and one suite has a bath. Beds have spacious storage drawers underneath and eye-level porthole views of the canal waters, darkening as the boat is lowered down the stone lock walls, brightening on rising again to glimpse a swan paddling by. The boat ties up at quiet moorings each night, and engines start up around 9.30am while passengers are still savouring fresh croissants, fruit, cheese, ham and perfectly frothed cappuccino. The canal has long been closed to commercial traffic, so your only water companions are other hotel barges and tourist boats.

The Burgundy canal spans 240km, with



189 locks; just a fraction is covered in satisfying depth on the cruise. Starting from Escommes, near the canal's highest point at 414m – this is France's highest summit-level canal – L'Impressionniste makes a stately descent through some 25 locks during the five-day voyage, covering about 50km. Lock keepers, in modern style, ride scooters ahead of the barge, ready to turn the iron bars that operate the heavy gates and let the water in or out. Some of the lock keepers' cottages are still inhabited, and owners are happy to sell local wines and pass the time of day. The barge is gently lowered into locks that seem to fit it like a cork in a Beune wine bottle, and then it bobs out through the opened gates into the smooth canal waters. Sometimes L'Impressionniste passes under road bridges that have so little head space the captain needs to shout a warning, and he then lowers both the sun canopy over the foredeck and the Burgundian flag, proudly flown from the prow.

As the barge moves to its next mooring, mornings are mainly spent sunning on deck, sipping wine from the bar, reading, taking photos and watching the locking at work. When mooring before lunch, there's time for a walk to a nearby village, where you can take in its church, sit in a cafe in the square or cycle along the tow path. Meals are taken round a communal table and wines, included in the cruise price, are each day married to the seasonal dishes served. Chef Sharif Gergis from Edinburgh was rated by fellow passengers to be of Michelin standard. Dinner is a highlight each night, when everyone dresses up just a little bit and talks about the day over cocktails. The menu, for example, might include ballotine of roasted guinea fowl stuffed with black pudding, followed by lavender, rosemary and heather-honey panna cotta. For the captain's dinner on the last night, the table was loaded with flowers and a mass of wine glasses. The menu began with foie gras followed

by fillet of Charolais beef, cheeses and chocolate cheesecake. With these dishes came a Beune premier cru from Louis Latour and a Charmes-Chambertin grand cru from Camus, a winery that passengers visited during the cruise.

Afternoons are spent sightseeing in the boat's people carrier and the captain's car. The captain, Max Renau, was born on the canal and lives in a lock keeper's cottage. With his extensive local history and wine knowledge, Renau served as a guide to passengers around castles and through caves. A visit to the private 13th-century, moat-encircled Château Commarin, home to 26 generations of the De Vogue family, was a lesson in French aristocratic lifestyle. The castle at Châteauneuf-en-Auxois showed their more indulgent side, while the Hospices de Beune highlighted a more compassionate, charitable aspect. This hospital for the poor was founded in 1443 by the Duke of Burgundy's chancellor and continued as a hospital until 1973. Now, when

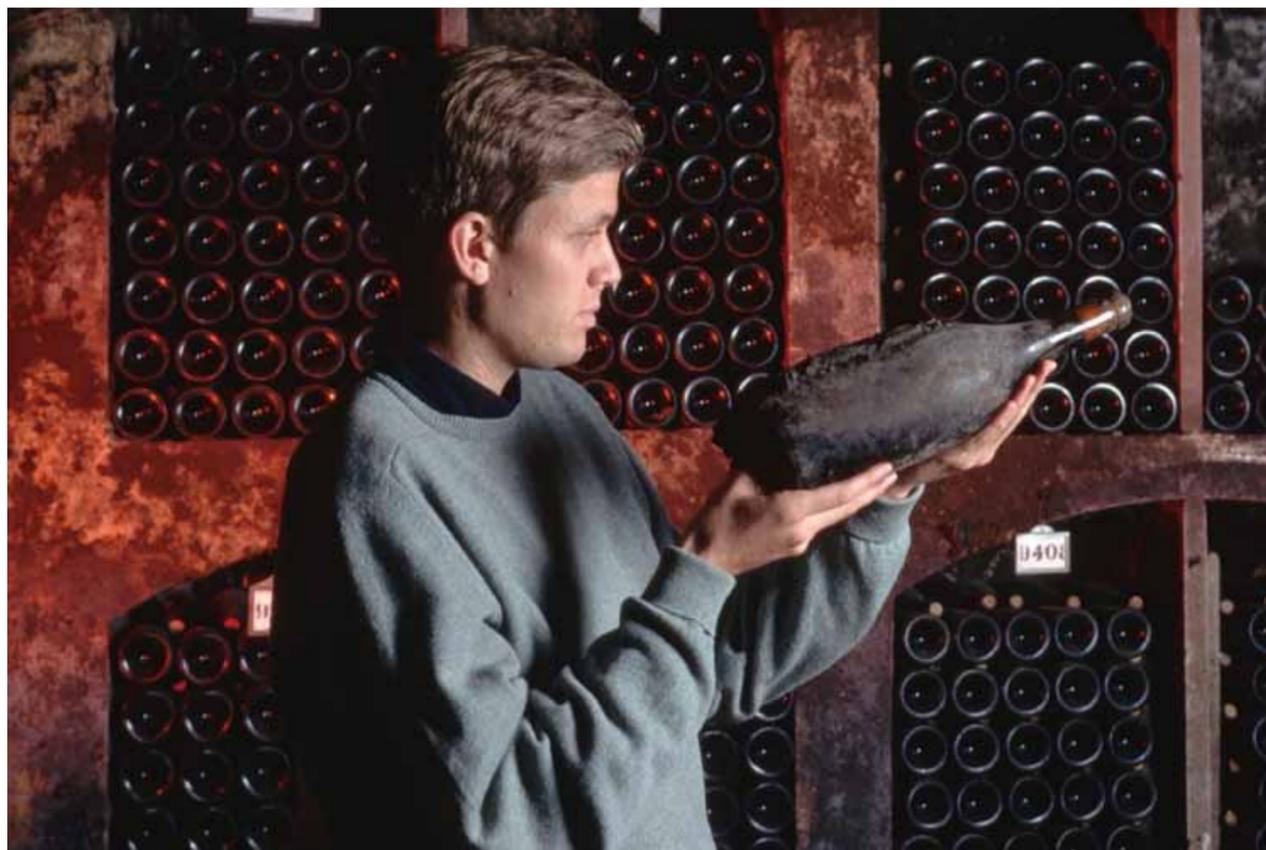
The pace of life slows serenely to the canal's 5km/h speed limit

not hosting important wine events, it showcases rows of scarlet-blanketed beds, rich 17th- and 18th-century tapestries, and displays explaining the workings of the kitchen and pharmacy.

A cruise highlight is the private tasting at Bouchard Aîné, in their noble town house premises over 18th-century cellars in Beune. This a far more memorable wine education than the customary line-up of bottles to be tasted against each other. In a series of different cellars, one's wine appreciation is enhanced by being taught

CRUISE CONTROL
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

The castle at Châteauneuf-en-Auxois; L'Impressionniste; biking along the canal is one of many ways to while away a day



how to apply the five senses in evaluating a wine. Each cellar has been designed to bring out one of the senses and, in each, the expert guide offers a wine to highlight that sense. One is shown how wine colour changes as it ages; the blue-purple colours of young red wines evolve to a burgundy hue. A look at the owner's small cellar shows a precious 1911 Pommard, a wine that changes its appearance every 20 years. The "taste" cellar, filled with places to inhale all the varied aromas that come from wine, is a fascinating place to develop one's nose.

A contrasting tasting visit is made to the 200-year-old family-run Domaine Camus Père & Fils, a biodynamic wine producer at Gevrey-Chambertin. Here the tasting is more traditional, with wines opened on barrel tops and described as they are tasted. Originally an edible oil producer, Camus began cultivating wines in 1850. Now, two-thirds of their vineyards produce grand crus, including Charmes-Chambertin made traditionally with hand-picked grapes, fermented for 18 days to three weeks, and then stored in oak for 14 to 18 months before bottling.

Cattle pastures and rolling forests serve as the backdrop to the canal stretch L'Impressionniste cruises. But the richest of the vineyard areas is a bike ride or a short drive away. The narrow 40km-by-2km strip of prime vineyards that make up the highlights of many an award-winning wine list form a dramatic panorama when seen from the side of the Côte de Nuits. One looks down over land where 24 out of the 25 red grand cru appellations of Burgundy are grown in soil that can vary within a hundred metres. The visit

along the mapped Route Des Vins allows you to take in the Château du Clos de Vougeot, the headquarters of the Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin with its medieval spacious cellars and mighty wooden wine presses used by the monk.

The "big-city" trip to Dijon had us walking around the Ducal Palace (now an art museum) and enjoying the rich architecture of the proud town houses, which are mainly old half-timbered buildings with coloured tiled roofs. As the capital of Burgundy, Dijon's main street displays regional flags and shopping ranging from the ultra-fashionable Galeries Lafayette to the historic shop of Maille the mustard maker, a product closely associated with the city. Tucked away on side streets were stalls selling antiques, old books and postcards, as well as a covered food market, where the central *buvette* made a good spot for a mid-morning glass of wine, surrounded by Burgundy's lush food products.

In summer, a cruise on L'Impressionniste provides all this tranquillity and more, viewed as you lie back in the hot tub in the bows. Autumn, with its changing colours, is a mellow time to cruise. It may not be fast-track touring, but with the well-organised private excursions and wine tastings built in, a cruise is probably the most satisfying way of getting an in-depth look at this rich corner of France. **T**

IMAGES: CAROL WRIGHT; AFP

ABBEY ROAD

ONLY 20 MINUTES from Dijon and a stone's throw from the Burgundy canal, the Abbaye de la Bussière hotel is a fine pre- or après-cruise spot to stay.

Built as a religious house in 1131 by an English Cistercian abbot, most of the surviving buildings date from the 18th century and have been restored by another Englishman, Clive Cummings. Frescoed walls have been uncovered, vaulting restored, the chapel has become a restaurant, and cosy, antique-packed lounges open off the galleried upper floor. The 18 bedrooms in the Relais & Châteaux property are decked out in traditional French style with ultra-modern bathrooms of double whirlpool baths and granite wash basins.

In the 14th-century wine press and cellars where monks made their communion wine, Cummings has plans to create a cookery and wine school. Daytime options at the hotel include cycling, strolling the

nearby tow paths, going for drives in classic cars, and paying visits to vineyards not normally open to the public.



A BARREL OF LAUGHS

FROM TOP Tasting at the Beaune cellars; the historical home of Maille the mustard maker; wines ageing in oak before bottling

