



# CRUISE CONTROL

Rory and Caroline Macrae share the hidden corners of Burgundy with guests who join them for holidays on their luxury French river barge, as Jeannine Williamson discovers







When Rory and Caroline Macrae first decided to work overseas, they had no idea it would lead to them being at the helm, quite literally, of their own business in the heart of Burgundy. In fact, at the outset the couple had not even set their sights on France, let alone a completely new life floating along the rivers and waterways.

“After we got married, we came up with the idea that we’d like to work abroad,” says Caroline. “We thought it would be a bit of an adventure for a couple of years, and we didn’t even mind where we went.

“We began looking and saw an advert in *The Daily Telegraph* for a chef and a steward to work on a privately owned boat in the south of France.”

The couple met while Caroline was training at Le Cordon Bleu culinary institute in London and Rory worked in his family’s shoe business in Carlisle. After gaining her certificate, Caroline went on to cater at weddings, dinner parties and corporate events, with Rory lending a hand.

This background ensured they got the chef and steward jobs, and what was initially envisaged as a two-year venture, became a life-changing experience for the couple. More than 20 years on they are still in France and last year launched their own business on a luxury barge they rechristened *Après Tout* (‘After Everything’), a permanent reminder

of their decision to go it alone after all those years.

Built in the 1950s to transport grain, the 127ft (38.7m) vessel was transformed into a hotel barge in 2004, but after five seasons, it

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languished at the side of the Canal du Bourgogne for three years and was finally put up for sale.

“We first arrived in France in 1991 to work on a brand-new barge, *Napoleon*. It was a river boat in

These pages:  
Rory and Caroline Macrae host luxury holidays on board *Après Tout*

Provence, which was coincidentally launched on Rory’s birthday,” recalls Caroline. “Neither of us had a background in sailing, it was just that the job happened to be on a boat.”

Like the proverbial ducks, they quickly grew accustomed to life on the water and Rory’s technical know-how, honed from working with machinery in the family business, and a grandfather who was an engineer, resulted in him being promoted to the position of second skipper within a year. His cocktail-making expertise then led to another unforeseen job offer.

“We had an American lady on ▶







moved to the other side of the Atlantic. However, despite the initial wanderlust that would have taken them to work anywhere in the world, they realised that they had already become dedicated Francophiles.

“We really missed France,” explains Caroline. “So we came back and continued working on the same boat. By then Rory was really keen on the skippering side of things and decided to apply for his captain’s licence. This involved having to learn French as the written and oral parts are all conducted in French, as well as the first aid certificate, so he had to work doubly hard compared with applying for the same type of licence in the UK.”

The fleet expanded and was sold to Afloat in France, part of Orient-Express group, and the Macraes moved to the base in Burgundy, put down roots and bought a property in 2003. A fully-fledged captain, Rory was appointed technical manager and promoted to general manager, looking after all five boats, and Caroline moved out of the galley to be in charge of operations.

“We always enjoyed what we did,” says Rory, taking up the story. “But one day, I thought: ‘Do I want to be in an office for the rest of my life?’



This page, above: alfresco dining on the stunning deck; Left: Chalon-sur-Saône’s market

board and her drink of choice was vodka gimlet,” explains Rory. “She was very particular about the way it was made, and I must have done it right because at the end of the week, she asked if we would go and work on her estate on Long Island, Connecticut, to cook, look after the estate and be her driver.”

The Macraes upped sticks and





We knew the barge was up for sale as I had actually gone to look at it for Afloat in France, and it was just three miles down the river from where we were. I was sitting in my office one evening and decided to email the owner and put in a final offer. Ten minutes later an email came back accepting it; we made the arrangements with the bank to transfer the money. Three weeks later we owned a barge!

“Buying Après Tout was much easier than buying our home as we looked at around 30 properties and couldn’t find what we were looking for. In the end, I told Caroline to continue the search and the next

one she went to see turned out to be the one.”

Built in 1624, the three-storey apartment is on an island in Chalon-sur-Saône, a 50-minute drive

*Today the expansive shining teak deck with its alfresco dining table is one of the barge’s stand-out features*

from Après Tout’s permanent mooring in St-Jean-de-Losne. Dubbed ‘the island of love’ its origins are not quite as romantic as they sound as at one time the Macraes’ home was in fact a brothel.

This page, clockwise from top: Après Tout; Caroline as host; Rory at the helm

In need of restoration when they bought it, they set about installing a large, new kitchen and creating a comfortable three-bedroom home where they live when they are not on their annual trip to see family and friends in the UK or on a holiday of their own.

From April to October they are on Après Tout, which carries just six passengers in total comfort. Also on board is tour guide Nick Borland, a long-term friend who has clocked up more than 20 years in the luxury barging business and has worked with the Macraes in the past; and hostess Hannah Sheridan, who variously cleans, serves meals and creates imaginative hand-drawn daily dinner menus and beautiful table arrangements.

After purchasing Après Tout in 2011, Rory and Caroline spent the winter getting the barge ready for their first cruise in May 2012.

“The deck was grey and at first I thought I would have to throw it out and start again,” says Rory. “When I had a closer look I realised I could sand it right back and oil it.”

Today, the expansive shining teak deck, with its alfresco dining table, sun beds, hot tub and innovative canopy that can be lowered to go under bridges, is one of the barge’s stand-out features.

From the outset, the Macraes set out to provide passengers with a unique experience, combining their







This page: Après Tout; key locations on Burgundy's famed wine route

background in the high-end hotel boat industry with a flexible, personal approach to passengers' individual requirements. As a result, the six-day itineraries and excursions, which along with food, fine wines and drinks (all included in the price of the holiday) can be adapted, even at very short notice, to suit guests' needs. They also offer bespoke special interest cruises, such as wine tasting and cycling.

"We had one passenger who only drank a particular brand of champagne, so we made sure we had plenty in stock and that's what he had all week," says Caroline, who makes full use of the regional food and wine on the doorstep to create exquisite meals. They are accompanied by different Burgundian wines and cheeses each day, with informal and fun wine tuition from Nick, who is first off the barge each

morning to buy croissants and bread from the nearest bakery.

Rory's previous management role, combined with tackling complex exams in French, helped him deal with the vagaries of French bureaucracy, and his advice to anyone setting up a business is to engage a good local accountant, or *expert-comptable*, at the outset to provide guidance and cut through any red tape.

The couple have thoroughly embraced the French culture. Boutique wine producers, a truffle hunter and a vintage vehicle enthusiast, who runs exhilarating vineyard tours in Second World War jeeps, are among the locals who provide passengers with unforgettable experiences. Lock-keepers, who invariably receive a cup of coffee and a pastry, even open locks for Après Tout during the hallowed lunch







period, their dogs racing along the banks to greet the barge, knowing they will also receive a tasty treat.

Fellow British expats have also come on board, and itineraries include visits to the 12th-century Abbaye de la Bussière, a magnificent hotel owned by Clive and Tanith Cummings that is normally only open to residents and diners; and the private studio of sculptor Paul Day, famous for the kissing couple statue at London's St Pancras Station. "Burgundy is a beautiful part of France, and even for passengers who have visited before, you see France, the countryside and the people from a totally different

This page, clockwise from top: sunrise in St-John-de-Losne; touring Burgundy's vineyards by Jeep; the lock-keeper's dogs

perspective," smiles Caroline. "We get a real buzz from introducing people to this beautiful region and seeing them leave enthralled by the whole experience of being in and around the waterways."

As Après Tout gently floats away on its next tranquil cruise, a mirror image reflected in the still water, it is easy to see why the Macraes are pleased they took the plunge and changed the course of their lives. **LF**

## BARGING IN BURGUNDY

- Opened in 1832, the 150-mile (242km) Canal du Bourgogne with its 189 locks is a feat of pre-Industrial Revolution engineering. Running from the River Yonne, a tributary of the River Seine, to the River Saône, it transformed the economic landscape of the region by providing transportation links between northern and southern France, with access to the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

- Today, the canal is primarily used by pleasure craft and Après Tout's cruises follow the historic waterway between the village of Pont d'Ouche and St-Jean-de-Losne, situated where the canal meets the River Saône and the largest inland port in France.

- Sightseeing highlights along the way include the scenic Ouche valley, where the landscape remains virtually unchanged from the time the canal was constructed; Beaune, the capital of the Burgundy wine region with the 15th-century Hôtel-Dieu, a former hospital with a magnificent tiled roof; and the city of Dijon, famous for its mustard shops and crème de cassis blackcurrant liqueur.

