

# TRAVEL

For a leisurely look at France, barge travel is the way to go, says Gillian Vine.

## Water sojourn

**F**AR from the clouds and crowds of Paris, it's a perfect morning at Venaray-les-Laumes in central France. I whip off a dozen snaps: a bridge, then a grand mansion, a small house for sale, reflections on the Burgundy Canal and two fishermen.

Then the glassy surface of the water shatters: one of the men has caught a large golden fish that he holds up for the older man, perhaps his dad, to photograph. Alas, before I can get close enough to take my own picture, they've released their catch back into the canal.

The chug of its motor recalls me to my barge, *La Belle Époque*, and breakfast. Fruit and cereals, croissants naturally — this is France — and a cooked course if I fancy it, all accompanied by lots of great coffee. I could stay here all day, having yet another cup and chatting to my fellow passengers as we begin the slow journey down the canal.

The beauty of this luxury form of travelling is that the barge is fully crewed, so there's none of the sweat-inducing need to grapple with locks, of which there are a dozen or more on the stretch to Tanlay. Even trying my hand at driving under supervision on a clear stretch of water I'm close to panic, not helped by the fact that my French consists of a dozen words, none of which include "left hand down a bit" or "steady as you go", which is what I think the pilot is telling me.

The trip began when we were collected in Paris by our captain, Florian, who doubled as minibus driver and tour guide. Having a pickup service provided as part of the cruise was a great introduction to the other three couples taking the week-long amble along the Burgundy Canal from Venaray-les-Laumes to Tanlay, places I'd never heard of until I booked the trip.

Nor had I ever set foot on a barge. The nearest thing had been inspecting my English friends' narrow boat when it was moored in Shropshire.

Having read that *La Belle Époque* started life as a log carrier, it was fascinating to see how beautifully she had been converted into a boutique hotel vessel by European Waterways, a company that has been providing high-end barge tours since 1974.

The company now has a fleet of 17 barges, operating in France, Scotland, England, Ireland, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands. The largest vessel takes 20 passengers, the smallest just six. The focus is on walking-pace travel along some of Europe's loveliest waterways, so on the Burgundy Canal we could exercise by hopping off at one lock and walking along the towpath by the canal then



Great food . . . A typical lunch menu on board.



On the canal . . . A typically quiet part of the canal.

reboarding at the next lock. Cunningly, I checked the distances between locks before getting off, choosing shorter walks in glorious late-summer conditions. Moreover, the paths were flat or had very gentle slopes, a reminder of the days when, as Tennyson put it, "slide the heavy barges trailed by slow horses". Actually, he was writing about King Arthur's Camelot but the method was the



Ready to go . . . *La Belle Époque* at Venaray-les-Laumes.

PHOTOS: GILLIAN VINE



Locked in . . . Lock and towpath on the Burgundy Canal.



Like a painting . . . Early morning on the outskirts of Ravieres village.



Sunny outlook . . . A field of sunflowers by the canal.



Genuine article . . . Chardonnay vines surround the village of Chablis, famous for its wine-making.

same. In France, they were more inventive, using mules, donkeys and occasionally oxen as well as horses to tow the barges, but these days diesel power is the norm.

As well as walking, there was another way to exercise but I'm not sure I want to mention the bicycles the barge provided, as it's somewhat embarrassing. One couple from Colorado, Bob and Barbara, whizzed along and

my daughter biked with them. How hard is this? I thought, so — despite not having been in the saddle for decades — I decided to give it a whirl. You never forget to ride a bike, right? I pushed off and wobbled down the slight incline and had it not been for Bob's quick reflexes, I would have ended up in the canal.

Much more to my taste were the side trips to various

attractions en route. I loved the village of Flavigny-sur-Ozerain, where the film *Chocolat* was set, but it was topped by medieval Noyers-sur-Serein, rightly labelled one of the most beautiful villages in France.

Whether it was a visiting a chateau or Chablis, a market or museum, the tours were included in the barge trip. All meals were part of the package, with an on-board chef who

conjured up fabulous food and even whipped me up a special entree when I mentioned not being able to eat mushrooms.

This level of service and all the inclusions makes European Waterways' tours much more competitive than might at first appear. True, prices are higher than the "one size has to fit all" river cruises but with transport from Paris and back included, an open bar, no cost for off-barge

trips and on-board cuisine and wines a top restaurant would be proud to serve, *La Belle Époque* was a winner all the way.

Throwing flowers into the water after dinner on the final night on board is a traditional way to ensure one returns. I really hope it works for me.

● Gillian Vine was the guest of European Waterways. For more about routes and vessels, see [www.gobarging.com](http://www.gobarging.com)



From the barge . . . A typical village by the canal.



Fancy a chateau? This one at Tanlay was reputed to be for sale for €3 million.

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