

boarding passes we went through the magnetometer while our carry-ons were X-rayed. The third and final inspection occurred just before we boarded. Our carry-ons were hand inspected and we were “wanded.” Security took longer than the flight back to LAX.

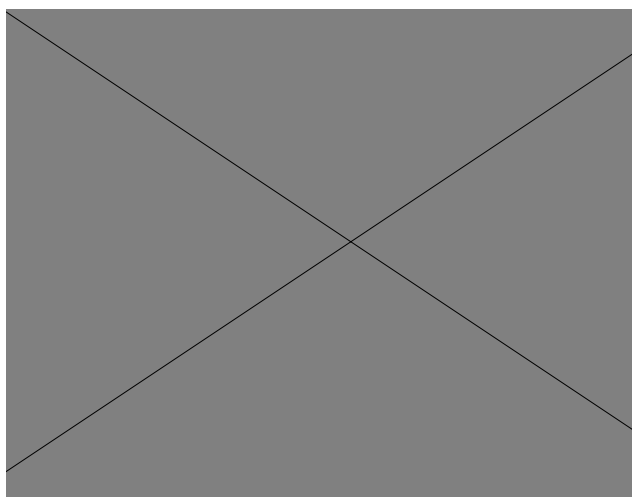
Another unpleasant surprise awaited us at LAX. We had to travel by bus from Terminal 1 to the International Terminal to go through Immigration and Customs, which went smoothly.

It was a very good trip. While Los Angeles was experiencing a week of almost constant rain, we enjoyed mild daytime temperatures and bright sunny skies. We also enjoyed a great visit to nature enhanced by the usual team of skilled Lindblad naturalists. ▲

—Jodie and Dale Wendel, Oceanside CA  
drw-hawthorne@att.net

**Current Data:** The eight-day “Among the Great Whales” program operates each winter from January to March when gray whales are breeding in Mahia Magdalena. In addition to water-level whale watching from Zodiacs, the expedition also offers Naturalist-guided walks on uninhabited desert islands, swimming, snorkeling, and kayaking in the Sea of Cortez. The itinerary remains flexible to make the most of whale watching and wildlife sightings. The 62-passenger sister ships *National Geographic Sea Bird* and *Sea Lion* offer comfortable but unpretentious accommodations, but more importantly, are nimble and small enough to access the bays of Baja California and the desert islands of the Sea of Cortez. Fares for 2011 start at \$4,990 per person, double occupancy. An early booking discount is available for booking nine months in advance and members booking through TravLtips receive an additional savings.

Lindblad Expeditions has been a leader in adventure travel since 1979. Their journeys are expeditions, not tours, consisting



A late summer hurricane provided enough moisture to allow many of the plants to bloom.

of small groups that always have a close, personal view of wild-life and cultural sites. Their itineraries are always well planned yet have the flexibility to take advantage of special opportunities. Their naturalists and historians are experts in their field, and also excellent communicators; it is this on-board staff that distinguishes Lindblad from other small ship operators. Their collaboration with National Geographic further enhances the shipboard presentations.

Lindblad Expeditions comprehensive brochure “Explorations” describes journeys to some of the world’s most interesting places. We recommend planning your 2010/2011 adventure early to take advantage of the special savings. Request a brochure and details on any Lindblad program from the TravLtips

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French Country Waterways

# Cruising the Burgundy Canal

Story and photos by Lew Toulmin



**T**ell your friends and relations that your next vacation is cruising a French canal in an upscale hotel barge, and you are sure to get some envious glances. But does the reality match the myth? That was our question on a cruise down the Burgundy Canal with French Country Waterways aboard the *Horizon II* in August 2009. The cruise was from Tanlay to Venarey-les-Laumes, northwest of Dijon, cruising about 35 miles as the crow flies, and about 45 curving miles on the canal.

We were picked up at a hotel near the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, and whisked in two hours to the *Horizon II* at the village of Tanlay, southeast of Paris. Boarding the vessel, we were struck by its large size, the attractive appointments and the friendly, competent staff.

The *Horizon II* was built in 1950 as a commercial vessel in Strasbourg, and converted in 1986 to a hotel barge. She is now owned by French Country Waterways, an American company. In 2004 the number of cabins was reduced to four, holding eight passengers instead of the previous 12. She is refurbished each winter in dry dock. The vessel is 5.08 meters wide and 38.98 meters long, just able to squeeze into the canal locks by a few centimeters! She displaces 220 tons, and has a six-cylinder engine with only 165 horsepower, less than many cars. Very

Clockwise from above: *Horizon II* passengers enjoying the Sun Deck as the barge goes under one of the festively decorated bridges of the Burgundy Canal.

Emma Dumel, wine expert on the *Horizon II*, presents a Corton-Charlemagne Grand Cru 2001 Chardonnay, a rare and expensive wine very hard to find in the U.S.

“Our cabin was about 14 by 14 feet, quite large, with attractive, tan textured wallpaper, dark wood trim, a king-sized bed (or two singles) with tufted leather headboard. There were two side tables, two individual reading lamps, storage for suitcases under the bed, and a large handsome armoire with a small desk.”

The main lounge and dining area of the *Horizon II* displays the country-inn ambiance of a French Country Waterways barge.



economical and “green.” Her three-bladed prop is a massive one-meter in diameter. Her draft of 1.45 meters is often just a few inches less than the depth of water in the canal, and our Captain Gregoire Megret noted that, “If it wasn’t for our large vessel going up and down the canal each week, it would rapidly silt in, and would need to be dredged at a cost of millions.”

The main lounge is the first area you encounter after leaving

the deck, down a short flight of stairs. The lounge is combined with a dining area and bar, and has sunny windows and lots of light, with excellent views of the countryside and canal. There is a small lending library, games—our group made some progress on a huge jigsaw puzzle—a large maroon Chesterfield sofa and some comfortable armchairs.

The lounge bar is quite unusual, being totally open to the passengers with no extra charges for any item. Hard liquors, aperitifs, wines, white port, soft drinks and bottled water are all



on offer. Near the bar is an open bowl of dark chocolates, which again is available to passengers on an unlimited basis. I always managed to sit near that bowl, and I think I should be buying cocoa futures, given how many I ate!

In fact everything on board, all meals and wine aboard and on shore, the bar, tours, and transfers (but not airfare) are included in the fare. The only extra charges are 220 euros per person for taking an optional early morning balloon trip; and tips, usually five to ten percent of the total fare. This all-inclusive approach is a wonderful, restful change from many cruise lines, which try to “nickel and dime” the passengers for numerous items on board.

Our cabin was about 14 by 14 feet, quite large, with attractive, tan textured wallpaper, dark wood trim, a king-sized bed (or two singles) with tufted leather headboard, and two lozenge-shaped portholes about 18 by 12 inches. There were two side tables, two individual reading lamps, storage for suitcases under the bed, and a large handsome armoire with a small desk. The air conditioning was excellent, quiet and individually controlled in each cabin. The cabin finish was very upscale, luxurious and elegant, with no scratches or blemishes anywhere.

Despite the armoire and under-bed storage, storage space was not huge, as noted in the company’s literature. So passengers should try to pack relatively light. This is no inconvenience, since the dress code is generally casual except for the Captain’s Farewell Dinner, at which a blazer and perhaps a tie is appropriate for men, and a cocktail dress is the standard attire for ladies.

There is no room safe and sometimes the cabins are just left open in a relaxed atmosphere. There is always staff on board, and no one from outside is allowed on the vessel, but if you have anything truly valuable you may wish to bring a lock and a lockable suitcase.

The large luxurious bathroom, very unusual in a cruising vessel, was done in white tile, with a good-sized shower stall, plenty of hot water, terrycloth robes and heated towel rack. High quality soap, shampoo, shower gel and bottled water are all provided.

The crew of *Horizon II* are incredibly hard working. At every lock we saw the pilot and boatman scrubbing the side of the vessel, and polishing every surface until it shone. At the end of



A view of the cloisters of the Abbaye de Fontenay, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the oldest Cistercian abbeys in Europe.



Clockwise from top left: *Horizon II* squeezes forward, with only inches to spare, into a lock on the Burgundy Canal southeast of Paris.

Cyclists enjoying towpath along the Burgundy Canal pass the *Horizon II*. Passengers can easily get off and on the barge at various locks to walk or cycle along the path.

Jean-Yann Attica, a remarkable chef from Paris, produced amazing creations in his tiny galley.

the week we saw the crewmen repainting the small scuffs on the side of the bow where the vessel had touched the lock. Thus the vessel looked brand new for the next group of passengers. All the staff spoke English, and they were a mix of English and French nationals. There are not many cruising vessels where you can completely list the entire crew in one short sentence, but here they are for *Horizon II*: captain/manager/guide; pilot/driver; chef; hostess/wine and cheese expert; and boatman/bo-sun. Just five crew members, but since they look after only eight passengers in four cabins, the crew to passenger ratio is very high indeed. The crew definitely makes the voyage. They are very caring, funny, talented and extremely proud of their ship.

A typical day with French Country Waterways consists of a tour of a beautiful local chateau, town or abbey, followed by lunch on board or occasionally ashore, and a half day of cruising the canal. One of the tour highlights was a visit to the famous and lovingly restored Abbaye de Fontenay, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the oldest Cistercian abbeys in Europe, founded in 1118 by St. Bernard.

Cruising the countryside is the focus for about half of each day. The Burgundy countryside consists of rolling hills, shallow streams, wooded areas and large open fields filled with sunflowers, wheat, corn, vineyards and beautiful white Charolais cows munching on gorgeous green grass. We were struck with how completely agricultural and attractive the region was, with no urban sprawl and all the population concentrated in small, interesting villages and towns. The *Horizon II* moved along at about five kilometers per hour, (three mph), but was slowed every two to three kilometers by going through a lock. So walkers from the vessel were able to easily keep up, and there are eight bicycles on board which allow you to whiz up the towpath if you like. On the stretch of canal that *Horizon II* cruises, there are no tunnels or ladders of locks, so progress is steady and relaxing.

At night, there are no Broadway shows or dancing girls, in fact there is no TV in the lounge or cabins, and only intermittent Internet access. So the focus of the evening entertainment is a leisurely dinner, followed by good conversation in the lounge or up on the large open deck. It was very relaxing and civilized. Fellow passengers are almost all older Americans,

with a sprinkling of British patrons.

Speaking of dinner, food, wine and cheese are a major focus of the cruise. Our remarkable chef, Jean-Yann Attica, produced amazing creations from a tiny galley. Breakfast included fruit, yogurt, cereal and breads, and could include omelets, eggs Benedict, soft-boiled eggs or other custom orders. Lunch consisted of salads, light meat, pastry, and always three kinds of cheese and two light but distinctive wines. A typical dinner included a wonderful asparagus soup with truffle oil, followed by a main course of excellent poached codfish on a rice pilaf with broccoli. The accompanying prawn tempura with fennel was not quite as successful, but the next courses were excellent: a plate of three cheeses, a fresh salad, and a trio of desserts. The desserts included a moelleux du chocolat (chocolate cake with a “melting heart of chocolate”), tiramisu with cherries, and a made-on-board banana sorbet.

The dinner wines for this meal were a Puligny Montrachet Premier Cru Les Folatieres Chardonnay from Domaine Jean Pascal from the year 2000, and a red Chambolle Musigny Premier Cru 1999 Pinot Noir from Ghislaine Barthod. During the cruise we got to try 23 different high quality wines we had never experienced before. The most impressive wines were at the Captain’s Dinner, with three “grand cru” or absolutely top-of-the-line wines. These were a Grand Cru Le Clos Chablis 2002 from Jean-Marc Brocard, a Corton-Charlemagne Grand Cru 2001 Chardonnay from Domaine Dubreuil-Fontaine, and a Corton Clos du Roi Grand Cru 2000 Pinot Noir, also from Domaine Dubreuil-Fontaine. One of our amateur wine buff fellow passengers remarked that, “In my decades of wine tasting I never before had a chance to drink a grand cru, and now to have three at one meal is unbelievable.” Emma Dumel, the on-board wine expert, said that, “Every year the owners and captains of French Country Waterways have a private wine tasting, and lay down the best bottles they can find for future use on board.” Thus many of the wines on board are difficult or impossible to obtain now.

We had lunch ashore once and an included dinner at a three-star Michelin restaurant, the famous Le Relais Bernard Loiseau in Saulieu. But afterwards we remarked that we were more impressed with the food, wine, cheese and staff on board than at the three-star restaurant!

All in all, I would rate this voyage as one of the best cruise experiences we have had in 30 years of cruising. We will certainly be envious if any of our friends and relations announce that they will be sailing down the Burgundy Canal aboard French Country Waterways’ *Horizon II*. ▲

—Lew Toulmin, Silver Spring MD  
lew@toulmin@aol.com

**Current Data:** French Country Waterways has been cruising the canals of France for 25 years. Their luxury hotel barge cruises offer a slow-paced, relaxing six night luxury vacation. Guests dine on gourmet cuisine and enjoy an exclusive wine list—many from grand cru and premier cru vineyards as described in our story. Cabins are nicely appointed, feature full-sized beds and private facilities, and the staff provides a high level of service. The ambiance is that of a fine country inn. A unique inclusion is an elegant dinner ashore at a prestigious local restaurant. A private motorcoach is provided for excursions.

Four routes are available: Central Burgundy aboard the 8-passenger *Horizon II*, which our author enjoyed; the Cote d’Or region of Burgundy aboard the 12-passenger *Nenuphar*; the Champagne region aboard the 12-passenger *Adrienne*; and the Upper Loire Valley aboard the 8-passenger *Princess*. The included excursions offer guests insights into the history, culture and winemaking of the area. Passengers may also explore on their own with the bicycles carried aboard each barge.

Cruises operate from April through October. Fares vary by season and start at \$6,095 per person, double occupancy.

Contact the TravLtips Specialty Cruise office in Flushing for a brochure and full details: 800-872-8584 or e-mail info@travltips.com.