

Barge Cruise Through Burgundy on the *Luciole*

By John F. Duane



My partner Mary and I took a trip on the barge *Luciole* on the Nivernais Canal in Burgundy, France in late July. I am a lawyer by trade and I have not written about a vacation since grammar school. But my time on the *Luciole* was so relaxing and pleasing to the senses that I wanted to describe my experience to my fellow TravLTips members.

Mary and I landed in Paris on Saturday and took a taxi to the Hotel Mansart in central Paris at the Place Vendôme. We had arranged the hotel through TravLTips and stayed there the night we arrived in Paris and the night before we left France. On both occasions, we were given a large, lovely room, and the concierge suggested outstanding restaurants within walking distance.

The next morning we enjoyed walking around Paris, which was festooned for the finale later that day of the Tour de France, that nation's most important sporting event.

The *Luciole* passengers met in the lobby of the Mansart Hotel on that Sunday afternoon and we boarded the mini-bus for our trip to Burgundy. As we passed through the French countryside, we conversed with those with whom we would be spending the next six days and we began to learn a little bit about each other.

When we arrived at the marina in the town of Clamecy, the *Luciole* stood out among all the other boats as the most colorful. Red and white umbrellas were unfurled on the deck, which was covered with beautiful flowers. After a kir royal reception with the captain and crew, we were escorted to our rooms on the lower deck. There were 13 passengers on our cruise and the *Luciole's* capacity is 14. The rooms are compact, functional, nicely appointed and comfortable.

At dinner that Sunday night, Mary and I were introduced to the culinary delights that would enthrall us throughout our cruise. Captain Stephane described the two wines that were being served with dinner, both of which were made in towns we would visit on our journey along the Nivernais Canal. Another member of the crew described the cheeses served and imparted legends about them. The chef explained the delicious food she had prepared for us and our dinner was wonderful.

Breakfast on the *Luciole* is buffet style with lots of fresh fruit, juice, yogurt and cereal. The crew made sure that we had freshly baked bread every morning. All meals are served in the indoor parlor on the upper deck, which has expansive windows on both sides. The crew serves lunches and dinners in a formal but friendly manner. Two invariably delightful wines were served with each meal as were extremely interesting and diverse cheeses. The food was exceptional and the dining experience was enhanced by the detailed explanation of the food by the chef and of the wines and cheeses by the captain and crew.

All the meals were spectacular. A sample dinner started with a Roquefort soufflé with sweet chili jam. The main course was a fillet of lamb with a cauliflower puree and basil ratatouille.

The cheese course consisted of a Bresse blue and a Morbier. The dessert was a lavender and orange scented crème brûlée. Mary and I marveled at the number of courses and the richness of the food at each meal and yet we never felt as if we had eaten too much. Each meal was a sensuous experience to be savored.

Incredibly, there were things to do on the *Luciole* voyage other than eat and drink wine. Half of every day, either between breakfast and lunch or lunch and dinner, passengers were given free time to do whatever they wanted. Some passengers sat outside on the deck and enjoyed the scenery. Mary and I took advantage of the wonderful bicycling experience afforded to us by the *Luciole*. There were bikes on board the barge and every day we would go through 4 or 5 of the Nivernais' locks. At each lock we were able to embark or disembark from the *Luciole* with our bikes and so it was always convenient to get on or



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off the barge. The Nivernais had been a commercial canal but now it is used exclusively for recreation. The paths on the side of the canal, which had been traversed by horses pulling the commercial barges, have been paved by the French Government. Thus, there are excellent, flat, safe bicycle paths throughout the *Luciole's* journey. Mary and I truly enjoyed bicycling without having to worry about vehicular traffic. We also took great pleasure in venturing off the bicycle paths to explore the little towns adjacent to the canal. Since it was vacation season for the French, most of the towns we rode through resembled ghost

Left to right:
Our author points the way to the charming medieval village of Noyers-sur-Serein, which has narrow cobblestone streets and many ancient buildings.
"We took great pleasure in venturing off the bicycle paths to explore the little towns adjacent to the canal."
The *Luciole* tied up below the Cathedral of Saint Étienne at Auxerre.
The *Luciole* transits one of the many quaint old locks of the Nivernais Canal.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF INLAND VOYAGES. "AUTHOR" BY MARY NORTHRIDGE

towns but they were still old, charming and beautiful with colorful flowers in window boxes at many of the homes.

While Mary and I anticipated having wonderful meals and exhilarating bike rides, what most surprised us about our voyage on the *Luciole* were the daily excursions. Every morning or afternoon, the mini-bus would offer to take us to points of interest in this incredibly ancient and historic part of France. Mary and I took advantage of each and every offered excursion and we are so glad we did. The first trip we took was to tour the Château de Bazoches, which was the 17th century home of the Marquis de Vauban, France's great military engineer and defense minister for King Louis XIV. The Vauban family tree, exhibited at the Chateau, dates back to the 12th century. Vauban's military genius was in developing strategies to penetrate any fortress while designing fortresses, which were impenetrable. His historical importance is evidenced by the fact that his 14 fortresses define the national boundaries of modern day France.

The second excursion was to Vézelay, which is dominated by an impressive 12th century Basilica. Vézelay was the destination of innumerable pilgrims who marked the trail for their return home with scallop shells. The crypt in the Basilica contains the relics of Mary Magdalene. Vézelay is also of great historic importance because it is where St. Bernard preached and Richard the Lionhearted launched the Second Crusade. At Vézelay, I bought a gift for my mother, a cross decorated with a scallop shell. It is such a simple souvenir but it captures the essence of this holy and historic place.

The fourth excursion was to the charming medieval village of Noyers-sur-Serein, which boasts of interesting market stalls, narrow cobblestone streets and ancient buildings with turreted ramparts. As we were enjoying the sights in Noyers-sur-Serein, we had the pleasure of meeting some of the family members of our crew. It enhanced the experience to know something about the personal lives of the group of people who were taking such meticulous care of us and treating us as if we were members of their own families.

The next day the mini-bus headed for a private wine cellar in the Chablis vineyards of Burgundy. There we learned about the process of making wine and, of course, we were given the opportunity to taste a few of the delightful vintages.

Captain Stephane and his crew brought infectious joy to their work, which intensified the wondrousness of the *Luciole* experience. They had great senses of humor, were always available to assist or answer questions and were quite frankly just fun people with whom to spend time. The crew's vast knowledge and intellectual curiosity made each of the excursions so much more interesting and enjoyable than it otherwise would have been.

On Friday we ended our cruise as we entered the small city of Auxerre, which is a beautiful sight to see from the Nivernais Canal. At the top of Auxerre is the Cathedral of Saint Étienne and the city is built on a hill rising from the Canal to the Cathedral. Mary and I wandered around the city enjoying the shops and parks. The crew also gave us a fascinating tour of the Cathedral. That evening before dinner, we had the pleasure of meeting Penny Liley, who owns the *Luciole* with her husband, John. Penny is a charming woman and Mary and I could see where the *Luciole* gets its wonderful personality.

In reminiscing about our trip on the *Luciole* Mary and I were struck by a particularly emotional memory. During our tour of the Basilica in Vézelay, we were shown 15 large wooden crosses standing in the heart of the Cathedral. The crosses date back to 1946, when Europe was bitter and broken after World War II. To symbolize the beginning of the time for healing, 14 of these crosses were built and carried from all corners of the continent to Vézelay. They came from Italy, Holland, Luxembourg, Portugal and France itself. While this plan for healing was being implemented, some German soldiers still imprisoned in France heard about it. They pleaded to be allowed to join the pilgrimage and a 15th cross was hastily built for them to carry. The prisoners brought their cross to Vézelay with the others, and there it remains to this day. This is an extraordinarily powerful symbol of the deep human desire for peace.

Thank you to the owners of the *Luciole*, Captain Stephane, his crew and TravLTips for a most extraordinary experience. ▲

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Current Data: A voyage on the *Luciole* reaches the very heart of France. The beautiful and historic Nivernais waterway on which the *Luciole* travels provides a step back in time. Embracing both the River Yonne and man-made canal—built to older, smaller dimensions—it is now primarily a recreational route winding through scenic, rural countryside. Each curve in the route presents an exciting panorama, to be explored on a stroll or bike ride between locks—passengers can easily hop off and on the barge anytime it enters a lock and bicycles are available—or from the sun deck of the *Luciole*. Each day the accompanying bus takes passengers on excursions into an historic and culturally rich region—to chateaux, market towns and vineyards. And the expert on-board guide knows this region well. There is no additional charge for the tours. (Optional balloon trips are offered in the summer months.)

A typical itinerary is from Auxerre to Clamecy. Highlights include a stop at the village of Bailly, with an excursion to a private wine cellar and the vineyards of Chablis. From Vermenton, passengers visit the beautiful market village of Noyers-sur-Serein. A mooring at Mailly-la-Ville provides opportunity for a journey to the medieval town of Vézelay and its historic cathedral. After cruising past the dramatic cliffs of Le Saussois, the barge moors at Châtel-Censoir. From Clamecy, a tour is provided to the imposing Château de Bazoches, the 17th century home of the Marquis de Vauban.

The *Luciole* accommodates up to 14 passengers. Three double-

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bedded cabins are available, each of which can be converted into twins. There are also three cabins with fixed twin beds and two single cabins on board. Each has its own private shower and toilet facilities. Individually-controlled air-conditioning is installed throughout. The main deck houses the saloon, which has large windows, comfortable seating, tables and an interesting little reference library. A small but well-stocked bar is in the forward corner where passengers may help themselves at any time. In front of the saloon is the carpeted sun deck outfitted with outdoor chairs, tables and a fleet of bicycles. It is a great vantage point for watching the lock operations and relaxing as you float through the peaceful countryside of Burgundy.

The meals that are turned out of the tiny galley are, as our author points out, truly spectacular. Breakfast is a buffet with offerings from the local *patisserie*. For lunch and dinner, the saloon is converted into a dining room. The tables are placed together to form a long dining table, which is attractively set and includes wines to compliment the menu. Lunch features prepared dishes and an assortment of salads and *charcuterie* items, ingredients again purchased locally. The four-course evening meals are gourmet in quality and preparation.

Inland Voyages, owned and managed by John and Penny Liley, has a very reliable track record of over 33 years in hotel barge operation. The owners' personal attention to all aspects of the voyage results in a superior product. The inclusive nature of the cruise represents outstanding value, especially in today's economy. Passengers are met in Paris and provided round trip transfers to and from the barge by private bus, the standard of food and included wine is excellent, excursions and admissions are included and there is an open bar on board. Week after week, passengers seem to have a wonderful time and report the crew is fantastic.

The *Luciole's* season runs from April through October. Fares for 2012 are from \$3,650 to \$3,950 per person double or single depending on departure date. Rates include six nights on the barge, all meals and wine served on board, local excursions by the bus and transfers between Paris and the barge.

