Travel and Adventure: Floating through France

by Ruth A. Hill

Some travelers never leave cities like London and Paris. Urban culture and sophistication are all they want. Others sample the cities then retreat to the countryside for a wander.

FRANCE BY BARGE - The Adrienne is an all-suite, 12-passenger barge cruiser with a crew of six. A one-week cruise of about 100 miles snakes through canals and locks from the Upper Loire to Nemours. CNS photo by Ruth Hill. DELIGHTFUL DINING - The Adrienne's chef, Jacques Christof, prepared meals including delicious three- and four-course dinners that came with selections from the barge's extensive wine cellar. CNS photo by Ruth Hill. FEELS LIKE FRANCE - Tours of chateaux like the 17th century La Bussiere are among Adrienne's shore excursions. CNS photo by Ruth Hill. BRING COMFORTABLE SHOES - Climbing streets in Roussillon during a shore excursion reveals ancient architectural detail. CNS photo by Ruth Hill. After several decades of tripping through both cultures, I've realized it's the latter that feeds my soul. Besides, the French countryside in June is gluttony for the senses. Butterflies dance across fields of blue-and-mauve lavender blossoms that nod in the sunshine. Floral clusters everywhere spill from tables, window boxes and ancient stone walls, just as they have for centuries. Jewel box villages beckon visitors to stroll their ancient streets.

What better way, Carol and I decided, to touch all this travel seduction than to float it. We'd do a barge cruise on the canals of the Upper Loire Valley, then ride some roads through choice parts of indomitable Provence. And finally, with an airborne float for indelible thrills, we'd complete a plan to pleasure the most seasoned Francophile.

Our water float week commenced on the all-suite, 12-passenger Adrienne, after a day and night at French Country Waterways' preferred Parisian accommodation, the palatial Hotel Meurice. Because we were across from the Tuileries Gardens, we had good vantage on some satisfying capital highlights - such as Musee d'Orsay and its stunning art collections. A night bus tour left us with lasting memories of the City of Lights. All that magic cast our mood for the all-inclusive waterborne elegance ahead of us.

Capt. Glen Moynan, one of the several bilingual British expatriates we encountered throughout our journey, met us and our fellow passengers at the Meurice. He drove us a couple of hours south on the barge's private minicoach to the Adrienne's Chatillon-Sur-Loire mooring.

Our group was all American. It was clear right away that four fun couples from eastern Pennsylvania would set a lively pace for the cruise. From the beginning, they grafted us into their fun - biking and hiking towpaths, bocce ball play after dinner and lively exchanges about travel and French history. Those folks were a lucky surprise component to the experience. Any pre-cruise trepidation we'd had about whether we might get stuck in close quarters with undesirable companions vanished immediately.

Onboard, we found a main salon setting decorated in 18th century French style. Custom-made furnishings and rich fabrics also embellished our spacious suite with its carved-wood accents and well-lighted bathroom of granite and marble.

The Adrienne's crew of six welcomed us with Champagne, and set about easing us right into an atmosphere of unpretentious yet elegant ambience, with no currency, language or logistical issues to tackle. Our hosts were mostly bilingual Brits, with the desirable exception of our jovial chef, Jacques Christof. He produced to culinary perfection our daily breakfasts of fresh fruits, pastries, cereals and yogurts and buffet lunches of fresh vegetables, meats or fish and a selection of three artisanal cheeses from various regions. Three- and four-course dinners came with selections from the barge's extensive wine cellar. During the crew's one night off, we did a dinner ashore at Michelin-starred Auberge des Templiers in Les Bezards.

Our week's float of about 100 miles through the Upper Loire into Nemours progressed at about 3 to 10 mph through 48 canal locks that are part of France's nearly 5,000 miles of preserved rivers and canals, primary modes of commerce and transport in former centuries. The famed 19th century Briare Aqueduct, designed by Gustave Eiffel who also gave Paris its iconic signature, was a first-day highlight. Cameras were busy as we enjoyed the odd experience of floating on one body of water over another 50 feet below, the Loire River.

There was an optional excursion each afternoon. Sometimes it was a quaint medieval village stroll with Glen narrating the sites. Other jaunts included a chateau and its surrounding village, such as the 15th century St. Fargeau, once home to a cousin of Louis XIV. The Fargeau's extensive labyrinth of spaces spoke of France's formidable history, right up to the ancient wooden attic beams and the hunters' trophy room banquet table.

Some of the Pennsylvanians opted for an early-morning hot air balloon float - an experience we decided to save for Provence. In Gien, we toured the ceramics factory where almost everyone acquired a souvenir. We

saw the charming fortified village of Chateau-Landon and its 11th century St. Severine Abbey from a horse-drawn wagon.

Gems of the French countryside enveloped our little vessel everywhere. Postcard-perfect medieval villages, manicured gardens, canopies of trees and languid canal waters stirred by a mother duck and her brood spilled the bounty of soft summertime France into the passing scene. Occasionally, a vineyard moved into view. Children on bicycles waved to us from the towpath. Sometimes we observed it all from the barge deck. Other times we plunged into it on foot or bike.

By Friday night's captain's dinner, Carol and I were solid fans. We liked the freedom barge cruising gave us to go and come at will or sit ondeck and read a book. It's a slowdown, smell-the-bougainvillea way to get intimate with another facet of Old Mother Europe. Barging can be bare-bones self-drive, or it can be in the style of French Country Waterways. We found the latter well worth the freight.

An evening among French speakers in Paris' Left Bank cafes and bistros prepared us up for a deeper culture plunge down south. Coffee and croissants the next morning got us moving out of the Hotel d'Aubusson salon toward our TGV fast train to Avignon. On arrival three hours later, we picked up a rental car and set out to find blooming lavender fields, more medieval villages and local artisanal edibles here and there.

Authentic lavender grows in higher elevations, so our road float would take us from Avignon into the Luberon and Alpine terrain near Forcalquier, through a surprising measure of open and rolling park-preserved land. We stopped at the asylum outside St. Remy where Vincent Van Gogh once lived and painted, multiple rows of tiny, blue-gold lavender hybrid flowers out his window. In the neighboring village of Eygalieres, we had a memorable lunch at Chez Bru - a celebrated bistro triumph by owners Wout and Suzy Bru.

Hilltop or "perched" villages were our favorites. Since the centuries when Saracens and other marauders menaced the local inhabitants, they've held fast to their lofty stations. Resembling wedding cakes, the hamlets rise in layers up the hillsides, peaking at a church steeple or watchtower relic. One has only to stroll the steep narrow streets and alleys of Gorde, Roussillon and Lurs and imagine the stories within the ancient walls and houses of sometimes six or seven levels.

The staff at The Lavender Museum near Gordes and the Laboratoire Sainte-Victoire in the perched village of Simiane-la-Rotonde primed us about ancient (since Roman times) and modern methods of extracting essential oils from the flower. Lavander, a plant that's as essential to Mediterranean cultures as sunflowers, is a key to the soul of Provence. Famed for its sedative properties, lavender products benefit the body in tea, honey, oils, gels, hand cream, cologne, hand and face creams, lotion and sachet, to name a few we found in the museum's boutique. The essence of real lavender is very pricey, because it takes about 287 pounds of flowers to obtain only a quart of essential oil via the distilling process.

Lavender enhances Provencal foods too. We saw lavender meringues in several bakeries along our way and finally tasted one at la Patisserie Jarry in Cavillon. In diminutive Lurs, we relished views of the Durance valley, along with a dish of lavender ice cream in Francois Grisolle's cafe, Les Saveurs de la Bello Visto. With its cascading olive groves, village clock tower right out of a fairy tale and its proximity to Provence's high lavender region, Lurs could have held us much longer. But an early-morning appointment for our final float took us into nearby Forcalquier and an early night.

That early-morning balloon float launched from a lavender field just outside Forcalquier. Philip Haslett, another French-speaking Brit and our affable pilot, promised views of medieval villages and chateaux, and the soft aroma of lavender. And he delivered.

Following our hour-long float across the rural landscape, we toasted our exhilaration with Champagne and croissants. Not just kudos to the flight, but to all our floats across France.

IF YOU GO

For trip-planning assistance, call 800-222-1236, or visit www.fcwl.com; www.provenceweb.fr; www.routes-lavande.com; and www.france-montgolfiere.com.

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