



It's all about
relaxing,
if you get my drift

There's nothing so calming as messing about on a French river, especially on a slow-going barge, writes *Arlene Harris*

part from a few short breaks around the country, most of us have been confined to base for the past 16 months. Despite the lifting of restrictions and the fact we are now allowed, if eligible, to travel to countries which are deemed safe, I – like many, I expect – am not very keen on the idea of crowded cities or the tourist sites that seemed a tempting proposition in the past. The river cruise, however, is an exception – the low-passenger, slow-moving meander through scenic France that I took just before the first lockdown may be just the ticket now, given everything we know.

My slow-moving home for the duration of this glorious trip was the Nympha luxury barge on the River Cher in the Loire Valley. In the only boat of its kind on this river, my fellow travellers and I (just six in total) were afforded the chance to experience some of the most beautiful French countryside, its wealth of jaw-dropping châteaux and largely undiscovered wineries.

After a short flight from Dublin, my other half and I arrived in Paris Charles de Gaulle and instead of having to take on a stressful crossing of central Paris, we took the short train ride south to St Pierre de Corps in the department of Indre-et-



Loire. Here, we were met on the platform by our captain for the week, Leigh Wootton, a man with 30 years of barging experience under his belt, an encyclopaedic knowledge of the region and its history and a dry sense of humour.

Our floating hotel was moored in a small hamlet with precious little to disturb us aside from birdsong, the

gentle lapping of the water against the side of the barge and the atmospheric sounds of a water mill, the 14th-century Moulin de Nitray, at the other side of the river. Pure bliss.

Starting as we meant to go on, we joined our fellow guests (two other couples) and the rest of the crew – Luke who would be cooking for us and Alana

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Top: The bridge at Château de Chenonceau
Left: Château d'Amboise

who would be catering to our every other need – for a glass of bubbly on deck before sitting down to the serious business of a four-course dinner (including the obligatory cheese course) and an impressive selection of local wines.

We were given a rough agenda for the days ahead but warned that things could change and we would not be sticking to a strict timetable. This was music to my ears.

The cabins were, in the words of our captain, small but perfectly formed and evoked childlike feelings of excitement in me as I packed away my things and bunked down in a surprisingly roomy and comfortable bed.

Next morning, I was up with the lark (or rather, the moorhens) and, after navigating my compact cabin shower, I was ready for an early morning walk along the towpath. Breakfast was to be served from 8.30am so we made sure to be back for the warm pastries, freshly squeezed orange juice, granola and coffee, before we all headed off to explore the area.

This included a visit to Château de Nitray, a Renaissance-style Touraine castle complete with a family-run winery, pigeon loft and a classic French hunting dog lounging in the sunshine. We got a close-up view of the first grapes being pressed (followed by a glass of fresh grape juice) and finished up with a wine tasting beneath the shade of a lime tree, before a leisurely amble through country lanes that took us back to the boat for lunch.

Anyone who has watched the wonderful Prunella Scales and Timothy

West on Channel 4's *Great Canal Journeys* will understand how excited I was to get going and to experience the peace and tranquillity of barging. Pushing along at a sedate 6km/h, sitting beneath a parasol in the gentle breeze, it struck me that I couldn't imagine a nicer way to travel.

Arriving in the picturesque village of Larcay, we moored under the shade of a willow tree before boarding our air-conditioned minibus to take us to Château de Villandry, the last of the great Renaissance châteaux built on the banks of the Loire.

We spent several hours revelling in the art, architecture, stunning gardens and history, while Captain Leigh's knowledge of the juicy behind-the-scenes gossip made the facts a whole lot more interesting. After returning to the barge to freshen up, we lingered over sundowners and another delectable dinner.

While food, wine, history and relaxation are the main themes of our trip, the continuous self-pampering and sloth-like behaviour isn't obligatory. There are bicycles on board for the guests to use and plenty of trails for running, walking and hiking. Should you take the notion, you can try a dip in the river itself.

Lower than usual water levels have proven problematic for many of the other boats using the waterways, so we had the river to ourselves as we enjoyed the languid pace of life.

Over the course of the next few days, we visited the Château d'Amboise, a royal

residence of the kings of France for more than 200 years, and the Château du Clos Lucé which was Leonardo da Vinci's home for the final three years of his life. Along with a tour of this grand house, we learnt about some of the many inventions for which he was responsible.

We also visited the iconic Château de Chenonceau and, in fact, were on the only barge low-slung enough to be able to cruise under its impressive five-arch bridge, which made for some fantastic photo opportunities for us as well as for the bystanders waving at us from the castle.

Mooring at Chisseaux, we took the short drive back to the château – often dubbed the Ladies' Château in deference to two women who presided over it: Henry II's mistress Diane de Poitiers who added the bridge over the River Cher, and then his wife Catherine de'Medici who moved in after the king's death and forced de Poitiers to relocate. The history of the place is fascinating, and a tour of the gardens proved to be a beautiful and peaceful end to the afternoon.

The stunning town of Valençay is also a highlight of the tour, as was a trip, in stark contrast, to the troglodyte village of Bourré, where we saw La Magnanerie, a highly unusual troglodyte dwelling, a *tuffeau* (local limestone) quarry and a silkworm nursery.

Shopping is, of course, central to any visit I take to France and on the final day,



Travelling by the Nympha luxury barge, above, is the perfect way to slow down and enjoy the French countryside at a relaxing pace, with its journey starting and finishing at Le Moulin de Nitray; Left: Arlene Harris on board the barge as it makes its way through the Loire Valley

a trip to Montrichard and one of the largest street markets in Touraine was on the cards, followed by a quick trip to the 11th century chateau overlooking the medieval town square.

A captain's dinner on board was held on the final night and, after one last breakfast, we were whisked to the nearest train station to begin the journey home and try to ease ourselves back into the relatively frenetic pace of the real world.

Travelling by barge has to be one of the most enjoyable and relaxing experiences, particularly in a post-pandemic world. It forces you to slow down, drink in the view (and the wine), listen to the birdsong and wildlife on the riverbank, and simply take a breather from the crazy world we now appear to live in.

The historic and cultural activities hugely enrich the trip, but there is something about cruising along at a snail's pace that enriches the soul and stays with you for some time afterwards. Slowness is the essence of this type of trip, and it has already left me longing to return.

Arlene Harris was a guest of the French Canal Boating Company, which has week-long barge trips aboard the Nympha from €8,580 for two people, full-board, including transfers, excursions and activities. A private charter for four costs €21,800, while a charter for six costs €24,000; frenchcanalboatcompany.com

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