



Vézelay Abbey in Burgundy



The wine cellar at St Bris

Taking each day as it comes on a barge on the Yonne river in southern Burgundy is one of the most relaxing ways to spend a summer European holiday, writes **Arlene Harris**

Life in the slow lane

Travelling at a sedate six kilometres per hour, the warm, clean air is filled with a cacophony of bird-song twinned with the quiet hum of an engine and the gentle lapping of water – I have arrived in heaven.

Cruising down the Yonne river in southern Burgundy on a beautiful vintage barge, I feel as if I have stepped out of modern life and been transported into a different era or even a different realm altogether.

Le Papillon, the vessel I am travelling on, began her life in 1902 as a commercial boat transporting goods along the river Rhine. In 1980, she was transformed into a luxury six-passenger hotel barge, and has been sharing the delights of this incredibly beautiful region of France with visitors ever since.

We fly from Dublin to Paris and, after a seamless journey from airport to station, board a train to Mignennes, where we are met by one of the charming hosts for our short stay on board Le Papillon (The Butterfly). Arnault is both informative and friendly as he whisks us off in an air-conditioned car to where our accommodation is waiting patiently for us to arrive.

We have no idea what to expect but, after half an hour travelling through the lush French countryside, we are greeted with the splendid sight of the beautiful old barge, moored along a grassy bank outside a quintessentially rustic village.

Resplendent in hues of green and red with colourful flowers adorning the deck sides, the vessel looks both regal and homely and our feet have hardly reached the top of the gangplank when we are rewarded with a welcoming glass of fizz from the rest of the crew.

With Arnault bringing up the rear with our luggage, Erell hands out glasses of bubbly as, together with Captain Leigh Wooton and chef Joanne Stones and our fellow guests, we revel in the giddy feeling of expectation while preparing to enjoy the first of many sumptuous meals in the cosy dining room downstairs.

The trip is strongly influenced by local food and

wine, and each meal (barring breakfast) is served with a wonderful selection from the vineyards of Chablis, Irincy, Ladoix, Nuits-Saint-Georges and many more.

Each is chosen to complement the food, which on the first evening, is griddled asparagus and salsa verde followed by oven-roasted corn fed chicken with a white wine and tarragon sauce. A fabulous array of local cheese is then produced and, just in case we haven't had enough, we finish off our first meal with a chocolate fondant and raspberry sauce – not a bad feast for one rustled up in a tiny galley kitchen.

Guiltily leaving the detritus of dinner behind, we retreat to the lounge for a digestif and a delightful hour in the company of our captain who regales us with stories of his childhood experiences in Waterford, cruising on our very own Grand Canal and some of his many escapades across three decades on the French waterways.

After an arduous evening of eating and drinking, we decide to head for our respective cabins – ours, the long room, is exactly that. At one end, there isn't enough room to swing a mouse, let alone a cat, but the other (which my husband graciously offers to me) is spacious and closer to the quirky shower room which has a little porthole and steps down to the shower area.

But while small, it is by no means uncomfortable; and after climbing into my berth and shouting goodnight to my other half at the opposite end of the room, I am out like a light, dreaming about the adventures ahead.

Up with the larks (or herons, to be precise), we enjoy another delicious meal of freshly baked croissants, pains au chocolat and a section of granolas, fruit, juices and coffee as our four-day cruise begins as it will continue; everything at a leisurely pace with no pressure to do anything and all the time in the world to come to that conclusion.

Anyone hoping to stick to a rigid schedule will be disappointed as the whole purpose of barging is to take each day as it comes – sometimes a loose plan made in the morning to visit local sights will



work out exactly as expected, while other times the boat may get stuck in a sandbank and take longer to manoeuvre than expected, but as far as I am concerned, it is all part of the adventure.

Meandering along, we take turns to 'help' Arnaud and Leigh on the bridge as they steer the very large but extremely elegant boat on its course, crossing rivers and canals. While it looks ridiculously easy, there is, I find, a great deal more to piloting a barge than I had previously thought, and it is necessary to remain focused, particularly when faced with curved riverbanks and rented boats.

Nowadays, most of the lock-keepers' cottages are empty, and the job of opening and closing the locks is undertaken by an army of keepers who drive over and back on mopeds. Our captain is extremely experienced, but etiquette calls for pilots to wait for the mobile keepers to arrive (it's a two-person job) as it sets a bad example for less able captains, usually tourists or weekenders, who may not secure the locks correctly.

I try my hand at opening and closing a few locks – all different in locations, shapes, sizes, ages and colours (one is bright pink, many are covered in flowers and some boast unusual sentries including



The 12th-century Château de Bazoches



A narrow but comfortable barge bedroom



The barge's lounge



The bedroom of Vauban's wife at the Château de Bazoches



a haughty pair of geese). Watching the lock fill and the boat rise, thanks to my sterling strength, is a very satisfying experience.

While off the boat, we take the opportunity to walk alongside and stretch our legs. For those wishing to simply accompany the barge from the land, a gentle amble is all that is required, but we decide to get a bit of exercise and, within minutes, have left the boat behind. The tranquillity of the tow-path walk is incredible. Sure, there are plenty of sounds to accompany us, but the babble of frogs, birds and mysterious animals in the undergrowth do little to burst the bubble of complete and utter isolation from the modern world, which in reality is only a few miles away.

All our meals are taken on board and served in the beautiful dining room (which Leigh refers to as the 'padded cell', given that the walls are covered in a soft, cushiony fabric rather than any slight on our mental state) by Erell, whose passion and knowledge of local cheeses is second to none. And most days, after a morning of cruising followed by a sumptuous lunch, we head out for the afternoon by car to do a spot of sightseeing – this involves detailed logistics on behalf of the crew, one of whom cycles back to

where the vehicle was left the evening before, throw the bike in the back and high-tail it back to collect us when we are finished dining.

Over the course of the few days, we visit the beautiful town of Vezelay and its ancient abbey (which was part of the original Camino pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela) – its cobbled streets and period architecture offering the perfect backdrop to an afternoon of wandering, window-shopping and purchasing some simple but gorgeous jewellery from a local artist.

We also take a trip to the heart of the Morvan, through tiny winding one-car roads, past farmyards and gîtes until we are greeted with the stunning sight of the Château de Bazoches which was built in the 12th century by Lord Jean de Bazoches.

With impressive turrets and an imposing façade, the château is open to the public from March to November, so we have the opportunity to enjoy the stunningly maintained interior which was the home of Marshal Vauban in the 17th century.

There is a large collection of memorabilia, including the studies and plans for strongholds for the Kingdom of France under Louis XIV. Only a section of the château is open to the public as Vauban's descendants

still retain the property as a family home, but we are allowed to explore the bedroom of the Marshal's wife, the main gallery, libraries and drawing rooms, before heading back into the sunshine to enjoy the stunning views over Vézelay hill.

And, of course, no visit to Burgundy would be complete without an obligatory trip to a local wine-maker – so with arms not twisted very far, we are persuaded to take a wine-tasting tour of a cellar in St Bris – and what an experience that is.

Passed down through several generations, this thriving wine-making business is still run by the Bersan family who offer interested visitors like ourselves the chance to descend the stone steps into the ancient passageways which, as well as housing rows of barrels of current vintages, is home to hundreds of bottles tucked away in nooks and crannies and covered in dust and cobwebs – none of these have labels, but I am sure that our jovial host knows exactly what vintage every single bottle is.

Knowing the provenance of the wine served with dinner is an added bonus, as indeed is the selection of wines and local cheeses. And over the course of our trip, we are truly spoiled by Jo's cooking which includes; confit duck, escargot, seared foie gras and fillets of beef from locally reared Charolais cattle. There are no vegetarians in our group, but given our delicious meat-free lunches, it is clear that catering for any dietary requirements, usually advised beforehand, is no problem for our busy chef.

Like many people, I had long harboured a desire to cruise the French waterways, but being on a hotel barge makes the experience so much better. With others in charge, you can sit back regally and enjoy the view, take a bike and go for an energetic cycle, or enjoy an amble along the tow path. You can even play captain by taking control of the wheel and helping to open and close the locks.

But the level of pampering we enjoy over the course of our short trip makes everything so special – and this, combined with the fact that the crew are so relaxed, makes it feel like we are on a trip with a group of friends (who admittedly are doing all the work).

Our trip draws to a close when we moor at the beautiful town of Clamecy and, after a slap-up Captain's dinner, the following morning it is time to say our goodbyes. As you might have guessed, we are reluctant to leave, but while this is my first canal trip, it most definitely won't be my last. ■

A week-long package on board Le Papillon, including transfers to and from Paris, excursions, full board, open bar and use of all facilities, costs from €3,200 per person. See frenchcanalboatcompany.com