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Learning in the Loire

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My knowledge of the Loire extended to the fact it was a river and French region. A six-night cruise on the [French Canal Boat Company's](#) barge, [Nymphaea](#), sounded the perfect way to learn about the food, wine, geography and history whilst relaxing.

The Barge

The 80-foot Dutch [Nymphaea](#) may be 98 years old but has been beautifully restored. The interior living and dining areas had rich varnished hardwoods, stained glass cabinet doors, turquoise or striped cushions and shining brass. The top deck, lined with colourful petunias in window boxes, had comfortable deck chairs with blue and white striped cushions.

There are three twin en-suite cabins. Our stateroom, [Chenonceau](#), at the front was down six steps. Its location meant it was triangular in shape with slim, but comfortable beds down the sides and two spacious cupboards. Although there was air conditioning it was a little noisy, so we braved the midges and slept with the portholes open. The shower had plentiful, powerful hot water and the separate loo and basin had lots of shelf space. Little touches like L'Occitane toiletries, pillow chocolates and daily replenished water carafes were welcome.

The food





Breakfast was simple: cereals, yoghurts, a daily changing fresh fruit platter, tea-soaked apricots and prunes, French bread and pastries collected each day from the nearest boulangerie, freshly squeezed orange juice and coffee to suit.

Lunch was my favourite meal of the day. Lucy, our cook for the week, introduced me to artichokes with a garlic aioli and cheesy gougeres. Salads were delightful and varied: griddled peaches and ham, pasta with pesto, potatoes with a lemon and chive vinaigrette, griddled aubergines and peppers. Paired with a chilled rosé of the day, I could have feasted all afternoon.

Two cheeses were presented with each meal by our Queen of Cheese, Alannah. In six days, we tasted 24 cheeses, many of them local to the Loire. Made from goat, cow and sheep milk they were soft, crumbly, hard, blue, smelly, single and triple-cream - the adjectives flow. Rinds were washed, mouldy or rinsed with ash or salt. Shapes were diverse: rounds, pyramids, heart-shaped Neufchatel, donut Couronne de la Loches and cylindrical **Sainte-Maure-de-Touraine** with a rye stick through it.

Splendid four-course dinners had both French offerings like bouillabaisse, duck with orange and port sauce and more international dishes. Each night, Captain Francisco introduced us to a different white and red wine and having visited and tasted wine at **Domaine de la Grange**, Châteaux **Chenonceau** and **Nitray**, we chose our favourites to stock the cellar. After eating, we took coffee and digestifs onto the top deck to watch the sun go down, surprisingly not until around 9.45pm.



On Lucy's night off, we ate at **La Boulaye** which although, slightly off the beaten track, was a five-minute drive from our mooring. It lived up to its recommendation in the 2019 Michelin Guide for 'fresh ingredients, capably prepared, simply a good meal'.

Captain's dinner, on our final night, began with another new experience - the espresso martini made on deck by Alannah as we cruised along in the early evening sun. We ended the meal and the trip, by sipping pink champagne with our wonderful crew of three.

The cruising and the scenery

The River Cher, a tributary of the Loire, was surprisingly wide, but not deep. Nymphaea, with its shallow draft of 50cm, was highly suited to the unpredictable water levels and is the only barge to cruise on the Cher. Locks have been built to help regulate the water flow and levels.



The original **itinerary** was to cruise from our mooring at Nitray, firstly west to Larçay and then eastwards to Chisseaux. Unfortunately, a lock had recently been damaged during repair work, which meant we couldn't cruise the full, intended stretch although we did go through four locks and learned about river management through sticks.

However, this didn't stop us exploring the area by other craft. One morning we glided along in a fun electric boat under the arches of **Château du Chenonceau** and on another, spent a day on the nearby River Loire in a traditional wooden boat, known as a toue. These were originally used to carry the locally quarried tuffeau stone to build the châteaux which line the river. It was rather like a punt with a flat bottom, which allowed us to navigate the shallow

waters. After a stupendous picnic on a small island, the wind got up on the return journey, and the single sail was raised.

Captain Francisco took time away from tiller to transport us in an air-conditioned minibus to the châteaux of [Amboise](#), [Chenonceau](#), [Nitray](#), [Chaumont](#) and [Clos Luce](#), the final home of Leonardo da Vinci.

Having seen the tuffeau stone chateaux, and sailed in a boat which carried the stone, we also visited [La Magnanerie de Bourré](#) - the caves where the stones were quarried from, and the workers lived. They have now been converted into trendy homes.

We accompanied Lucy to the weekly market at Montrichard, to select fresh ingredients for dinner. Our visit coincided with the arrival of a circus and everyone watched as huge yellow lorries, one with four trailers, negotiated their way through the narrow streets.

Whilst this was an action-packed week, we also relaxed on deck and took in the scenery: spectacular and diverse trees creating wonderful reflections, mill houses, châteaux spires peering through branches and simply watching the sun rising and setting.

If we'd chosen to be more active, onboard bicycles were available.

The weather

Having packed long trousers and a wrap anticipating cool evenings on deck, I was pleasantly surprised how long the sun lasted and shorts remained on and the wrap unpacked.



Our trip fulfilled all my expectations and more. I've learned about the history of many of the Loire's iconic châteaux, I'm seeking out French wines in supermarket aisles and have a list of recipes to recreate for friends. I also left totally chilled and relaxed, if a little heavier.

The [French Canal Boat Company](#) has a second barge, [Papillon](#), which cruises through [Burgundy](#).



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