

Escape



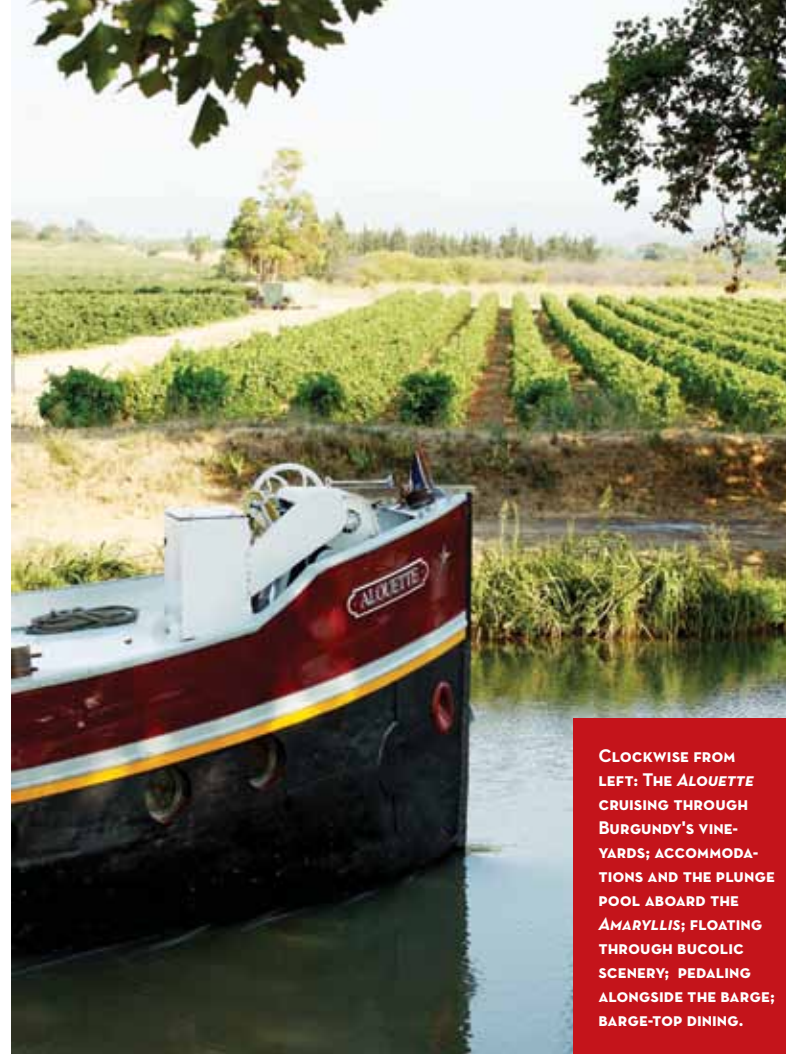
BARGE RIGHT IN

Afloat in France delivers an intoxicating and inspirational journey through the waterways of France's venerated Burgundy region

BY PAUL RUBIO

Each year, the return of spring ushers in new life to France's most venerated nexus of fertility, the country's Burgundy region. Verdant grasses and vibrant sunflowers once again blanket the hillsides, heightening the beauty of the history-steeped châteaux, stone-hewn homes and medieval townscapes. As young Pinot Noirs emerge on the storied vines throughout this cradle of wine civilization, village life erupts in full bloom.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: THE ALOUETTE CRUISING THROUGH BURGUNDY'S VINEYARDS; ACCOMMODATIONS AND THE PLUNGE POOL ABOARD THE AMARYLLIS; FLOATING THROUGH BUCOLIC SCENERY; PEDALING ALONGSIDE THE BARGE; BARGE-TOP DINING.



During this magic of spring, a handful of luxury barges takes to the picturesque waterways of central France, exposing sybarites to the back lot of prime wine country. Meandering through the postcard-perfect veins of the Burgundy region, the five *péniche-hôtels* of Belmond's Afloat in France commingle the best of luxury cruising with complete immersion into rural France. Hosting between four and 12 guests for six-day, seven-night journeys, these petite ships navigate the rivers and narrow canals that once served as principal European trade routes and berth in the premier small towns of France's wine circuit, including Dijon, Beaune, St. Léger sur Dheune and Vandenesse en Auxois.

The Afloat fleet—the *Amaryllis*, the *Fleur de Lys*, the *Alouette*, the *Hirondelle* and the *Napoleon*—consists of traditional Dutch barges outfitted with top-of-the-line amenities. The *Amaryllis*, for example, flaunts four expansive cabins, en-suite marble bathrooms with oversized bathtubs, a lounge-lined plunge pool, a lavish dining room and Louis XVI-inspired furnishings.

Through the lazy days of spring, summer and fall, the *Amaryllis* et al float gracefully through Burgundy's narrow inland waterways, giving ample time to bask in the bucolic scenery—feet up, wine in hand—through centuries-old locks. Paths and trails frame most canals,

offering the opportunity to use house bicycles to pedal alongside the barge or even detour into a nearby town.

As expected, a trip through Burgundy mandates a heavy concentration on gastronomy and wine. This cruise embraces the essence of France's "foodie" and oenophile roots with three gourmet meals daily, shopping trips to town markets for local ingredients, private tastings at some of the world's most revered wine houses, on-board wine courses sampling Grand Crus and more.

One day, passengers visit the caves of Maison Joseph Drouhin in Beaune, Burgundy's official wine capital, to learn about the regional *terroirs* and how sun exposure, soil, slope and Earth's elements can create the perfect wine. (Like real estate, great wine is all about location, location, location.)

Another day, they'll tour the Château de Chamirey, an esteemed family estate, where experts help demystify the wine-making process and offer generous pours of superlative white and red Burgundies. Whether guests

come into this sojourn a neophyte or connoisseur, the master winemakers and sommeliers they meet cater to all levels of knowledge.

Be sure to pack a bit of expandable haute couture. Morning, noon and night, epicurean delights foster endless temptation. For lunch and dinner, the ship's personal chef presents indulgent, multicourse meals, each expertly matched with a different varietal. Expect the likes of roasted filet of Charolais beef with potato fondant, seared foie gras with cassis and shallots, and freshly shucked oysters with shallot vinegar. The calorie counting doesn't end with dessert; following the last bite of fresh crème brûlée with shortbread or strawberry-lavender panna cotta is an ever-changing selection of three fine French cheeses.

In between unapologetically eating, drinking and relaxing on the barge, travelers participate in daily excursions. Beyond absorbing the local vibe through guided walks and personal ambles into rural towns, look forward to visiting magnificent sites such as the



TOP: THE AMARYLLIS FLOATING GRACEFULLY THROUGH BURGUNDY'S NARROW INLAND WATERWAYS. ABOVE: AN AFTER-NOON BARGE-SIDE PICNIC FILLED WITH FRENCH CULINARY DELIGHTS.



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ABOVE: THE AFLOAT IN FRANCE FLEET CONSISTS OF TRADITIONAL DUTCH BARGES OUTFITTED WITH TOP-OF-THE-LINE AMENITIES. TOP RIGHT: SETTING UP FOR AN AFTERNOON OF WINE AND CHEESE ATOP THE BARGE.

fourteenth-century Château de Germolles, the former home of the Dukes of Burgundy, as well as the circa-1443 Hôtel-Dieu de Beaune, a museum and former charity hospital that remains one of the foremost examples of French fifteenth-century architecture.

Afloat in France trips conclude much how they begin: with a fabulous Champagne and wine reception and the best in French cuisine. Yet this peregrination through the back paths of France's most exalted wine country surfaces as a time of learning, personal growth and quiet reflection. It reveals a place where the simple life is the good life; spiritually, voyagers are bound to end the Afloat journey in a higher place. And no, that's not the wine talking. (afloatinfrance.com) ◀◀



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