

Welcome

On arrival, our travel-weariness quickly dissolved thanks to the beaming smiles of the crew who welcomed us aboard, handing us a glass of champagne and a selection of delicious canapés. After our various introductions, we had just one instruction from our Captain, Stephane: "Start enjoying yourself straight away as the week will go by very quickly." So we did, and he was right!

Accommodation and Décor

On first seeing La Belle Epoque, I was instantly struck by the size of the vessel. It appeared much bigger than in the photos I'd seen and very impressive with its crisp blue and white paintwork. The interior décor is dominated by traditional wood paneling and there is space for everyone to sit comfortably in the interior lounge or outside on the sundeck. The cabins are cozy and have everything you need for a very comfortable week. They have windows or portholes encased in that lovely old heavy brass which you just don't see nowadays. The house-keeping team worked very hard at their role, discreetly cleaning and tidying the cabins and providing fresh towels every day. And the bathrobe and slippers are especially handy for keeping your modesty when walking up to the hot tub on deck!

Food and Wine

Not considering myself a food buff, I wasn't sure if the gourmet meals would be as important to me as to others. How wrong I was. The delicate flavors, imaginative food combinations and beautiful presentation by our chef, Emma, were a delight. Served with seamless efficiency by Kayleigh and Lindsay, each lunch and dinner was accompanied by appropriate red and white wines for us to enjoy and compare, expertly described by our Captain. And, in true French style, we had a different selection of cheeses at every meal, dutifully described by Lindsay. It didn't take long for dinner to become a highlight of our day. And after one of our slightly longer afternoon guided walks, we laughed as we noticed that everyone had arrived especially early for dinner, perched on the edge of our seats and casting hopeful glances at the kitchen door.

Locks

The gentle chug of the engine is more comforting than intrusive. With locks occurring every 20 minutes to one hour (40 locks in 5 days), the Captain and his effervescent First Mate, Rudy, are kept very busy. Far from becoming repetitive, this process remained as fascinating for me at the end of the week as it did at the start. Each lock has its own little keeper's house, complete with name and number plaque above the front door and a friendly dog eager to greet the barge. The gardens have their own individual style and one features a selection of bizarre follies, including a huge giraffe! The lock offers an opportunity for guests to hop off for a tow path walk or cycle ride, or to step back on board for a coffee or to just sit and enjoy the cruise.

Walks

On most autumn mornings, the mist hangs heavily over the water. It's beautiful. Stepping outside, you need to be wrapped up warmly while the mist lingers but it becomes surprisingly warm if the sun burns through. One of my fellow passengers commented as we strolled along the tow path "There is something very pleasant about having your hotel bedroom gliding along the river beside you." As well as the option to walk along the canal towpath, there is no doubt that having the experienced walk guide, brought an additional dimension to the trip. He led us on a two to three hour leisurely walk into the surrounding countryside each morning or afternoon. The walks were not

fast paced or demanding. They were designed to give us time to absorb the views and relish the quietness of our surroundings. We also had regular pauses to hear his anecdotes, bird and wildlife observations and snippets of local history. Under his gentle leadership, we passed through pretty pale limestone villages, saw evidence of wild boar foraging, tasted a grape or two in a fine Chablis vineyard and, on the morning we walked to Les Clefs de Rochefort, this derelict castle was appropriately enshrouded in Hammer Horror-esque mist.

Visits

Our sightseeing visits were guided by our well-informed and articulate Captain who brought to life the classic French Château de Tanlay and the stunning Abbaye de Fontenay – a ‘must-see’ if you visit this area. He kept our attention whilst knowingly mispronouncing the occasional English word with a glint in his eye!

We were surprised to be guided around one of Chablis’ leading wineries by a bright young Australian whose extensive knowledge of French wine growing and Australian wine blending belied his youthful looks. He explained the sometimes complex production methods with remarkable clarity. Finally our curiosity got the better of us and we asked “What brings an Australian to live in France?” With the panache of his adopted country, he smiled and shrugged “A girl!”

Before...

I had two personal concerns before this walk:

Firstly, as a single person accustomed to living alone, would I feel the need to ‘escape’ from the barge and my fellow passengers? I can honestly say that this thought did not cross my mind at all during the whole week. Far from being a challenge, the mix of cultures in our group (Canadian, American, Australian and English) added to the interest of the trip and the mix of visits, walks and fine-dining kept me occupied but not at the expense of relaxation.

Secondly, being on the most susceptible end of the motion-sickness scale, would I suffer any effects of the barge’s movement? Not at all – I felt as stable as on dry land. In fact, being surrounded by water had a truly therapeutic effect.

And After...

If you are considering this type of voyage but haven’t done anything like it before, I cannot recommend it highly enough. Don’t hesitate to take the opportunity. It’s an experience which will leave you well-rested, enriched and smiling at your memories for a long time afterwards. Would I go again? Absolutely!

LA BELLE EPOQUE - BURGUNDY WALKING CRUISE FOR INDIVIDUALS

Venarey les Laumes to Tonnerre

Departing 9th to 15th October 2011 & 16th to 22nd October 2011

Sunday, Day 1 Montbard to Tonnerre

We rendezvous at Montbard TGV station at 18.04 and transfer you to the barge, moored in Tonnerre, in a private air-conditioned minibus. A full crew Welcome Aboard with champagne and canapés during which we hear about the week's itinerary, its walks and its activities. After time to settle into your cabin we gather for our Welcome Dinner on board which is a wonderful introduction to Burgundy's excellent cuisine.

Monday, Day 2 Tonnerre to Tanlay

After a delicious breakfast which includes fresh croissants from a local Boulangerie we drive into the centre of Tonnerre for a short tour of this historic and fascinating town. We see the amazing Fosse Dionne and the 13th Century Hotel Dieu. Back on board, a morning cruise takes us to Tanlay. After lunch on board we walk to the 16th Century Renaissance style Chateau de Tanlay for a guided tour of this beautiful house.

Returning to the barge we are transferred a short distance by van for our first countryside walk. This takes us through farmland and then the glorious Tonnerrois vineyards, in October ablaze with hues of gold, yellow and orange.

Tuesday, Day 3 Tanlay to Ancy le Franc

We start the day with a canal-side walk passing ancient villages before we depart for the world famous town and vineyards of Chablis. After a gourmet lunch in Chablis we see some of the sites before we enjoy a private wine tasting at the Domaine Servan, renowned for its Premier and Grand Cru wines popularized by Alex Lichine in the 1950s. There is time to wander round the town before we return to the barge at Ancy le Franc.

Wednesday, Day 4 Ancy le Franc to Ravières

A morning visit to Noyers sur Serein, listed as one of the most beautiful villages in France to enjoy the vegetables, cheeses, colors and delights of the local market. We are

then guided around the medieval streets and ramparts before returning to the barge for lunch. In the afternoon we either enjoy a lazy cruise gently down to Ravières or walk there by a circuitous route through the Burgundian countryside. We start this in the ancient village of Chassignelles where we visit its historic 12th Century church to see some of the best preserved wall paintings in Burgundy.

Thursday, Day 5 Ravières to Montbard

Starting at the tiny village of Cry, this morning's walk takes us through a cacophony of woodland, rolling fields, forest and a ruined castle. In the afternoon we drive to the exquisite World Heritage Unesco site of Abbey de Fontenay founded by St Bernard in 1118. Not only is it a wonderful example of early Cistercian architecture but it is virtually intact. With its peaceful gardens and ponds and fascinating cloisters, dormitories and scriptorium, Fontenay gives an exceptional glimpse of early Cistercian life and industry. Before dinner there is time to stroll round the ancient centre of Montbard.

Friday, Day 6 Montbard to Venarey les Laumes

After climbing out of the valley our final walk takes us past fields of Charollais cattle and through the hamlet of Benoisey before reaching Grignan where we descend to meet the barge. En route we have the best views of the week with stunning vistas across the valley of the Brenne and the Canal du Bourgogne. In the afternoon we first visit the fascinating walled hilltop village of Flavigny sur Ozerain, where the film Chocolat was made. We then visit Alesia, the site of the final battle between the Gauls and Romans that took place in 52 BC, and finally the fortified town of Semur en Auxois before returning to the barge moored at Venarey les Laumes for the Captain's Farewell Dinner.

Saturday, Day 7 Venarey les Laumes to Paris

After breakfast, disembark and transfer to Montbard tgv station or centre by 11am.

On alternate weeks the cruise is in the reverse direction. This is a sample itinerary and is subject to change.

Accommodation	Walking Cruise Price
Junior Suite per person	\$4,550.00
Suite per person	\$4,750.00
Single supplement	\$1,750.00
Single cabin	\$4,890.00
Charter 10 passengers whole boat	\$48,900.00
Charter 11 passengers whole boat	\$50,200.00
Charter 12 passengers whole boat	\$51,500.00

Value Season Walking cruises: October 16-22 and October 23-29, 2011

Price includes: Transfer to the barge from the meeting point on Sunday, 6 night cruise, all meals on board catered for by the on board Master Chef, open bar 24/7 with a large range of alcoholic and non alcoholic drinks, all wines served throughout the cruise, excursions and admittance fees as per the itinerary, use of barge facilities, which includes bicycles and spa pool, and transfer back to the drop off point the following Saturday morning.