

Life in the Slow Lane

It can sometimes feel that life moves at such a fast pace that it's passing us by. Canal barging is the antidote. It's all about going nowhere fast and enjoying the ride. Giselle Whiteaker idles through Burgundy.





La Belle Époque on the Canal de Bourgogne



Abbaye de Fontenay

The low throb of the engine is the only sign that the barge is in motion, as it glides along the Canal de Bourgogne through rural countryside studded with grand châteaux and idyllic villages. Onboard are a small group of passengers, who boarded *La Belle Époque* yesterday afternoon in Venarey-les-Laumes after being chauffeured from Paris, 133 miles away. The barge carries a maximum of 12 passengers on her leisurely cruise along the canal, but on this trip there are only four. No-one is complaining about having the crew's undivided attention.

Sitting on the deck in the warming morning sun, it's hard to believe that the Dutch barge was originally built in 1930 to carry timber. In 1995, *La Belle Époque* was purchased by European Waterways and underwent extensive renovation. The spacious luxury cabins reminiscent of an Art Nouveau French country manor, the marble-tiled en-suite bathrooms, the on-deck Jacuzzi, and the comfortable saloon furnished with antiques and reproductions are testament to her transformation.

There's a simple delight in slowing down. The fast-paced life of the city is a world away from the serenity of the canal, where everything seems to happen in slow motion. Woodlands and rolling fields flank the towpaths and even the herons that take flight as the barge passes flap their wings in languid, measured beats. Six nights onboard feels like a generous time out.

On this first day of cruising, we will cover a mere 11 or so miles. We could walk faster. In fact, we do. Aware that we will be dining indulgently each day on superb French cuisine with a modern twist, expertly prepared by our onboard chef Martin Valovic, we opt to pass the first few locks on foot. Deck-hand Sam knows the locks like the back of his hand and briefs us on the distances, leaving us to determine our desired level of activity. Waiting by the quaint

lockmasters' cottages to watch pilot Akim guide the 128-foot long and 16.5-foot wide craft into the narrow spaces with nary a bump never fails to impress.

Close to midday, we reboard, before the lockmasters disappear for lunch. Chef Martin dishes up two courses of midday delicacies daily, making use of ingredients from the region. After last night's welcome canapes and dinner of scallops, frog leg tempura, cucumber jelly, apple and parsley emulsion, followed by cod loin, petit pois à la Française with shrimp-caper butter, and a dessert of apricot with fromage blanc, espuma and sorbet, we know we have much to anticipate. The lemon, thyme and garlic spring chicken with Caesar

salad is delectable and stewardess Magda introduces us to a selection of cheeses and wines to accompany, an act she performs diligently twice a day, tuning our palates to the underlying flavours.

We moor in Montbard in the early afternoon, and our efficient captain Jolanda becomes our tour guide, transporting us to MuséoParc Alésia, a spectacular edifice that houses an interpretation centre, laying out the conquest of Gaul by the Romans in 52 BC, when Caesar and Vercingétorix went head to head. On nearby Mont-

Auxois, where the oppidum overlooks the final battlefield, a statue of the defeated Vercingetorix stretches into the sky. The afternoon ends in Flavigny-sur-Ozerain, where the film *Chocolat* was set, and we sample Anise de Flavigny in the only place it is produced. The sweet anise-flavored candy was originally manufactured by monks and draws crowds into the small village.

We quickly fall into a variable pattern, combining a daily stroll or cycle with cruising, dining, and forays to local sights, including the exquisite UNESCO World Heritage Site of Abbaye de Fontenay founded by St Bernard in 1118. The abbey is virtually intact and represents a distinctive example of early Cistercian architecture, complete



The onboard cuisine is superb



Life slows down on the canal



A table at Hostellerie des Clos in Chablis

Foie gras onboard *La Belle Époque*

with peaceful gardens and fascinating cloisters, dormitories and a scriptorium, where the monks read and transcribed. In Noyers-sur-Serein chef Martin takes us to the local market, buying produce we deem interesting, ranging from green tomatoes to purple potatoes and flat peaches, building these into the dishes to come with mouth-watering results. One lazy afternoon we're treated to the tuneful crooning of a superb two-man jazz band on the deck, the tinkling sounds rippling over the water and making our toes tap.

We visit the Chateau of Ancy-le-Franc, a Renaissance jewel a short stroll from our mooring spot on the canal, and dine ashore at Hostellerie des Clos in Chablis, listed in the current MICHELIN Guide. The food is delicious, as is the wine, but our chef has accustomed our palates to fine dining at every meal. A few days later, he invites us to access his kitchen sanctuary and learn the secrets of perfectly prepared duck breast with celeriac fondant; a lesson we are all keen to learn.

We moor in Tanlay on our final day and return to Chablis to tour the vineyards and town and partake in a wine tasting, sipping a selection of exquisitely aromatic Chablis Premier Cru at Domain Alain Geoffroy. Feeling mellow, subdued by the wine and the sun, we return to our belle to prepare for the grand finale: the Captain's Dinner. Chef Martin has outdone himself, a feat we didn't think possible. Creamy foie gras, an

airy twice-baked smoked haddock soufflé, and deconstructed beef bourguignon pave the way for a platter of cheese and a serving of five mini desserts, each bursting with flavour.

In the morning we'll be returned to Paris, somewhat more rotund than we started. We're only around 30 miles closer to the capital than where we started, six days ago, but that's the point. It's not about the destinations, despite their bucolic beauty. The joy is in the journey; the luxury of sheer indulgence; of kicking back, relaxing and following the slow-flowing water. ■

Prices for a 6-night cruise aboard hotel barge *La Belle Époque* are from £3,290pp in a twin/double cabin, including all meals, wines, an open bar, excursions and local transfers. Full barge charters are also available for families and groups.

**European Waterways:
Tel 44 (0) 1753 598555 Website: gobarging.com**