



# LOCK, STOCK, and

Taking a canal boat through Burgundy is





# BARGE

a recipe for relaxation. By Chris Caswell



## WITH AN UNDERHANDED PITCH THAT WOULD HAVE IMPRESSED A SOFTBALL COACH, RHEA TOSSED THE BRIGHTLY COLORED BAG UP THE STEEP CANYON SIDE OF THE CANAL LOCK INTO THE WAITING HANDS OF THE LOCKKEEPER.

Opening the bag and peering inside, his face beamed a broad smile. "Ah...chocolat Americain! Merci!"

It was our twenty-seventh lock...no, wait...it was the forty-third, no...oh, well, it doesn't really matter. The warm days and the decorated locks and the tiny villages and the rolling scenery have blurred together into a tapestry of a most wonderful charter.

This was a voyage measured not by coral reefs or sandy beaches, but in bottles of wine and small French restaurants and swans gliding like miniature galleons across a canal painted golden by the setting sun. It was about bicycling along an ancient tow path for our morning croissants and the flicker of sun and shadow as our barge slid past rows of plane trees lining the canal.

It was the sound of a gentle rain pattering on the roof as we snuggled under a thick duvet coverlet and the aroma of mushroom sauce simmering on the stove. It was a screen door slamming somewhere beyond a field yellow with mustard, as children were called for dinner.

Our journey was not marked in kilometers but in sighs of wonder as great chateaus and grassy meadows and forested hillsides came into view.

We had decided to do a bareboat barge cruise along the canals of France and, while there are literally thousands of miles of waterways and a handful of companies offering all manner of boats, we quickly honed our choices to the Burgundy region for its scenery (a secret code for wines) and to the well-respected Locaboat Plaisance. Unlike many companies, Locaboat purpose-builds their own boats and they use the styling of the *penichette*, or classic French canal barge.

With our friends Suzan and Bob, we opted for the Penichette 1500R, a 50-foot barge with an aft deck and four cabins, which would give us privacy and room to spread out. We liked the galley in the deckhouse so everyone could enjoy the view and, with the big sunroof, we didn't feel we missed out by not choosing one of the flybridge versions.

We cruised from Corbigny to Joigny, a one-week trip through the heart of Burgundy. We transited 67 locks, giving us a chance to try our French on lockkeepers several times a day, but the total distance we covered was only 136 kilometers or an astonishingly small 84 miles. That works out to be about 15 miles a day, though the fun level made it seem we were going ten times as far.

Our boat was absolutely spotless when we arrived in Corbigny. The galley was completely outfitted, and the two showers and two

head compartments were modern and tidy. Since we'd rented from Locaboat before, our check-out was cursory but, even for novices, the instructions are pretty straightforward.

The boat is powered by a low horsepower diesel, so speed isn't a concern, nor is navigation since it's hard to get lost on a canal. In general, the handling is leisurely, particularly when it comes to turning or stopping, but any skipper with common sense will figure it out quickly. Besides, Locaboat has covered the sides of their barges with more fenders than a harbor tug, so you'll bounce off the walls of any lock you may brush.

We did some basic provisioning for the first day at a nearby market, knowing that we would shop daily in each village at the boulangerie (for croissants and bread), charcuterie (meats), and at street markets for vegetables. Many of the lockkeepers are also budding entrepre-







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neurs: knowing they have you captive in the lock, they offer salad makings straight from their gardens or wines from their vineyard.

Which brings us to wine. Burgundy is known for its “big name” red wines, the Grand Crus, but we learned that there are wonderful reds that remain undiscovered, simply because they don’t “travel.” Lock-keepers or a store in town would fill our empty Evian water bottles with a pleasant, and sometimes superb, wine for a few Euros, which came from local stock.

Of the 67 locks, some were automated so the lockkeeper only had to push a button to handle the gates. But at many, we (really, our deckhands, Suzan and Bob) were expected to help crank the big handles to open or close the doors and then raise the sluices to fill or empty the lock. It’s not particularly onerous work, thanks to well-greased mechanisms that are centuries old, and it offers a good chance to get ashore and stretch your legs.





You're wondering about the colorful bag that Rhea tossed the lockkeeper? Tipping seems to be an unresolved question. Some think it's a good idea to tip the lockkeeper a Euro for his help, while others feel money is gauche. We sided with the latter and brought miniature American candy bars which Rhea packaged in colorful paper bags. These genuinely pleased and surprised the lockkeepers who, we discovered, would phone ahead to the next lockkeeper about our arrival. There are no secrets along the canal.

Every lock closes for lunch for one hour, and arriving one minute late gets you only a sad Gallic shrug from the lockkeeper as he goes into his small cottage. We took to timing our cruise so that we only arrived at locks when they were open, which meant we stopped in small villages (with free quays to encourage your business) or beside a pleasant meadow.

The barges have no formal anchor, however. Instead, you get a canvas bag with a large mallet and several metal stakes. Pound a stake into the canal bank at the bow, another near the stern, put your lines around them, and you're settled for lunch or overnight.

A tow path runs along one side of the canal and, since we'd rented bicycles, we could use our "lunch break" to explore nearby villages by using the tow path as a bike trail.

But most of our time was spent gliding along the calm waters of the Nivernais Canal and then the Yonne River, enjoying the sun and

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scenery. Locaboat very thoughtfully designed a settee with a round cocktail table at the bow, so the crew could relax with a glass of plonk while watching the world pass by from the best seat in the house.

At Auxerre, we moored at the Aquarelle marina, giving us an unrivaled five-star view of the three spectacular cathedrals that were lit at night (the French know dramatic lighting). In Clamecy, there's a 13th century cathedral with incredible gargoyles, and a 20th century wine merchant happy to refill empty bottles for a few Euros.

At Beilly, underground caverns are where you'll sample Cremant de Bourgogne, Burgundy's version of champagne and, though Burgundy is known for red wine, don't miss out on Kir, a cocktail of white wine and cassis, the locally produced blackcurrant liqueur.

Plan to let your belt out a notch because cranking the locks won't stave off the calories in Burgundy. Our days started with chocolate croissants and progressed at lunch to croque-monsieurs, a grilled ham and cheese sandwich often topped with a béchamel sauce of butter, nutmeg, and Parmesan.

Dinner? We were lucky to have our own gourmet chef aboard so capers and wine sauce scented our salon, but you can't visit Burgundy without sampling Coq au Vin, Boeuf Bourguignon, or the renowned local truffles. In between meals? Don't miss gougere, a puff pastry filled with a Gruyere soufflé.

All too soon, the houses of Joigny with their carved wooden facades—one dated 1492—appeared around a bend and it was time to return our penichette at the Locaboat base.

In a world alive with cellphones and iPods and the jitter of civilization, it had been a pleasure to disconnect and immerse ourselves in a slower way of life afloat. It was a grand adventure never to be forgotten. □



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