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If you go

Those cruising with French Country

By **Anne Z. Cooke**

FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH • Sunday February 19, 2012 5:42 AM

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Waterways on the Champagne cruise fly to Paris and spend a night before being picked up and taken to the dock at Maizy or Chateau-Thierry.

ABOARD THE ADRIENNE — If a trip down a lazy river — or on a canal in northern France — doesn't seem like much of a cruise, think again.

After a week floating past vineyards and villages, the casinos and swimming pools — usual fare of ocean cruises — didn't seem that important.

The cruise ends at Chalons-en-Champagne.

"I feel a little like Huck Finn," said my niece Katie, putting her feet up. "Just drifting along and letting the canal decide where we'll go."

The cruise runs from July through November. Rates start at \$5,295 in the shoulder season.

For the three of us traveling together — my daughter, Katie and me — the Champagne cruise on the 128-foot Adrienne, a French Country Waterways barge, was a tour with a twist, a departure from our annual madcap treks and family campouts.

Cruise travel agents or cruise websites may offer better rates. All meals, wine, tours and transfers to and from the barge are included.

The point of a barge cruise, said Capt. Glen Moynan, is "not to race to the end but to enjoy the timeless quality of rural France," the way you would experience it if you were riding a horse or walking.

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Our days aboard the Adrienne were an empty canvas free of family issues, obligations and chores. As the morning sun burned the mist off the vineyards, we lingered over fresh-baked croissants and coffee or disembarked to stretch our legs.

As we sat on the deck gliding past haystacks and stone houses, a hundred tiny details seemed larger than life: the peeling bark of gnarled tree trunks, ripening Champagne grapes and paint-chipped shutters hanging ajar. We collected and stored memories and took hundreds of photos as the scenery drifted by.

At just 4 mph, the pace was slow enough that passengers could hop down onto the towpath and walk, or to sit on the deck and take in every detail.

France boasts more miles of barge canals and connecting locks than any other European country, and many are still in commercial use.

Work on canals began in 1604, when someone realized that shipping cheese, salt, soap and charcoal was easier by a boat than on rutted roads.

We traveled on a canal with no unique name but that parallels the Marne River, passing through a series of locks in the Champagne region east of Paris. The crew estimated the length of travel at about 50 miles, between Chateau-Thierry, where we boarded the boat, and Chalons-en-Champagne, where we disembarked.

What surprised us was how busy the canals still are. When the Adrienne waited in line to enter the locks, we disembarked to watch the gates close and open as other boats went through.

A few of the barges belonged to competing cruise companies. But most were privately owned, converted by French families for weekend and holiday travel.

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Like those barges, the Adrienne had been built to carry freight. Long, low and spacious enough for six double cabins — 12 passengers — it was ideal for conversion into a pleasure craft.

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Portholes provided light and air, and the baroque-style furnishings suggested an earlier age. We found drawers and an ample closet, and even space to hide the luggage. The only thing missing was onboard Internet service — a relief, I thought.

Even if there had been Internet service, the Adrienne's daily schedule of guided tours, village walks and unhurried four-course meals left no time to scan emails.

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On our first full day, we spent a long morning touring battle sites from World Wars I and II, including those at Chateau-Thierry and in Belleau Wood.

Several of our fellow passengers, military history buffs, had joined the cruise just for this tour, which visited the Aisne-Marne cemetery and the American Monument to French-American friendship.

Some of France's worst battles took place here in June 1918, right along the front line, where 10,000 soldiers died, including 1,056 U.S. Marines.

Rows of white crosses spreading across the grassy lawns were in poignant contrast to what we imagined the area looked like during the battle. Here and there, you can find rusting cannon and the scars of the trenches.

Another long day was spent in Reims, famous for the Gothic cathedral where in 1429 Joan of Arc crowned Charles VII king of France.

As a European history enthusiast, I could have spent all day poring over the architecture and the relics. But others wanted to visit the ruins of a third-century Roman triumphal arch known as the Porte de Mars, and the 11th-century Abbey of Saint-Remi. Alas, no matter which ship or what location, shore tours always seem too short.

The most anticipated tours were the visits to the Champagne houses, where the grapes — a blend of "pinot noir, pinot Meunier and chardonnay," according to our guide Gina — become wine and eventually champagne.

At Moet & Chandon Cellars in Epernay, Gina walked us down into one of the tunnels that snake 17 miles under the town, to show us the vats of white wine in the process of becoming "bubbly," and the dimly lighted cellars where the bottles are stored, stacked in rows from floor to ceiling.

"You know the great discovery that produced Champagne, and why the bottles don't explode, don't you?" she asked us, smiling quizzically. "Bottles with thicker glass."

As we walked back out into the light, Gina also pointed out another use for the tunnels, or "caves," as they are called here. During World War II, French scholars and museum curators hid their art collections in tunnels like these.

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As the week wore on and the passengers learned more about one another, each night's candlelit dinners grew more comfortable. By the week's end, we were playing charades and lingering on the deck to look for falling stars.

And like summer camp of yore, when the adventure was over, it was really over. As we disembarked at the village of Chalons-en-Champagne, we exchanged emails and promised to stay in touch.

But we probably won't. Real life is too busy. But we have our photos and they have theirs, and those — along with memories — are likely to live on.

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