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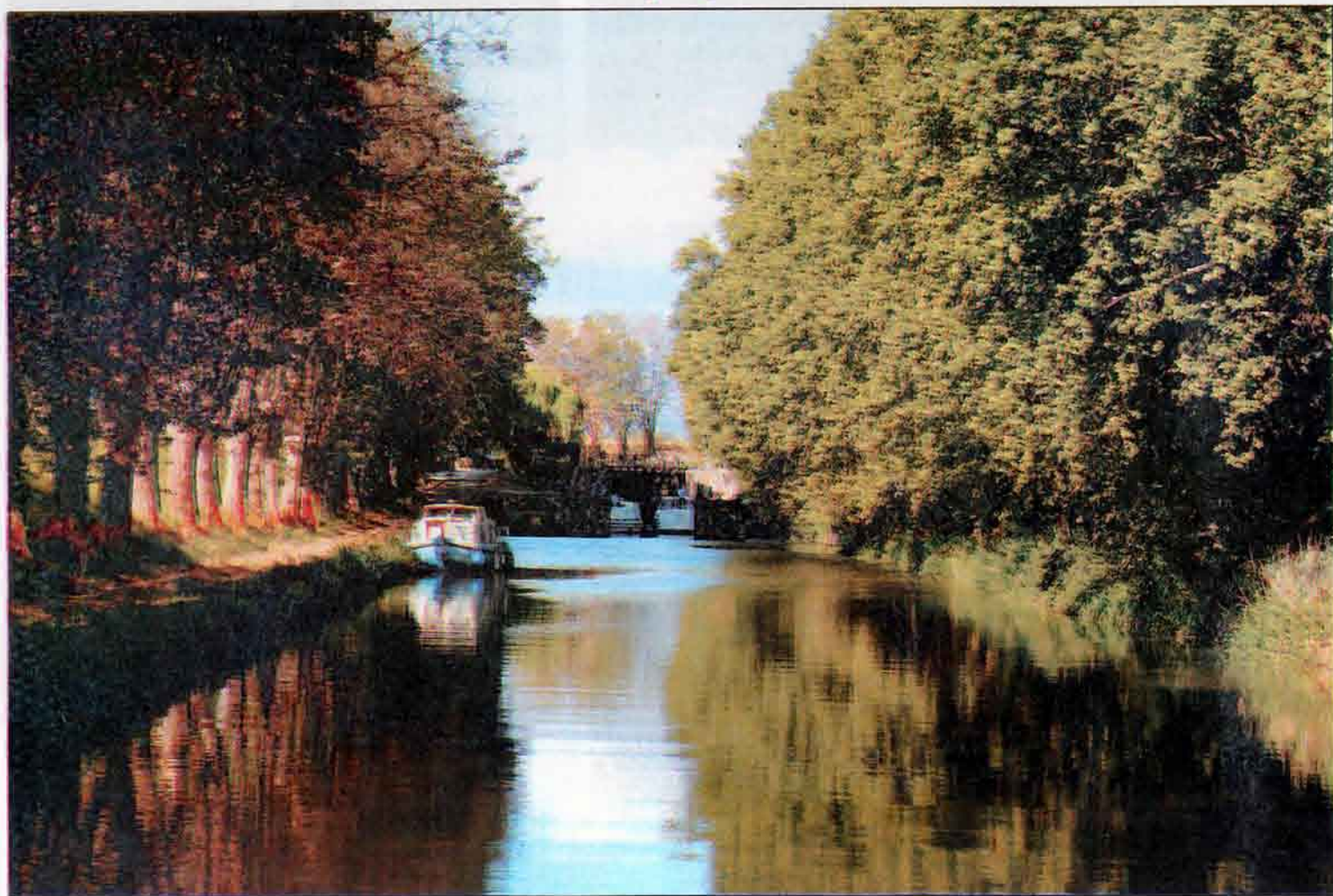


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ANDREA KITAY PHOTOS

The placid waters of a canal in France ensure serene cruising for passengers aboard the Adrienne.

Sightseeing in slow motion

Barge trip in France puts passengers adrift in the beauty of the land

By Anne Z. Cooke | FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

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. "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."



Crew members prepare the Adrienne for departure.

Passengers relax on the prow deck.



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.

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.

Our days aboard the Adrienne were an empty canvas free of family issues, obligations and chores. As the morning sun

See **BARGE** Page **F2**

Couples embrace tying knot at 20 knots

By Si Liberman

FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Wedding ceremonies aboard cruise ships are increasing at a surprising rate, according to the Cruise Line International Association, the trade group for 25 major cruise lines.

More couples, including same-sex pairings, are going that route, buying packages for weddings or civil unions and getting built-in honeymoons.

Carnival played Cupid last year to more than 2,000 couples who purchased its varied wedding deals. And the line expects that figure to increase by 10



An onboard wedding ceremony can range from as little as \$725 to \$2,500.

percent this year, spokesman Vance Gulliksen said.

As for gay ceremonies, Gulliksen said the cruise line performs same-sex weddings in waters where they are sanctioned.

Same-sex marriages are now sanctioned in seven states — Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont and Washington — as well as Washington, D.C.

An onboard marriage or civil ceremony can range from as little as \$725 to \$2,500, depending on the cruise line and package selected.

The \$725 package on the Italian MSC cruise line buys the service of a cruise officer, use of a decorated private room, recorded wedding music, a floral bouquet for the bride, a sponge cake decorated with chocolate hearts and the names of the bride and groom, a bottle of sparkling wine, a photographer for one hour and a symbolic wedding certificate.

On Princess vessels, \$2,250 (which includes the \$450 marriage license fee) covers use of a wedding coordinator, a candlelit ceremony officiated by the ship's captain in the wedding chapel, live music, floral arrangements plus a rose bouquet for the bride and a boutonniere for the groom, a photographer's services and selection of photographs, a wedding cake, champagne, two glasses and a keepsake wedding certificate.

Aside from the prices, the details of wedding packages are mostly similar on Carnival, Disney, Holland America, Norwegian and Royal Caribbean ships.

If you're interested in a cere-

See **WEDDINGS** Page **F3**



ANDREA KITAY PHOTOS

Private barges come in all shapes and colors on the canals in France.

BARGE

FROM PAGE F1

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.

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.

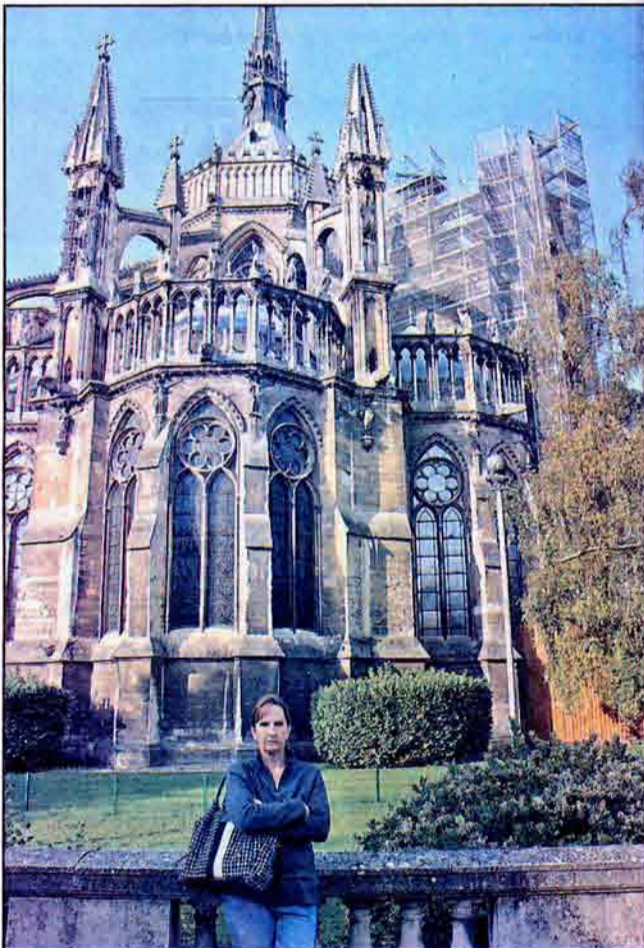
Portholes provided light and air, and the baroque-style furnishings suggested an earlier age. We found drawers and an ample closet, and even space to hide the luggage. The only thing missing was onboard Internet service — a relief, I thought.

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.

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.



Vineyards dominate the view in the Champagne region of France.



Reims is famous for its cathedral, built in the Middle Ages.

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 Moët & 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,

If you go

BARGE CRUISING

Those cruising with French Country Waterways on the Champagne cruise fly to Paris and spend a night before being picked up and taken to the deck at Maizy or Chateau-Thierry.

The cruise ends at Chalons-en-Champagne.

The cruise runs from July through November. Rates start at \$5,295 in the shoulder season. Cruise travel agents or cruise websites may offer better rates. All meals, wine, tours and transfers to and from the barge are included.

Call 1-800-222-1236 or visit www.fcwl.com.

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.

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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