

Leisure & luxury in the Loire

Jeannine Williamson savours life and gourmet food in the slow lane on a beautiful barge

It was a head-turning sight from every angle as Apres Tout nosed gently onto the Briare Canal Bridge with skipper Rory Macrae expertly guiding the vessel through the waterborne 'eye of a needle' with hardly any distance on either side.

Passers-by stopped to take photographs of us - well, in reality the gleaming blue barge - while we took pictures of the spectacular views as we traversed the narrow 2,170ft span over the River Loire. Built in 1896, until 2003 it was the world's longest navigable aqueduct before the opening of the Magdeburg



Water Bridge across Germany's Elbe. It was one of many highlights, in this instance a literal one, during a wonderful week sailing along the Canal Lateral a la Loire, which runs alongside the namesake river.

The leisurely cruise took us from Nevers - where the scene for the ensuing days was set with Champagne and canapes served on the immaculate teak deck - to Briare, a new itinerary for 2019 on the barge that began life in in the 1950s transporting grain through Burgundy. After 20 years working on upmarket French holiday barges Rory and his wife Caroline, a cordon bleu chef, decided to take the proverbial plunge to run their own business "after all these years" - hence the name Apres Tout, meaning after all.

The 124ft barge had already been converted into a hotel boat but was in a very sorry state when they found it up for sale at the side of the Burgundy's Canal du Bourgogne where it had languished for several years. They set about refurbishing it and today it carries just six passengers in style, with well-equipped cabins, a cosy indoor dining room and salon and, the piece de resistance, a gorgeous teak deck with an al fresco dining table, shady canopy that cleverly lowers to go beneath bridges, ultra-comfortable chairs which turn into loungers and a hot tub.

Putting their own stamp on barge cruising after years of working for a large corporate, Rory and Caroline offer a choice of itineraries plus bespoke and special interest breaks. Even scheduled sailings can be adapted and if passengers want to skip a planned excursion then something else can be arranged, or if they fancy a particular food or drink then it will duly arrive at the table. In fact, nothing is too much trouble.

That said, we were more than happy to go with the flow. Aply led by Glen, the resident guide, driver and wine expert during our cruise, our first day began with a stroll through Apremont, nestled on the banks of the Allier River and worthy of its title as one of the prettiest villages in France. Afterwards there was free time to enjoy the quirky Parc Floral, with its fun follies, water features and stunning themed flower beds.

In between scenic sailing along the canal, there was something different to enjoy every day. All excursions are exclusive to Apres Tout passengers and we sipped the region's famous Poilly-Fume wines on private vineyard tours and tastings. At Chateau de Tracy it was fascinating to discover the estate could trace its roots back to a 15th century Scottish noble family.

Another day we walked through the charming streets of the hilltop town of Sancerre and another excursion was a very unusual trip taking in the towering rafters and roof space of the grand Chateau de Saint-Fergeu with a visit to some of the rooms, including one filled with nostalgic and evocative old toys.

Back on the barge we variously relaxed on deck



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with an ever-present cocktail to hand, strolled along the canalside or worked up an appetite for the next meal - never far away - by cycling along the tow path or into sleepy nearby villages on one of the on board bikes.

As Apres Tout moves at a walking pace there's never any pressure to hurry to keep up, and Rory can pull in at any of the locks when you decide it's time to climb back aboard. In fact, a canal cruise really is the fastest way to slow down and leave behind everyday life as you sail along at a stately pace. We might have only covered just over 60 miles, but we gained a wealth of experiences along the way and formed friendships, kept up on return, with our amiable fellow passengers. The atmosphere is relaxed and informal and Rory and Caroline are the most delightful hosts.

Easily on a par with all the sights is Caroline's sublime catering. Days begin with fresh baguettes and pastries from the nearest village bakery, and all manner of other delights, followed by a buffet lunch and four-course dinner. Different wines and cheeses accompany lunch and dinner and appetites are honed even further by beautifully hand illustrated menus set out in the morning. It's no surprise that many passengers ask about Caroline about her recipes and as a result she has written a cookbook, which is a great souvenir to take home.

With a sailing season from April to October, Apres Tout originally cruised in Burgundy and in 2018 it was partially relocated to the Loire to provide an alternative itinerary. In 2020 there will be brand new sailings in Alsace.

Rory and Caroline invested months of TLC transforming the once neglected barge into a beautiful vessel and now they put the same care and attention to detail into caring for their passengers - many of whom return year after year to savour life in the slow lane on the tranquil French waterways.



Above left: dining on deck. Left: Caroline preparing lunch. Left: Caroline and Rory. Opposite page: Apres Tout on the canal.



Factfile

In 2019 Apres Tout will sail in the Loire and Burgundy and begin a new itinerary in Alsace in 2020.

Six-night cruises cost \$6,500 (prices converted to sterling at time of booking) and fares include all food, wine and an open bar, excursions and transfers to and from Paris.

Whole boat charters and bespoke cruises are also available.

For further details call +33 686 890318 or visit www.bargeaprestout.com.