

Business

Book your trip in Naples, cruise canals of France

■ Couple live here part time, steer booming business

By Kalhan Rosenblatt

George Kovalick was bored with retirement.

So rather than play golf or sit at the beach, Kovalick, and his wife Susan, decided to buy the Meanderer — a 1948 Belgian “spitz” commercial barge converted into a lavish luxury barge-hotel.

Now, the couple spend half a year offering week-long trips down the canals of France, about 70 miles south of Paris, to six guests at a time.

The Kovalicks bought the boat after George Kovalick retired from the travel industry in 2007, and, three years ago, they moved to Naples to set up the headquarters for the luxury barge’s booking office.

“In the winter from the end of October to the beginning of April, we’re in Naples,” Kovalick said. “And that’s our booking time. The barge industry books as far as a year in advance. Most of the marketing sales and the management of the preparations are done in the U.S., so Naples is the natural place to move our residence and office.”

The Kovalicks spend six months in France working on the barge and tailoring customized trips for their clients, including an on-board personal chef, a spa and a breath-taking view of the French county as it glides past. Trips cost between \$5,200 and \$32,900 depending on the package, according to the Meanderer’s website.

With the exception of a six-week stint in New York City, the rest of their time is spent in Naples.

Kovalick says Naples has the



COURTESY OF GEORGE AND SUSAN KOVALICK

Meanderer’s clientele and makes the yearly commute to France easier.

“We market to the American tourists and customers. We know America best. I’ve lived in the U.S. for 46 years and my wife for almost 30. Americans are our compatriots and that’s the fun we have,” said George Kovalick, referring to his French and his wife’s English heritage.

Since moving the Meanderer’s headquarters to Naples, George Kovalick said business has never been better.

“Barging is one of the fastest growing industries,” he said. “Our barge, as well as other barges in France, are having the best year this year.”

While business skyrockets with customers in the U.S., George Kovalick says he will not be bringing the Meanderer to the states any time soon.

“The program is not transferable to the U.S.,” he said. “Anything done on the water in the United States is done in the open water, like the Gulf of Mexico, the Pacific or the Atlantic. That’s not something I would like to do. Barging in France is unique. It has a taste that doesn’t exist in any other attraction.”

While the Meanderer still has some communications offices in France, George Kovalick has no plans to move its headquarters out of Naples.

“It’s been a great success and a fantastic adventure for us,” he said.