



## ***Explore France with ease aboard a river cruise.***

BY DANA FREEMAN

**I**t should come as no surprise that France is one of the most visited countries in the world. It is a destination begging to be explored, filled with glamorous cities, charming villages and copious amounts of fine French wine and cheese. This diverse nation has 18 different regions to discover, each with its own unique highlights. So whether you're paying your first visit to France or your 10th, take the guesswork out of planning your next trip to France by booking a luxury river cruise.

Allowing you to visit multiple destinations in a short amount of time, sailing on a small

floating boutique hotel is an elegant, hassle-free way to see the country. You'll board the ship, unpack once and then comfortably unwind as you cruise from one destination to the next. You can visit an entire region in one week without the burden of having to move hotels or arrange transportation between cities. Plus, most food, beverages and excursions are included in the fare, so there is no worry about going over budget. There really is no easier way to experience and discover all that France has to offer with your spouse, family or a group of friends.

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From the City of Light to the vineyards of Bordeaux, any of these stress-free, luxury river cruises will make it easy for you to explore one of the world's most beautiful and romantic countries.



***Itinerary: The Upper Loire Valley on the Barge Meanderer***

Barge cruising is one of the most intimate, leisurely and luxurious ways to see the French countryside. Unlike larger river cruise ships, luxury hotel barges can only accommodate from two to 24 passengers, and they sail on small canals in the interior of the country. These voyages include a private chef, excursions, food and wine, and ground transportation. With the exception of gratuities, everything is included. Itineraries take place in rural areas, providing authenticity and total immersion in a region.



With a crew of five, the guest-to-staff ratio is almost one-to-one. Your English-speaking Captain Declan is your guide for the week. He is quite the historian, as well as personable and extremely entertaining. Chef John prepares gourmet French cuisine for all three meals, including a fabulous four-course dinner every evening. Along with the pilot and two hostesses, the crew makes you feel like the Meanderer is your home for the week.

Daily excursions on the Meanderer take you to prominent historical landmarks in the Loire

Valley, such as the Palace of Fontainebleau, once home to French royalty and Napoleon Bonaparte, and to smaller off-the-beaten-path places like the Faïencerie de Gien, where they have been producing fine china since 1821. Additionally, you will go wine tasting in Sancerre, visit châteaux and have the opportunity to shop in several small villages and towns. And since it's just you and your fellow passengers on these outings, every day it feels like you are on a private tour.



One of the best parts about Barge cruising is the opportunity to hop off and get some exercise every day. As Meanderer floats slowly along the Canal de Briare, just a few feet from the bank, you are welcome to disembark and walk or use their bikes to ride along the towpath.