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## An Anniversary Cruise in the French Countryside on the 6-passenger Meanderer Barge

BY BETHANY HUNKELE | OCTOBER 8, 2018



**M**y husband and I recently celebrated our 13<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary onboard the beautiful Meanderer barge, peacefully cruising along the canals of central France. Barge cruising has long been a niche specialty of Frontiers, and I was so excited to be able to experience my first week-long cruise together to commemorate our special occasion.





We began our adventure flying to Paris, and enjoying a night at the luxurious Relais Christine hotel. Tucked away on a quiet side street on the Left Bank, we were greeted warmly and shown to a beautiful garden suite with patio access to a green grass courtyard. Sitting on the peaceful patio with a glass of wine in hand, you would never realize that you were in the very center of Paris! Steps down the street however, you are at the Seine River's edge in the midst of central Paris. We enjoyed walking around the city and taking in all of the classic sights.

Our cruise began with the hospitable and friendly owners of Meanderer, George and Susan Kovalick, collecting us and four other guests at a central hotel in Paris, providing direct transportation in their Mercedes minivan to the barge.

Upon arrival, we were greeted by five crew members who showed us to our cabins and explained all of the room amenities. After settling into our room, we headed to the sun deck, for a champagne reception.



We didn't know it at the time, but the talented crew members would end up being the hidden gems that made our cruise so memorable. As we sipped on champagne and enjoyed fresh strawberries (picked right from the barge's potted plants on deck), Chef Martin gave us an



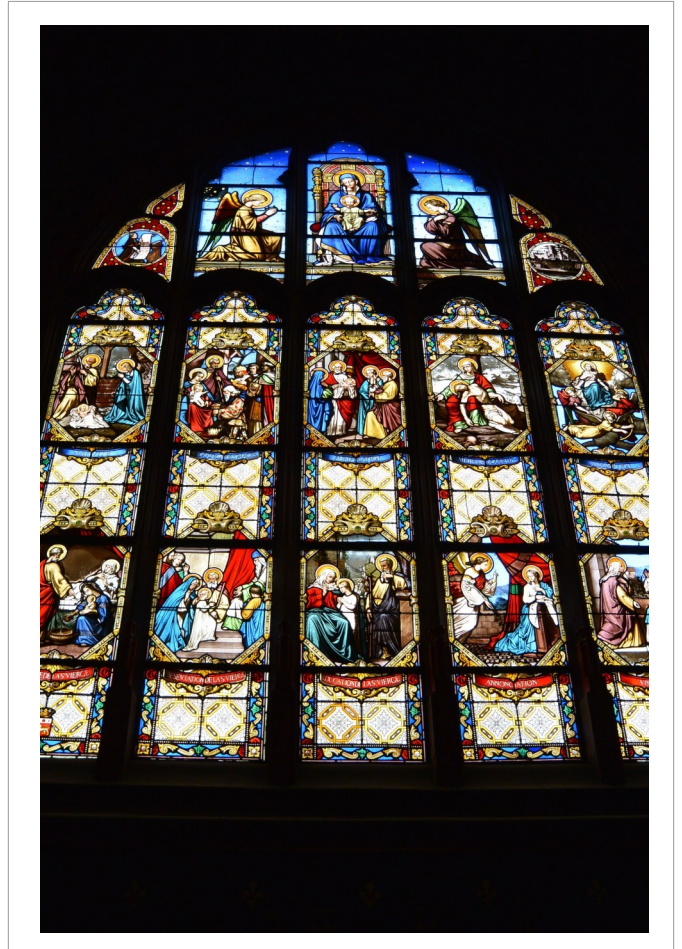
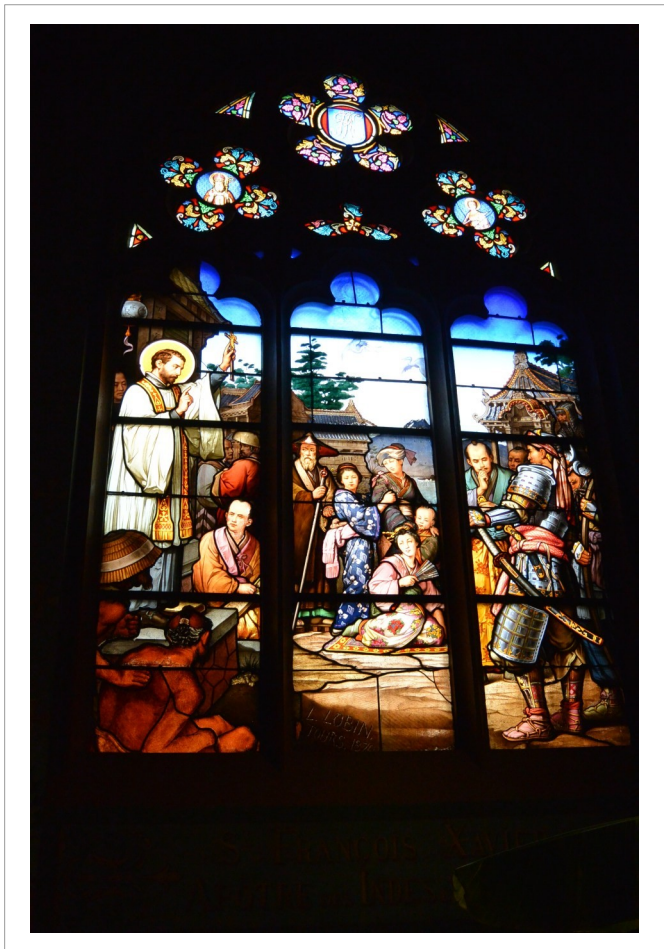


overview of the culinary highlights of our week, and reconfirmed that he understood any food allergies and dietary restrictions onboard. Having food allergies myself, I was extremely relieved to hear Martin say that he would have no difficulties at all in tailoring meals to suit my needs.

During the course of the week's cruise, we experienced exhilarating excursions which were equally coupled with relaxation and leisure time. Among the sights we visited were two chateaux, including one that permitted a tour of the attic to see how the castle was built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We also climbed a historic tower in the medieval hilltop town of Sancerre, followed by a well-deserved wine tasting. We visited the famous faience pottery factory in Gien where we watched the craftsmen make their famous plates and vases and browsed their remarkable shop for gifts to bring home.



My husband and I both agree that our visit to the church in Montargis had the most stunning and intricately designed stained-glass windows that we have ever seen, and this was followed by a stop at the delightful praline



shop in town with endless samples! There was enough free time built into the trip, that we had plenty of opportunities to take the barge's bikes for rides on the towpaths and into the local towns to do some exploring all on our own. Finding our way by ourselves through a forested path to arrive at a beautiful, medieval church in Rogny-les-Sept-Ecluses was a particular treat as it was an adventure shared just between us!

While all of the experiences with the French locals were wonderful, the Meanderer crew members were the proverbial "glue" that held the trip together and made it truly a magical experience for us. Declan, the manager onboard the barge, made sure that everything ran smoothly and had an uncanny knack for gracious hospitality, whether it was bringing me a blanket while I sat outside on a chilly morning, answering all of our group's questions on French life and culture, or even surprising us with a beautiful set-up at the Jacuzzi one evening with candles and our favorite beverages awaiting.

His wife Aisling was the hostess, and she made sure that our dining table was simply elegant and that our cabins and linens were always fresh. Akim and Matus, our pilot and matelot, were two of the most likeable people, never minding when we wanted to try our hand at steering the barge. I had to laugh when my husband first took the wheel and didn't do such a great job steering – Akim calmly got the barge back on track and the smile never left his face as he asked my husband to try it again.



A filet of cod with a saffron risotto made for me by Martin.

Last but not least, Martin's cooking was truly amazing. As dining and experiencing local cuisine is an important aspect of a barge cruise, due to my dietary restrictions and allergies, I was worried that I wouldn't enjoy the culinary treats as much as other guests. I couldn't have been more wrong! For every dish he served that was on my list to avoid, Martin made sure I received a plated entrée or similar starter created specifically for me.



One evening he prepared a heavenly (per my husband) pork dish with carrot puree and a mustard sauce, but for me, he created zucchini with the same delicious accompaniments. The crème de le crème was the surprise anniversary celebration that the crew had for us on the last night of the cruise. They presented us with a beautiful heart-shaped anniversary cake for dessert, champagne, and personalized cards. Our time spent on the Meanderer barge was beyond memorable and made even better by the personalized attention from the crew members.

Returning to Paris, my husband and I stayed on the Right Bank at the beautiful Hotel Regina in a Junior Suite with a Louvre Museum and Eiffel Tower view on the fifth floor.

After settling into our room and having a glass of wine, we realized that **we didn't want to leave** – with our windows open, we could hear the atmosphere of central Paris's sounds and excitement below while watching the Eiffel Tower twinkle in the distance. I think we can safely say that this anniversary trip will be hard to beat

