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European Barge Cruises That Are Anything But Boring

By Sara Tucker
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Hotel barges have a sleepy reputation, but the itineraries on these vessels pair just enough lazy-river idleness with sporty excursions



BARGE AND IN CHARGE The charter-only Meanderer, a luxury French barge, can customize itineraries for cyclists.

SMALL, flat-bottomed and slow-moving, hotel barges can access some of Europe's most beautiful rural areas, navigating 19th-century canals that are off-limits to larger boats. Carrying a handful of passengers, six to 12 at the most, they have a high crew-to-guest ratio: The captain picks you up at the train station; the chef pops out of the kitchen to

chat about cheese platters. With free-flowing wine included in the price, you won't go hungry or thirsty on a barge cruise, nor lonely or seasick. You might, however, get bored.

The scenery rolls by glacially at 3 to 4 miles per hour, walking speed. You can read an entire page of your book and not miss a thing. For recreation, you'll find bicycles for onshore exploration, a towpath, maybe a hot tub; a game of Scrabble in case of rain. Once a day, everyone piles into a minibus and goes to a castle, a winery or a medieval monastery. Then it's time to eat again.

On the Canal du Midi, you can play tennis and visit Roman ruins.

This laid-back regimen, for all its charms, tends to turn off restless travelers. The solution: barges with itineraries that let sporty types exert themselves enough to fend off tedium. Some programs are available only to groups that charter a barge. Other outings, such as a bicycle excursion to a wine château

or a day of golf, can be arranged on certain barges even if you reserve a single cabin. To book a cruise, contact the boat captain (check the website for email addresses) or an agent who knows all the operators (some 70 hotel barges ply the waterways in Europe) like Barge Lady Cruises, based in Chicago. Either way: Specify your desired diversions. Here, a few ideas of where and how to beef up a barge cruise.



Photo: Tom Texier

Cycling for Sancerre

France, the country where hotel barging was invented (by an Englishman in 1966), has the most active options for barge travelers, many aimed at family groups that include grandparents and teenage children. “It’s about keeping the kids occupied,” said Penny Liley, a boat owner who introduced family-adventure cruises to the Nivernais Canal, in northern Burgundy, with activities such as trail riding on horseback, rock climbing, and kayaking on the River Yonne. Both the Nivernais and the Canal de Bourgogne, in southern Burgundy, are lined with cycling routes that fan out across the gently rolling countryside. On the Canal du Midi in Provence you can play tennis and visit Roman ruins in one fell swoop, and on the Canal de Briare, you can pedal to the vineyards of Sancerre for winetasting.

BARGE TO BOOK The **Meanderer**, a six-passenger barge, is captained by an avid cyclist and offers golf and bicycling excursions in the Upper Loire. *From \$5,875 per person for a six-night cruise; bargemeanderer.com.*