discover

Sharing our love for France's spectacular waterways

Burgundy

Pretty riverside villages, histories of duchies, iconic rooflines, exceptional gastronomy and some of the world's best wines
Barging in Burgundy

YOUR COMPLETE GUIDE
TO THE PERFECT CANAL CRUISE

- Why choose Burgundy
- Canal du Bourgogne
- Canal du Nivernais
- When to go
- How to cruise
- Contact us

Burgundy is an unspoilt gem in the centre of France, but often a place that visitors speed through on their way to the Alps or the south - a treasure overlooked.

It is a region of kingdoms and duchies awash with history, stretching 100 miles southeast of Paris as far as Macon and covering some of the greatest wine growing areas in the world. It is also highly regarded for its gastronomic prowess having the highest concentration of Michelin starred restaurants in the world. With verdant pastures, rolling hills and plenty of sunshine, it's no surprise that Burgundy remains an eternal must-see destination.

Ruth & the team
A GREAT CANAL NETWORK

Burgundy is not just renowned for its food and drink; it also has one of the most extensive canal networks.

The enchanting Nivernais Canal meanders south from Auxerre to Digoin, skirting the western side of the Morvan hills. Meanwhile the Canal du Bourgogne, which starts in Laroche Migennes, flanks the east and runs down to St Jean de Losne.

It is possible to do a circuit of the two of them and enthusiastic boaters can complete it in around three weeks. If you want to try your hand at one of France’s great rivers, the sleepy Saône skirts the southern reaches of this region.
Why visit?

SCENERY & CLIMATE

- Temperate climate
- Stunning scenery
- Colourful history
- Local produce & cuisine
- The world’s most famous wines

Not as hot as the south, nor as rainy as the west, Burgundy has a mild, humid, temperate climate, with no real dry season and an average of 250 hours of sunshine a month in June, July and August.

It’s a misty, mellow, fruitful place that attracts wine lovers and pilgrims alike - one of the famed routes to Santiago de Compostela begins in Burgundy, at Vezelay. The scenery that beckons you onwards, the rolling vineyards topped with ancient châteaux, is one of the key attractions of the area.

COLOURFUL HISTORY

As a region, Burgundy is drenched in history: during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Hundred Years’ War was waged between England and France.

The French King Jean II gave the dukedom of Burgundy to his son Philip the Bold who quickly established a court to rival his father’s. Meanwhile, the English King Henry V formed an alliance against the French with one of Jean’s successors, Philip the Good.

The legacy of the conflict between these two warlike factions is written into the Burgundian landscape even today, in its castles and abbeys, its small farms and village churches, all of which had their own fortifications, and the effect is one of ancient (and photogenic) charm.
It’s a fertile region, with the sharp escarpment of the Cote d’Or perfect for growing vines and the sweeping valleys ideal for cereal and cattle farming. The pale Charolais cows dotted in the lush fields are a great feature of this part of France. Such abundance has led to the growth of an unrivalled cuisine – not just Boeuf Bourgignon, but Coq au Vin and the ubiquitous Escargots (garlicky snails) all originate here.

There are markets galore. One of our favourites takes place in the south, in the beautiful timbered square of the Place St Vincent near the cathedral in Chalon sur Saône. It is held on Fridays and Sunday mornings and the fruit, vegetables and delicious local cheeses are cheaper than in more touristy Dijon and Beaune.

For Michelin-starred restaurants, Joigny just north of Auxerre on the Yonne river is home of the legendary Côte St Jacques, domain of the renowned chef John-Michel Lorain who boasts two Michelin stars at the moment but has achieved the giddy heights of three in previous years. It’s pricey, but the food is unforgettable.

If you are cruising the Burgundy canal and eating out on a more modest budget, you can’t go wrong at the L’Auberge de Marronnier in Châteauneuf en Auxois, but truth be told, almost any self-respecting Burgundy village will have a restaurant or café serving up regional delicacies like Confit de Canard, accompanied by decent house wines, and small towns such as Clamecy on the Nivernais have an embarrasement de richesse – La Gondola, Hostellerie de la Poste and L’Angelus are all highly rated.
The very word Burgundy denotes the rich colors and velvety textures of its most famous vintages - think Gevrey Chambertin, Clos de Vougeot, Pommard, Volnay and Aloxe Corton.

The Romans were the first to plant vines in Burgundy and in the sixth century the ruler King Gutram granted some vineyards to the church. Over the ensuing centuries the monks perfected their techniques and in 1336, nearly seven hundred years ago, the Cistercians walled in their vines, establishing what is now Burgundy’s largest enclosed vineyard, the Clos de Vougeot.

One of today’s most popular grape varieties, Pinot Noir, was first mentioned (as Noiret) in 1370. In the 14th century, Philip the Bold declared that the Gamay grape wasn’t fit for human consumption, most people preferring wine produced from the Fromenteau grape, close to today’s Pinot Gris, while Chardonnay didn’t feature in Burgundian vineyards until the 18th century. Gradually, vineyard ownership passed from the church to the nobility, but many large estates were broken up after the French Revolution. Napoleon’s change to inheritance laws also meant that children had to inherit equal amounts from their parents, with the result that vigneron were forced to make a living from smaller and smaller parcels of land. This led to the development of the role of the Négociant, who brought groups of small producers together to produce a single wine.

If you are travelling through Burgundy on a luxury hotel barge or a small self-drive hire boat, you will have the chance to discover the gamut of some of the world’s finest wines, starting with Chablis to the north of the region. The mild climate and chalky soil provide the perfect conditions for growing Chardonnay grapes with high acidity and not much fruitiness, giving Chablis wine its characteristic dry, mineral taste. The ancient town itself is a treat to explore and if you are daunted by visiting some of the more exclusive producers, try the cooperative La Chablisienne where the welcome is warm and the wine wonderfully cool (and affordable).
When cruising down the Burgundy canal, be sure to take in the regional capital Dijon, a short hop from the vinicultural capital of Beaune. The latter is an excellent hub for exploring the world class vineyards nearby. Every November since 1859, the Hospice de Beaune wine auction has drawn thousands of eager purchasers, collectors and investors through its doors and the funds raised all go to charity. Among the celebrated vineyards in the area, you might want to visit Romanée-Conti, the jewel of the Côte de Nuits, currently producing 6,000 bottles a year of the most expensive wine in the world, which can be kept for between 20 and 40 years.

Another of the greats is Pommard, named after Pomona, the ancient goddess of gardens, while nearby Corton and Corton-Champagne are both named after emperors (Curtis d’Othon and Charlemagne respectively). The latter is one of the area’s finest white wines, another is Meursault, where Cistercian monks began production in the 11th century. The name Meursault derives from muris saltus, the ‘mouse-leap’ stream of the Ruisseau des Cloux, so named by Roman soldiers. We had a particularly kind welcome from vigneron Pascal Bouley, in the spellbindingly pretty village of Volnay, and took home a couple of bottles to keep for a very special occasion.

As you cruise further south enjoying the slow pleasures of the wide Saône river, the wines of Beaujolais and Macon are worth discovering. These are mostly made from the Gamay grape and are generally lighter than their Burgundy neighbours, but bottles of Moulin à Vent, Juliénas and Fleury, not to mention Pouilly Fuissé, can hold their own on any wine lover’s table. George Duboeuf, one of the best known négociants in France, established his wine merchant’s business in Romanèche-Thorens, where you can visit the world’s first theme park for wine and viticulture and learn all you need to know about the production of the world’s favourite drink.
The Canal de Bourgogne itself is an awe inspiring example of pre-Industrial Revolution engineering: begun in 1775 when the digging was done by hand, it is 242 kilometres long and has 189 locks. At its highest point, Pouilly en Auxois, a tunnel of over 3,000 metres long had to be dug through challenging terrain at the cost of approximately 200 lives.

The waterway was opened to commercial traffic in 1832, but only 20 years later the first railway link between Paris and Marseilles was finished and provided a swifter means of transporting large amounts of freight, so that the Burgundy Canal never quite fulfilled its commercial promise.

The upside of this is that it remains virtually unspoilt as it wends its way through two of the most beautiful departments in France: the Yonne and the Cote d’Or.
Semur-en-Auxois

An irresistibly pretty town whose ancient fortress looks down over the River Armançon. Its medieval vistas have proved to be a huge attraction for artists and photographers. If you visit in late May or early June you will be able to witness France’s oldest horse race, the Course de la Bague, which was first run in 1639.
**Pontigny Abbey**

When it was completed in 1150 this magnificent Cistercian Abbey with its elegant gothic choir was a magnet for English pilgrims, including Archbishops Thomas à Beckett and Stephen Langton and continues to attract admiring visitors to this day.

**Tonnerre**

Home of the Fosse Dionne (an ancient lavoir that can be traced back to Roman times) Tonnerre also has a spectacular medieval hospital (Hotel-Dieu) dating back to the 13th century, which now houses a museum. The Tonnerre vineyards are famous for their white burgundy wine. A good entry level white Burgundy can be found at the Château de Vaulichères – we loved its lemony, saline taste.

**Tanlay and Ancy-le-France**

The château at Tanlay with its romantic moat and famous tromp l’oeil frescoes and the impressive château at Ancy-le-Franc, which is an Italian renaissance jewel of the 16th century, are both a testament to the former wealth and power of the region and should not be missed.

**Forge du Buffon**

Funded by the famous French naturalist George Louis Leclerc, Compte de Buffon, in 1768, this beautifully preserved iron works is regarded by some as the cradle of the French industrial revolution – it’s a riveting piece of social and cultural history.
Fontenay Abbey

The abbey was built by St Bernard of Clairvaux in 1118 and, as the oldest preserved Cistercian monastery in the world, is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The stunning limestone cloisters are the perfect place to find shade and tranquillity on a hot summer’s day.

Châteauneuf-en-Auxois

A relic of the Hundred Years War, the château is an excellent example of the military architecture characteristic of the 14th century and a beautiful medieval town is clustered around it. When you have wandered around the narrow streets and visited the various craft shops and cafes, head off to Vandenesse-en-Auxois, another stop on the waterway, where you will get the perfect view of the keep at Châteauneuf gazing down on the canal.

TOP TIP...

Gaze up at the Burgundian rooftops where since the 12th century richly coloured tiles arranged in intricate patterns were installed to confer status on the owners of the houses whose roots they graced.
Dijon

The ancient capital of the region is home to the ducal palace and provides one of the historical and architectural highlights of the area. Originally the official residence of the Dukes of Burgundy, it now houses the Musée des Beaux Arts, one of the largest museums in France, which features masterpieces by Titian, Veronese, Brueghel and Rubens. In the 17th century Dijon was granted exclusive rights to produce mustard, a skill that locals have honed down the years and nowadays the famous Dijon mustard adds a piquant note to the cuisine for which Burgundy is so well known.

Beaune

Well worth a short detour from the canal, Beaune is a major centre for viticulture but is equally famous for its ancient hospital with its dazzling glazed tiled roof. This houses Roger van der Weyden’s breath-taking medieval masterpiece The Last Judgement – worth the price of the admission ticket on its own.
One of the most treasured canals in the whole of France because it is small and intimate, with plenty to see and do along the way, the Nivernais links the Loire with the Seine, roughly following the course of the river Yonne. It is definitely one of our favourites. It is 174 km long and has 112 locks, most of them manned so there is plenty of help on hand.

Construction was begun in 1784 in order to float timber lashed together into rafts from the Morvan heathlands to provide Paris with wood for building and for fuel. The canal was also used to transport grain, stone and wine but its importance faded with the arrival of the railway.

**Auxerre**

The 13th century stained glass windows in the Cathedral St Etienne are a sight to behold and the Abbey St Germain, which was founded in the 6th century and boasts a 12th century steeple, provides a matching bookend to the cathedral. Another must-see is the stunning 17th century clock tower in the heart of the city. Our tip: there is a marked walk following in the footsteps of Cadet Rousselle, a court bailiff from Auxerre who had revolutionary leanings and about whom one of France’s most famous folk songs was written. It leads you to all the best sights in the town.
Bailly wine caves

The wine caves at Bailly are where a co-operative of 430 wine growers collaborate in making Burgundy’s fine sparkling wine, Crémant de Bourgogne. The underground cave is just a short distance from the canal and houses a permanent stock of five million bottles of wine – you won’t be able to resist a tasting and perhaps a further tipple back on board!

Rochers du Saussois

One of the prettiest moorings on the canal is at the foot of a striking limestone escarpment, perfect if you fancy some rock climbing although there is a path for the less agile, and from the summit you will see magnificent views for miles around. It’s also a nesting site for peregrine falcons - lovely excursion for nature lovers and family cruises.

ST BRIS...

is the closest village to Chablis and some of its fine white wine is grown in neighbouring fields but with a much smaller price tag.

TOP TIP...

The charm of the Nivernais canal isn’t so much the tourist towns or the châteaux you might see along the way; it’s popular because it is incredibly picturesque, it’s small scale and it’s quaint – it’s like sailing back to another age and in that sense, it can be a transformative journey.
Clamecy

Formerly a timber town and a key point for the shipping of logs to Paris, it is now an extremely pretty spot, packed with good restaurants and great opportunities for retail therapy. It’s the start or end point for some of the luxury hotel barges on this route.

Sardy Staircase

A flight of sixteen locks leading to the summit of the canal at Baye, although they are manually operated by VNF éclusiers, it’s still quite a workout and reaching the last one feels like a great achievement. Many of the former lock keepers’ cottages are now home to the galleries of potters, artists and craftsmen, so part of the fun is to hop off the boat and pick up the perfect present to take home.

TOP TIP...

Look out for the lavoirs – most villages still have their ancient wash houses built from limestone and fed by local streams, where the women used to gather under shelter to do the laundry with their friends. Most famous of them all is the Fosse Dionne in Tonnerre, but some other smaller examples are just as picturesque.
How to cruise?

**HOTEL BARGE ~ SELF DRIVE ~ RIVER CRUISE**

**Hotel barge**

Luxury barges are large, sedate and beautifully converted from vessels that used to carry cargoes of wine or wheat. Fully crewed, they offer all-inclusive cruises for those wishing to enjoy the finer things in life.

With just a handful of cabins, they offer a unique experience to share with a handful of fellow guests or you can take a whole boat charter for your own party. You’ll enjoy gourmet food, fine wines and a tailor-made itinerary if you charter one – then all you need do is relax and experience the ultimate in luxury afloat.

Top luxury barges include Grand Cru and C’est la Vie, while Luciole and Savoir Vivre offer excellent alternatives. Elisabeth and Randle, among others, provide more modest accommodation in this region.

**Self drive boat hire**

There are four operators with an excellent range of boats to choose from, so you are sure to find the ideal vessel to suit the size of your party (couples, families and groups of friends) and your budget. Whether you’re an experienced sailor or a complete novice, the canal is easy to navigate with friendly lock-keepers on hand to help.

Completely free to travel at your own pace, you can stop wherever you please. Stock up at local fresh-food markets, discover charming cafés and restaurants on the way. At every turn you’ll find mesmerising sites to see, fascinating history to explore and superb local wine to savour.

**River cruises**

The Saône river sweeps through Southern Burgundy from Beaujolais to Provence as a tributary of the Rhône, carrying passengers on luxurious river cruise liners to the major moorings in between.

Most river Saône-Rhône river cruises begin in Chalon-sur-Saône at the heart of Burgundian wine making. While Avignon often features as the final, most southerly point with excursions to Arles for those in search of its amphitheatre, sunflowers and some Van Gogh inspiration.
When to go?

ALL THE SEASONS

If you have a few days before or after your cruise you may be able to catch one or two of these spectacular events:

**Vezelay Music Festival**

In and around its famous Romanesque basilica this important town celebrates modern music and the classics with well-known singers and musicians from around the world. With wine tastings and street music as well as the more formal performances this is a joyful way for all the family to experience the kind of musical event that France does so well.

**When:** third week of August

**Beaune International Festival of Baroque & Romantic Music**

Visit the historic Hospices de Beaune for a festival of Baroque music that includes operas, concerts and recitals. The festival features re-discovered works by the famous and not so famous composers, performed by the musicians of tomorrow. And a special treat - sample a baroque buffet recreated from 17th and 18th-century cook books.

**When:** weekends throughout July

**Château de St Fargeau, Sound & Light Festival**

For children and adults alike this festival celebrates France's history each week-end when a cast of over 600 actors, all in period costume, convenes to introduce you to the famous characters from the past - D'Artagnan, Joan of Arc, French revolutionaries and many more. Hugely colorful and entertaining - not to be missed.

**When:** throughout July & August
If you’re ready to explore Burgundy, then we’re here to help (yes, we’re literally here in France, too).

With years of experience of both luxury hotel barging and self-drive boat hire on this unique waterway, we’re perfectly placed to find you your ideal cruise vacation.

Just contact Ruth and the team to get started.

Contact us

cruises@french-waterways.com
www.french-waterways.com

Our regional contact numbers:

USA  CANADA  +1 405 445 0350

AUSTRALIA  +61 3 9005 8569

UK  IRELAND  +44 7590 287178

FRANCE  +33 6 09 74 00 64