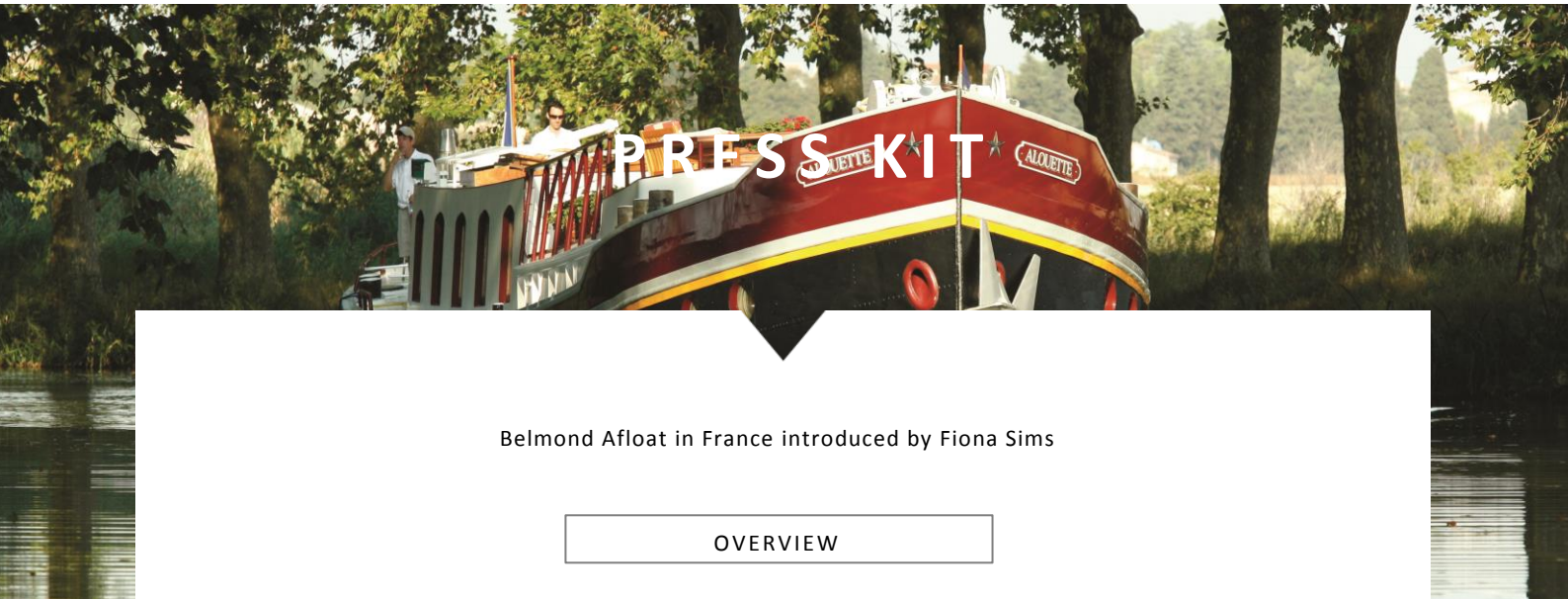



BELMOND
AFLOAT IN FRANCE
BURGUNDY



Belmond Afloat in France introduced by Fiona Sims

OVERVIEW

Belmond Afloat in France has redefined inland cruising with its fleet of luxury barges (or péniche hôtels, as they are known in France), which meander along the country's bucolic rivers and canals.

Operating from April to October, the barges wind sedately through various routes in Burgundy, Provence and Languedoc-Roussillon, stopping along the way for lunch with legendary wine producers, visits to vibrant markets in medieval villages, or a hike up to a Cathar castle perched on a craggy hilltop.

Guests can book an entire barge (or even two in tandem) for their own exclusive use, or simply sail on a per-cabin basis. It's the ultimate escape for family and friends, and a unique romantic getaway.

And this is barging with a difference – think en-suite bathrooms (some with baths), heated swimming pools, tastings of rare vintages, gourmet food, and antiques-decked interiors. There's even a grand piano on board one of the barges. And for guests who can't escape the real world there is Wi-Fi, and all the latest gadgets to hand.

There are customized itineraries to captivate all imaginations, and all ages, from truffle hunting and go-karting, to hot air ballooning and horse-riding. Or to just simply be — drifting effortlessly along, past banks of yellow irises and fields of lavender, crossing sun-drenched plateaus with doe-eyed Charolais cattle, past dramatic gorges and rosemary-scented garrigues, where daily life is dictated by the rhythm of the vineyard.

The Belmond Afloat in France team is passionate about wine. The barges pass by some of the world's most famous vineyards, so for those with an enthusiasm for the grape this is a paradise. There are wine experts on hand to guide guests through the finer points of the newly launched Wine Academy — and even help them to negotiate deals on rare vintages to take home.

Meet the Belmond Afloat in France barges. There's Belmond Alouette, which glides along the Canal du Midi from Carcassonne to Béziers, for up to four guests. Belmond Amaryllis hosts up to eight people and focuses on the vineyards, villages and cities of Burgundy, drifting from Dijon to St-Léger. And that grand piano can be found on Belmond Fleur de Lys, with its ornate fabrics and four-poster beds, carrying up to six passengers from Dijon to Vandenesse-en-Auxois. Belmond Hirondelle takes up to eight, from Dole to St-Léger, and boasts a chef who can teach guests how to cook local speciality dishes. And finally there is Belmond Napoléon, the company's biggest barge, accommodating up to 12 passengers – think lavish feasts, iconic wines and cocktails sipped under the stars.

Two new additions to the fleet, Belmond Lilas (Lilac) and Belmond Pivoine (Peony), launch in Alsace and Champagne respectively in summer 2017. The new barges will each accommodate eight guests in four luxurious cabins and offer six-night itineraries that include private visits to top vineyards, innovative breweries and grand chateaux.

HISTORY & BACKGROUND

In 1966 Richard Parsons, a Reuter's news reporter, had the idea to convert an old coal barge into a passenger ship accommodating 20 guests to travel along the French waterways. He had no idea that it would be the start of something special. It captured people's imaginations and they returned – in droves.

It didn't matter that back then French canals were often clogged with commercial traffic and barges had to wait in long queues for their turn in one of the many locks. It was all part of the charm, agreed the passengers, who revelled in the peace and quiet of the largely unexplored rivers and canals that Parsons chose to navigate.

Tales of their riverbank adventures reached American writer Emily Kimbrough, who became similarly hooked, writing about her experiences in a book called *Floating Island*, which extolled the virtues of barge cruising in France. Cue an influx of North Americans in search of this ultimate inland watery escape, demanding barges with better facilities. A new industry was born – welcome to the luxury French barge cruise.

Today there are hundreds of barges available to hire, and not just in France, but also in Holland, Ireland, England and Germany. They vary in comfort and in size, from four- to 20-passenger boats. But nothing is quite as luxurious as the Belmond Afloat in France fleet, which the company acquired in 2003.

The big draw is that it is, by necessity, a slow passage. So slow that passengers can often walk along the canals more quickly than the barge, as it drifts languorously past quiet villages, meadows with sunflowers and endless rows of plane trees, allowing precious time to contemplate the French waterways in all their beauty. The fragrances of France waft on the gentle summer breeze, from the heady scents of thyme, fennel and juniper to the intense aroma of tree-ripened peaches bought at the local market earlier that day.

EXPERIENCES

Grape Escape

The Belmond Afloat in France fleet cruises by some of the best vineyards in the world so it's entirely appropriate to make the most of the grape. The company has devised a range of wine-focused itineraries that include visits to top producers, private cellar tours, tastings of rare vintages and even lunch with a famous winemaker.

Belmond Fleur de Lys stops by top estates along the Canal de Bourgogne and the River Saône, and Belmond Napoléon travels through the heart of Provence, while guests can explore more vinous gems in the Languedoc on Belmond Alouette. But if wine is a particular passion, then connoisseurs will be attracted to La Semaine des Grands Crus.

Operating twice a year, the Grands Crus cruise weaves its sedate way along the famous Canal de Bourgogne, up the mighty River Saône and then on to the Canal du Centre and Dijon, leaving plenty of time to take in the famous Burgundy appellations, with their pocket-sized vineyards set in emerald green rolling hills. Along the way it passes Romanesque churches and monasteries, and picture-perfect stone-built villages perched on vine-grooved limestone escarpments.

What's so special about Burgundy? Wind back to the early Middle Ages, when monks controlled the vineyards - they created the first wine classification system here, so you could say that Burgundy is the father of terroir. Anyone who loves wine should make tracks here.

And there's nothing like a winery visit to bring the experience alive, especially when the owners are your hosts. Olivier Leflaive escorts guests around his cellars in Puligny-Montrachet, while Christine Drouhin shows off her Pinot Noir grapes at her family estate, Drouhin-Laroze, in Gevry-Chambertin.

A highlight is that guests get to taste every single one of the 33 Grands Crus along the way, with a little help from one of Belmond Afloat in France's accompanying wine experts. They will open doors, cellars and vineyards that are normally closed to the public, and guide guests through a line-up of wines with dinner both on board and at chateaux.

For those who want to learn more about wine, cue the Belmond Afloat in France Wine Academy. Founded in 2015, this immersive programme of talks and visits goes deep into the heart of Burgundy and its wines. Led by resident expert Pascal Wagner, guests explore the concept of terroir, get the lowdown on the grapes, and are helped to negotiate deals on vintages to take home. The Academy is available for charter groups of four or more, on Belmond Amaryllis, Belmond Fleur de Lys and Belmond Hirondelle.

Gastronomic adventures

One of the greatest pleasures of travel is dining out and discovering the local food. And when that destination is France, the enjoyment is magnified.

The markets alone are enough reason to visit, with vendors' tables laden with vibrant vegetables, where butternut squash cosies up to garlic and green beans on one stand, while on another intensely flavoured cured meats sit next to tangy, vine-wrapped cheeses. In Provence, add to that long sheets of pressed and dried red peppers, which add colour to dishes, while vast bunches of basil scent the air. So let Belmond Afloat in France be your guide.

Using the best ingredients, fresh from the market, cooked with precision according to local recipes, Belmond Afloat in France chefs ensure guests will remember every dish. Each dinner comes complete with carefully chosen wines to match. Guests can even accompany Belmond Afloat in France chefs to the market, where they will track down the most delicious produce, and offer tips on how to cook it.

Guests can also try their hand at cooking in the spacious open kitchens on Belmond Alouette and Belmond Hirondelle. There they can learn how to master French specialities such as tarte au citron and bourride (the local fish stew).

The towns and villages along the waterways are where visitors begin to truly understand the southern French kitchen, among the thyme- and rosemary-scented garrigues, where local cheese is wrapped in chestnut leaves and beef daube is brightened with slices of orange peel.

Any guest keen to discover the mysteries of that great Gallic delicacy, the black truffle, can join an organised hunt. Other gastronomic adventures include a visit to a working olive oil mill, with the chance to buy this aromatic "liquid gold" to take home.

Family time

There is much on offer for Belmond Afloat in France's younger guests. The Saône Valley might be famous for its stunning wines but there is fun to be had for children, and combining family interests is easier than you might think.

While in Dijon the Grey Poupon Mustard shop is a must-visit for grown-ups—but there is also a roller-skating park for youngsters and Jungle Kids, a raucous climbing and adventure centre. Anyone who still has energy to spare can cycle alongside the barge once they've returned.

At the village of Brazey, near the barging capital of Saint-Jean-de-Losne, guests can saddle up and set off at a trot through the sunflower-filled plains of the Saône Valley, or accompany the barge along the towpath at a sedate pace. Then there's the nearby waterpark, where the entire family can get their fill of thrills on the many slides and in the pools.

And all ages can't fail to be charmed by Burgundy's fairy-tale castle at La Rochepot, which can be explored before a visit to the Summer Bobsleigh Park in Le Creusot. While at Chalon, guests can try go-karting on an indoor circuit before cruising the town's bargain-filled antique shops and half-timbered houses.

And don't forget that lunch and dinner are always an entertainment with Belmond Afloat in France, with chefs at the ready to customise menus for the whole family. France is, of course, packed with Michelin-starred restaurants which actively welcome little ones.

PEOPLE

Nigel Bealing, General Manager

Nigel Bealing was born on a boat. Not literally of course, but the Belmond Afloat in France general manager has been mucking about on the water since boyhood, making regular trips from the family home in southern England out to the Channel Islands, and along the French coast. A top spot was – and still is – the picturesque port of Honfleur in Normandy, where he would head to his favourite bakery and stock up on buttery pastries.

So did Nigel always follow a career on the waves? Not to begin with; he started by working in the IT department of British Aerospace. “But it didn’t exactly ignite my passion,” he remembers. When he then took a job as a deckhand working on a hotel barge based in Dijon he didn’t look back, gaining his pilot’s license and then being promoted to captain.

In 2011 he was appointed captain of Belmond Amaryllis; he was later promoted to general manager of the Belmond Afloat in France fleet. He directs all the boats from his office on the banks of the river Saône in Saint-Jean-de-Losne, the barging capital of France.

“I’ll never tire of river life. I watch the world go by from my window,” he declares. And not many people can say that they drive through some of the best vineyards in the world on their way to work in the morning,” says Nigel, who loves to end his day with a glass of crisp crémant on his porch.

Desert island tittle? “It has to be Puligny-Montrachet. It’s such a treat. Though I’ll never manage to build up my own cellar, as I tend to drink everything I buy. But the team has huge amounts of fun tasting and buying the wines for our cruises,” he adds, showing off a bottle of Burgundy’s most highly sought-after wine, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Grand Cru, that he has just picked up for the next Grands Crus cruise on Belmond Amaryllis.

Jonathan Foschini, Tour Guide

How long have you been a tour guide?

I’ve been a guide for Belmond Afloat in France for 10 seasons now. I’m a linguist by training. I was brought up in French-speaking Canada, but I have an Italian father, so I grew up speaking French, Italian and English. Other languages came pretty easily to me, so I also speak fluent Spanish, German and Portuguese. So yes, I get to use my languages in this job, but I also get to delve into history, which is another passion.

Which is your favourite spot in this part of the world?

Burgundy is beautiful, certainly, but Provence is the most exciting region in France for me. It’s got everything, from a Roman temple in Nîmes and an amphitheatre in Arles, to vibrant markets bursting with colour and boasting such variety – and that’s just the vegetables.

Best aspect of your job?

Being a tourist myself, so I can discover new things to show our guests. I have to try everything out first, which I do in the winter months when the boats aren’t running.

Your latest discovery

A cooper I found in a little village south of Beaune. You can watch him making the barrels from scratch, and even get involved yourself. It’s such an important step in the winemaking process and one that people little understand. But it all begins to make sense when you see how the barrels are made, and the work that goes into them.

What’s your perfect day off?

Hanging out in Dijon. Every other week we do the turnaround there so I’ll go to a restaurant for lunch and eat favourite local specialities such as oeufs en meurette - poached eggs in red wine with lardons, and wash it down with a glass of Chorey-les-Beaune.