

BARGING ALONG THE MEUSE

THE LEISURELY PACE OF A BARGE CRUISE ALONG THE RIVER MEUSE WAS THE IDEAL WAY FOR **AL DEMERS** AND HIS WIFE ELLA TO ENJOY A RELAXED WAY OF LOCAL LIFE IN NORTHERN FRANCE

France has always had a special appeal to us. A previous trip had taken us to the southern French coast near the Spanish border and it left us with the desire to see more of the country. So we planned to spend a few weeks in Paris and then do a week long barge cruise on one of the northern rivers.

Like many travellers, we use the internet to do our trip planning. Tours and packages can work well for many but we love the flexibility of building our own itinerary. When you search the options for river cruising, you quickly realise that many offerings are really mini versions of ocean cruises. The focus is luxury and entertainment. The towns and cities will pass by as you sip your martinis and sample the canapés. Your barge will have every amusement that can be fitted in the space available. Ella and I wanted to touch, taste and smell the countryside and meet as many of the locals as we could. We had done the formal sea cruise with 'dress up' and grand dining – but in our hearts we are informal

travellers, comfortable in casual clothing and not needing constant care and attention.

Once we had our little Paris apartment booked on the banks of the Seine in the 9th Arrondissement, we searched on the net for river cruises. Many offerings fell into the 'up scale' category but we found a number that were more to our taste. We carried on going until we found the Barge Nilaya website.

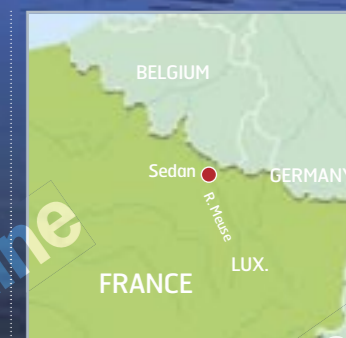
“NILAYA HERSELF WAS A GORGEOUS 1922 DUTCH MOTOR BARGE HOUSING THREE EN-SUITE CABINS, A SPACIOUS DINING SALOON AND WHEELHOUSE”

The phrase “informal fun, hands-on barge cruise” jumped out at us. Nilaya herself was a gorgeous 1922 Dutch motor barge converted specifically for cruising. With her dimensions of 24 metres by 4.5 metres, she housed three cabins with en-suite bathrooms, a spacious dining saloon, well-fitted galley and comfortable wheelhouse. Everyone does his or her part as 'guest crew', be it cleaning up after dinner, doing

some shopping or helping tie up. So we booked a week on the River Meuse starting at Sedan and ending at Verdun.

The River Meuse was an easy choice both for its history and scenic appeal. The river is in the northern corner of France close to the German border as well as Luxemburg. It flows through a corridor between France and Germany that has seen armies clash

back to mediaeval times. We'd see a mix of small cities, towns and villages, and as this region is largely agricultural, we would also have a glimpse of rural French life. It would be a great contrast after a teeming world-class capital like Paris. Nilaya, like other river barges, had a route it followed over the travel season that gradually worked its way across France to end at its winter lay-up point. So the traveller has a variety



WRITER PROFILE

NAME AL DEMERS

AGE 63

INFO Travelling and sharing his experiences with his wife Ella, Al's recent destinations include Mexico's Baja Peninsula, southern France, motor touring Pousadas in Portugal and taking a cruise on the Amazon.

things to remember.

ON BOARD THE BARGE

Check out disabled access, as some barges may not be equipped for special needs. Small children or pets may not be allowed due to safety concerns. Some barge operators may be able to provide special diets, so make sure you double check when you make your booking.

Check what footwear is required on deck and pack clothing ideal for both on board the particular barge you have selected as well as for any time spent ashore.

Make sure you bring enough film or memory, camera batteries and other essentials, as not all stops along the way will have them available.

PICKING YOUR CRUISE

Al and Ella used the internet to source barge operators, but research carefully to ensure the one you choose suits your needs. Ask for references and check them out before selecting the barge cruise that best suits your lifestyle.

There are a wide variety of barge routes available across France so pick the area that interests you the most.



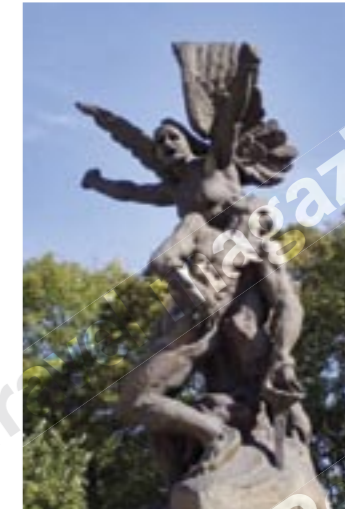
At the start of the trip in Sedan



The local Eclusier's maison



Local fishermen while away the hours



» of options as to different rivers and canals in various regions of France.

Our train left Gare de l'Est station in Paris headed west to Charleville. There we huffed our suitcases across to the opposite side of the tracks in the old station to catch the 'milk run' to Sedan. Oh to be 19 years old again with a backpack! It was a short trip in the old train car but a marked contrast to the comfort of a first class cabin out of Paris. That was all more than made up for when we arrived at Sedan and met our skipper Kevin who greeted us by waving a little Canadian flag. Kevin is an expat Briton with an extensive sailing background and a multitude of mariner's tickets both for Britain and France. His 'crew', Steph, had a similar background in sailing. The barge itself lived up to its billing. The cabins were comfortable and self-contained, and the vessel's refitting had been carefully thought out to create both an attractive and utilitarian interior.

Our only remaining concern at this point was about who our fellow passengers would be. A week could be a long time at close quarters if we didn't get along!

SHARED EXPERIENCES

We met Hillary and Steve aboard, who turned out to be Britons around our age and with not dissimilar backgrounds. To break the ice we went out to dinner together. It was a delightful evening of laughter, mangled French as we

ordered – and plenty of good local wine. Any concerns we had of not getting along vanished. It set the scene for a week of good company and shared experiences.

Our skipper turned out to be a superb host who took great joy in seeing us have a good time. Steph had a wicked sense of humour and joined in with us in all the hilarity. It was interesting to throw three sets of people together and have the dynamics work so well.

The package for the week on the barge had included all breakfasts and 'light' lunches. There was also an evening meal with wine on the start and finish days of the trip. Kevin turned out to be an excellent chef as well as a competent skipper. Along with all the regular fare, he could also produce the local French dishes. Fresh local ingredients were utilised; the presentation was worthy of a fine restaurant and the taste divine. The breakfast staple was the freshest baguettes from the local village, picked up by Steph each morning. 'Light' lunches were anything but; different every day, often with fresh greens and herbs from the little garden boxes on the foredeck. Late evenings often involved a few glasses of wine or local beer out on the deck, and our 'oohs and ahs' at dinner got us another evening meal thrown in (five course!) where Kevin worked hard to outdo himself. In return, we passengers got together mid-trip to restock the boat's wine locker after some of our evenings on the

deck ended up stretching on a little late into the night.



Arrival at one of the locks along the way

deck ended up stretching on a little late into the night.

The week had a defined duration with a start and finish point, but beyond that there was plenty of flexibility in when and where we stopped. Our skipper knew the route well but was more than willing to linger here and there if we found something of particular interest. The start of our trip was in Sedan, a city rooted in French history as the scene of a humiliating defeat for the French in the 1870s at the hands of Prussia. The city also homes one of Europe's greatest fortresses dating back to the 1500s. It is a massive structure with a

narrow winding staircase and a tour isn't for the faint of heart or short of breath! The modern city of Sedan looks a little ragged around the edges suggesting an unkind economy of late. We cast off from Sedan around 9am in the morning on our first day of cruising.

The surface of the Meuse was like a mirror as we passed through the rural countryside. There are numerous locks on the Meuse to facilitate the movement of barges and any other floating vessels. These rivers and canals were once a major part of the French economy, moving goods and materials all across the land. Today these



Taking a stroll in Dun-sur-Meuse



waterways have a new economic role as part of French tourism.

The *eclusier* (lock keeper) was a fixture along the canals. He would have a tidy house and garden beside the locks and would operate the gates as barges moved up and down the waterways. The locations were often scenic spots and the job came with an undemanding workload. Many locks are now automated so the *eclusier* is a vanishing breed. We did hit a few manual locks in succession and our *eclusier* jumped in his old vehicle and raced ahead from lock to lock to let us through.

The canals and rivers are also grand fishing spots and any time of day we saw middle-aged anglers along the grassy banks. We were a little puzzled at first how so many had time off during week days – till you consider France's very generous retirement policies for many civil servants. The River Meuse took us through rich green farming country with tidy farms and herds of cattle. It was a laid back, peaceful way to

travel with often just the quiet throb of the barge's diesel engine and the squawk of the ever-present herons at canal side – which would flap into the air as we drew close. It was so relaxing simply to sip a coffee and chat with the others. Here and there, however, we began to see reminders of the region's

“SOMEONE SHOULD WRITE A GUIDE TO OPENING HOURS OF RESTAURANTS, SHOPS AND ATTRACTIONS IN FRANCE; IT WOULD BE A LIFETIME'S WORK...”

often bloody history – a crater in a field from shelling, bullet pockmarks in the wall of a village building or a small military cemetery in the distance.

BIKES AND DICTIONARIES

The communities along the river were each different from the others. Location, history and economy had shaped their size and appearance. The first stop, Mouzon, is a little

town with an 800 year old church and 16th century sites. Like many places in the Ardennes region, it is now the final resting place for many young American soldiers from WWI. That afternoon we all grabbed the bikes on board the Nilaya and pedaled some miles into the countryside. I'm sure we provided some amusement to some of the locals we passed by, who could see how rusty our cycling skills were!

Stenay was home to about 3,000 people and probably dated back over 1,500 years. The four of us rushed ashore in high hopes of seeing the European Museum of Beer but were greeted with a 'Closed' sign and a rainstorm. Someone should write a guidebook to opening and closing hours of various shops, restaurants and attractions in France; I suspect it would be a lifetime's work and would cover many, many volumes.

Dun Sur Meuse was next: a pretty small town with a 14th century Gothic church high above on a hill. The long hot climb to the top of the hill was worth it, as it afforded a stunning view of the valley below.

We dined out together that night at a small local restaurant. The service and food were excellent and revealed the French flair for dining. The four of us had borrowed Kevin's special English/French dictionary for food before heading out to dine. However, I think we only confused ourselves more as we tried to use it.

Verdun was the next and last stop. It turned out to be a very pleasant small regional capital with

infobox.

Flights from the UK to Paris are easy to come by and most airports will have airlines that connect to the French capital. Budget flights can also be found at reasonable prices.

TRANSPORT

Al and Ella flew from Vancouver in Canada to Paris and travelled by SNCF (train) to Sedan and back from Verdun to Paris at the end of their trip. www.sncf.co.uk

BARGE CRUISE

The couple travelled on the Nilaya Barge. There is still 2009 availability and early bookings are offered 20 per cent discount. www.bargenilaya.com

SUGGESTED TOUR OPERATORS

Explore!
0845 013 1537
www.explore.co.uk

VISAS

UK passport holders do not require a visa to enter France.

VACCINATIONS

Vaccinations against hepatitis A+B, rabies (only for longer stays), tetanus and tick-borne encephalitis are recommended.

a beautiful riverfront. All of us were delighted with the place and spent a day walking and taking it all in. Underlying Verdun's physical attractiveness of course is a bloody piece of history, with the great battle of WWI leaving estimates of between 500,000 and 800,000 French and German soldiers dead. Monuments and statues are scattered everywhere to remind those passing by. I'm no student of sculpture, but when we saw Rodin's Winged Victory which weeps in rage at the slaughter and holds a broken soldier's body in her arms, I could not help feeling sad.

The next day saw us parting ways after a shared breakfast. We shared email addresses and wished each other well. Hillary and Stephen set out for Sedan to pick up their car, while we headed to the Verdun railway station to make connections for a fast train to Paris. For Kevin and Steph, it was back to preparations for the next set of passengers.

For us this had been more than simply a sightseeing trip on a boat. We had shared a week with new friends with whom we have since exchanged emails. 2009 may bring an opportunity to reunite briefly when we make a trip to England.

Would we travel this way again? Yes we would! I would recommend it to anyone – especially those who value informality and who enjoy real contact with the people and environment of the places visited. ■