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**Anne Z. Cooke**  
*Travel and adventure writer*

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## Bubbles, Barges and Canals, Part 3

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ONBOARD THE SS ADRIENNE, France (Part 3) -- When you cruise with **French Country Waterways**, daily shore excursions are part of the experience. In France's Champagne region, this means visits to some of the Great War's most tragic battle sites. On our cruise, historian and WWI buff Glen Moynan, the Adrienne's onboard tour leader, makes history come alive. And so it is at the Aisne-Marne Cemetery and American Memorial, a massive double colonnade commemorating the 230 year-long friendship between France and the United States and the soldiers who died nearby.



Thousands of white crosses stretch over the greensward, a sylvan setting that belies the grim reality of war. From here we walk to Belleau Wood itself, where, in June 1918, nearly 10,000 soldiers died, including 31 officers and 1,056 infantry from the U.S. 5th Marine Corps Regiment. Walking among the rusting tanks and cannons, and the scars left by zig-zagging trenches, we seem to hear the cacophony of rifle shots and the screams of wounded soldiers. One of the barge's passengers, Dr. Barry Noonan, a

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plastic surgeon, says he's especially interested in this site. "I'm writing a history of facial reconstruction," he says, a specialty born after this battle, in which so many men suffered disfiguring and life-altering injuries to their noses, ears and lips.

As the week wears on, we walk along the canal's towpath, waiting for the Adrienne to catch up with us. In lazy moments we read on deck, watch the passing vineyards and listen to the water lap against the bow. Candlelit dinners grow increasingly more comfortable as the days go by and we get to know each other. By the week's end, we're playing charades and lingering until the last wine glass is emptied and the stars come out. Time drifts by. Life is good.



My favorite tours are to the Champagne "houses," where the grapes become bubbly. In Moët & Chandon cellars, our guide, Gina, leads us through a portion of the 17 miles of tunnels that run under the town of Epernay. Stopping here and there to relate the history of champagne, she pauses to explain why champagne bottled today can sit for years without exploding. "It's a secret, discovered right here in France!" she says, with a wink. "They make the glass much thicker." Nor is there such a thing as "champagne" grapes. The bubbly combines three varietals: Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay grapes. We taste several vintages, compare them and even Katie takes a sip.



Later the group visits Ployez-Jacquemart, a family business in the Marne Valley's rolling hills. The "crush," starting as we arrive, takes place during the narrow window when the grapes are at their peak. Organized chaos rules as migrant workers spread through the vineyards, picking the bunches and dumping them in plastic bins, the first step in their journey from vine to bottle.

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On our last day we dock at Chalons-en-Champagne, a village contested in both World Wars. Determined to make the most of our last few hours in France, Katie and I spend the day strolling the narrow streets. Window-box flowers adorn timber-frame houses, tiny store fronts advertise "Fromagerie" and "Poissonnerie," and young mothers push their babies in strollers. The clouds sail over and a sudden light drizzle hurries our return to the Adrienne's cozy cabin.



So is a barge cruise a real cruise? Yes, if you're looking for a slow boat through France, a chance to slow down and smell the grapes. For a few days, we felt what life was like when the horse was the fastest ride available. Watching the passing scenery, I promised I'd remember each detail, from the fields of hay and the gnarled trunks of ancient trees to the exquisite food and the attentive crew. And the occasional bottle of champagne, of course, to toast the memories.

**IF YOU GO:**

**GOING THERE:** Fly to Paris and overnight at the Hotel Raphael. [French Country Waterways](#) picks passengers up at noon for their mini-coach ride to the dock at Maizy or Chateau Thierry. The cruise ends at Chalons-en-Champagne.

**RATES:** Per person rates start at \$3,395 in shoulder season. Cruise travel agents may offer better rates. All meals, wines, tours and transfers to and from the dock are included. Not included are tips for service, which are pooled and divided evenly.

**CONTACT:** For more on **French Country Waterways**, call (800)222-1236, or visit [www.fcw.com](http://www.fcw.com).

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[Anne Z. Cooke: Bubbles and Luxe With French Country Waterways](#)

Imagine my rapture at the chance to navigate the quiet waters of France's Champagne region on a luxury barge, a week that promises a much-needed break in my too-busy life.



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Whether you are looking for that special someone, just beginning a relationship or with a long-term love, I believe it's imperative to make romance a priority. Every partnership needs a little poetry.



[Anne Z. Cooke: Bubbles and Luxe by Barge \(Part 2\)](#)

Our barge cruise is underway at last. We'll cruise at the speed of an escargot up the Marne River into the adjacent canal, surely the most pleasant way to explore the heart of rural Champagne.

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