



Text and Photos: Ivo Menzel

BURGUNDY IS A FANTASTIC REGION WITH A FASCINATING CULTURE, A WONDERFUL GASTRONOMIC TRADITION AND SUPERB WINES

FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO DISCOVER THE LESS WELL-KNOWN DELIGHTS IN THIS AREA FROM THE WATER, THE CANAL DU NIVERNAIS IS AN EXCELLENT OPTION. MIKE GARDNER-ROBERTS OF CHARTER COMPANY FRANCE FLUVIALE HAS AN IDEAL LINSSEN YACHT READY AND WAITING.

"Villiers-sur-Yonne?". The taxi driver at Auxerre station looked puzzled. "Mon dieu", he said, shaking his head, "where is it you want to go exactly? To Villiers-sur-Yonne? Apart from a few houses and an old church, there's nothing there!" "That's exactly where we want to go", Petra and me answered. The driver shook his head again, adjusted his cap and drove along narrow country lanes, through charming villages and thick woodland to our destination.

An hour later, he finally understood the purpose of this long car journey. Petra got out of the taxi, walked across the medieval River Yonne bridge and waved in the direction of a brand new Linssen Grand Sturdy which was moored below. "Oh là là! What a splendid cruising boat",

the taxi driver laughed, "that's why you've come all the way out here." I smiled, retrieved our luggage from the boot and paid the driver. "Well everything went fine", Klaus said as he greeted me on board. While Petra was admiring the yacht's interior, Klaus explained the route that he had sailed. "I boarded the yacht near to Decize on the Loire. The most exciting parts of the trip were the 1,200 metre long tunnel at La Collancelle, the sixteen locks at Sardy-lès-Épiry and yesterday the beautiful medieval village of Vézelay with its splendid St Magdalene basilica. I've been moored here waiting for you since this afternoon."

It was a long evening. Klaus had put together a delicious plateau de fromages. He served it up with ham, foie gras, wine grapes and – as you would expect – Pinot Noir and

Chablis. Many tales were told. The moon shone a silvery light on the imposing fruit trees and plane trees around our mooring and eventually a far-away church bell heralded the start of a new day. We raised our glasses to our upcoming voyage and our sturdy Linssen, wished Klaus bonne nuit and retired to our comfortable aft cabin.

The sun's rays woke us promptly at 8 a.m. I disembarked to go in search of fresh baguettes. However, I wondered whether there was a baker in the village. I did not have to wait long for an answer, because as soon as I was on the Yonne bridge a delivery van approached along the Rue du Pont. The van stopped and the side window opened to reveal a huge pile of oven-fresh baguettes. "How many do you want?" asked the woman in the driver's seat. I bought three baguettes, the women served the other customers who had arrived and took her leave of us with a charming au revoir. When I returned to the boat, I was greeted by the smell of fresh coffee. We had a relaxed breakfast and then Klaus cast off and we sailed in the direction of Clamecy.

The mood on board became even more positive. Grassy meadows with white Charolais cattle were followed by idyllic riverbanks, bright yellow rape fields and thick woodland. At the lock near Chevreuse, two cyclists from Oldenburg were waiting. They introduced themselves with "we are Uwe and Margit." They had been journeying for the past week from Decize to Auxerre. While Uwe was praising the many B&Bs along the canal, Margit was

casting her curious eye over our Linssen. "We've also had a few boating holidays", she said, "mainly on Aida cruise ships. But we've never seen such a darling little boat as this." When Klaus heard this, his face turned to thunder. But he managed to control himself and kindly asked the two whether they would like to come on board for the next part of the voyage. "There's plenty of room on board because this darling little boat is bigger than you think." "Of course", said a delighted Margit, "that would be great!"

While the two cyclists got on board, a white Renault came rushing up. A young guy got out and ran to the lock. He pulled up his sleeves, spat on his hands and opened the lock doors manually. Ten minutes later our Linssen slid gracefully out of the lock and continued towards Clamecy. The first thing we saw in this old town (which owed its prosperity to the building of wooden rafts) was the bell tower of St Martin's church, which pointed above the maple trees towards the clear blue sky. We moored in the harbour and made our way up to the old town.

The construction of the Canal du Nivernais dates back to the sixteenth century. At that time, the forests around Paris had already been cut down to provide fuel for the flourishing city, so that wood had to be transported to the capital from elsewhere over bumpy roads. The Canal du Nivernais had to act as a bridge between Paris and the forest of Bazois. However, it was another 250 years before the first sections of canal were complete. But how



was the wood transported? The trees were cut down, sawn into smaller pieces and thrown into the streams and rivers. In Clamecy, these logs were retrieved from the water and tied together to create rafts 75 metres long and 5.50 metres wide. Brave men climbed on board these ramshackle structures and guided them to the capital using long poles. However, with a population of 5,000, Clamecy was far more than just a ‘terminal’ for wood intended for Paris. It has picturesque half-timbered houses, snug alleyways and traditional inns, but it is also the birthplace of writers such as Romain Rolland and Claude Tillier. While Tillier amused the world with his humorous satire ‘Mon Oncle Benjamin’, Nobel Prize winner Rolland advocated peace and understanding during the First and Second World Wars.

The voyage continued and in Pousseaux, a hand-operated lifting bridge links both banks of the canal. We were unable to simply sail underneath, because the steel bridge was more or less the same height as the railing on our Linssen. What should we do? Just wait? For whom? There was nobody to be seen anywhere and there was no bridge keeper’s house or a telephone number. There was only a sign saying that anyone who tried to operate the bridge themselves would receive a hefty fine. “Let’s wait”, Klaus decided. And the skipper’s word is law, so we waited: 10 minutes, 15 minutes, 20 minutes. After half an hour a boat came in the opposite direction. The skipper moored, disembarked and cranked the bridge up – we could hardly believe our eyes! “You can pass through”, he shouted, which we were only too pleased to do.

At the stroke of 7 p.m., the lock keepers along the canal end their shift and make their way home. And needless to say, we arrived at the Châtel-Censoir lock a few minutes too late. “Rien ne va plus”, said Klaus shrugging his shoulders, “we cannot go through.” So we stayed the night in

the marina. But where could we get something to eat? One of the marina staff recommended a rotisserie, “five kilometres away”. Although we were still considering this option, he ordered a taxi and wished us “bon appétit”. After a few hair-raising bends taken at high speed along a rock face, we arrived at a traditional auberge. The fireplace was crackling away and there were photos of mountaineers on the wall. The chef wished us bonsoir and asked what we wanted to eat. There is trout, Bresse chicken and Charolais beef.” We all ordered beef. “Good choice”, said the three men at the table next to ours. They were rock climbers from Paris and were practising their daredevil sport on the steep Rocher du Saussois.

French writer Stendhal was a keen sailor along the canals of Burgundy. “You see the countryside far better than from a stage coach”, he wrote 200 years ago. That is still true today, at least if you have the time. And time is something we had on our side! Free from stress and rush, we wandered through the sleepy alleyways of Mailly-le-Château, from where you have a view of the Yonne from a protruding rock. Near Prégilbert, we enjoyed the tasty trout of fish farmer Pageaud. We later passed through the picturesque fortress town of Cravant near to where the River Cure flows into the Yonne, before sailing gently on towards Bailly. Just like on a painting, the Yonne meanders here through woods and below vineyards slopes. We moored at the quayside in Bailly and set out on foot to climb the Col du Crémant, which name refers to a hollow limestone rock about 200 metres high. The inside of the rock serves as a wine cellar for the local Bailly Lapierre wine cooperative. Approximately five million bottles are stored in the four-hectare vaulted cellar. At the entrance, it’s possible to sample modest amounts of this immense wine collection and everyone is welcome to buy as many bottles as they like. Needless to say we did not let this opportunity pass. We concluded that although excellent red wines are produced in the region between Dijon and Beaune, the north-west of Burgundy also has a lot to offer, particularly its magnificent Crémants.

The rest of our voyage can be quickly summarised. The next day at 9 a.m. we passed through the lock at Bailly. Châteaux and large mansions feature here, former tow paths have become asphalted cycle tracks and traffic speeds over the bridges. Five locks further on, we arrived in Auxerre, a city of 38,000 inhabitants. After a total of



170 kilometres along the canal and through 110 locks, our Linssen arrived at its final destination. We should really have returned our floating luxury accommodation in Vermenton. But Klaus had made arrangements with Mike Gardner-Roberts, head of charter company France Fluviale. This British Francophile and canal voyage enthusiast was willing to pick up his splendid boat in Auxerre marina. All formalities were soon completed. Together with Klaus, we strolled through the picturesque maze of the old town full of half-timbered houses. We visited the gothic cathedral of St Étienne, possibly the most famous in Burgundy. At the Tour de l'Horloge, we took our leave of Klaus and got in the taxi. "Villiers-sur-Yonne?" the taxi driver asked. After a moment's hesitation, I suddenly recognised the driver who picked us up on our arrival in Auxerre. "Non, non!, I laughed, first to Chablis to buy wine and then to the station for the train to Paris." "D'accord", he smiled. He adjusted his cap and we were off.



Burgundy

Burgundy is in the east of central France and has a rolling landscape with hills of up to 900 metres. The region covers 31,600 km² and consists of the following départements: Côte d'Or, Saône-et-Loire, Nièvre and Yonne. Auxerre (approximately 38,000 inhabitants) is the capital of Yonne and is located on the river of the same name. Together with Dijon, Auxerre is considered to be one of the most beautiful cities in Burgundy. The city has many medieval attractions, of which the most famous is the gothic cathedral of St Étienne. Chablis (16 km from Auxerre) is certainly worth visiting thanks to its world-famous Chardonnay wines. The largest city in Burgundy is Dijon (150,000 inhabitants).

Canal du Nivernais

The idea for the construction of a canal between the Loire and the Seine dates back to King Henry IV (1553-1610). Work started in 1784 and 60 years later the canal was first used as a waterway for transporting wood. The canal is 174 km long and features 110 locks. The most spectacular structures along the route include the tunnels at La Collancelle (758 m), Mouas (268 m) and Breuilles (212 m), the lock system in the Sardy valley (16 locks within 3 kilometres with a drop of 48 metres) and the aqueduct at Montreuillon (33 m high, 145 m long).

Would you like more information about yachts charters in Burgundy?

Burgundy Cruisers SARL

1 Quai du Port,

F-89270 VERMENTON

Tel.: +33 (0)3 86815455

Fax: +33 (0)3 86816787

france-fluviale@orange.fr

www.francefluviale.com

www.linssenboatingholidays.com

