



The last mooring site for the group's cruise on the canals of Champagne.

Cruising the Canals of Champagne

AFTER OUR WEEK EXPLORING the jewels of Bordeaux, we returned to Paris for a long and filling meal at a bistro near our hotel. The next day, five of our original 15 members left us, and two joined us for the two-hour bus trip to Champagne.

We arrived and then boarded our 128-foot barge (the *Nenuphar*) operated by French Country Waterways. This was our second trip on such a barge after spending a week on *L'Esprit* in Burgundy in the fall of 2018. The couples who went on the first trip were very positive about all aspects of the trip, which led to the decision to have a similar experience in Champagne. The temperatures were cooler this time, but the weather was very nice. We were welcomed onto the barge with an array of beautiful and tasty appetizers with accompanying Champagnes and white wines. This was a preview of the very good food to be served over the next week with unending accompanying Premier and Grand Cru wines with each lunch and dinner.

The experience on the barge was very different from the full day and evening calendar we had in Bordeaux. The barge was very well appointed, and the itinerary permitted more leisure time. In fact, we visited only two Champagne houses. Both were unknown to any of us, but we were very impressed with their range of Champagnes.



A collage of lunch meal offerings.



Jim Bryant pilots the Nenuphar barge.

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A morning view of the canal.



The barge arrives to pick up Jim Bryant after a bike ride along the canal.

LOCAL CHAMPAGNE PRODUCERS

The first visit was to Guy Charbaut, which is a medium-size producer with significant underground caves which we toured. We tasted five different Champagnes and were offered more. After making purchases, we went to Ployez-Jacquemart which is a smaller-sized house.

Before the actual tour, one of our group, Brian Pollack, volunteered to open the bottle of Champagne with a knife. The visit to the underground cases involved extensive multi-storied chambers of many thousands of bottles. After the tour, we were offered a chance to taste the entire range of offerings. All were very good-to-excellent in quality and because there is no availability in the U.S., we were offered free shipping to our homes. What a deal!

As an example of the cuisine we enjoyed, I have included a collage of several courses served during a lunch meal. One evening, we went into the local village and dined at a famous Guide Michelin restaurant which had recently reopened and was in need of more or better service help. As a result, the meal lasted longer than it should have. We had many (almost unlimited) choices for our mooring site each night.

THE CATHEDRAL NOTRE-DAME DE REIMS

One of the highlights was a visit to Reims where we toured the Cathedral of Reims. This was the coronation site for all French kings from the 11th century to 1825. After the tour, we sat in the square in front of the cathedral basking in the afternoon sun at this incredible monument while sipping fine wine. During the day, we were able to walk or bike on the beautiful, paved trails along the canals. One day, the captain allowed me to pilot the barge which was enjoyable for me and hopefully not scary for others!

Another highlight of the trip involved a visit to the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery at Belleau Wood. Like all U.S. cemeteries abroad, it was in immaculate condition when we visited. The visit confirmed the appropriate nature of this cemetery and memorial to one of the most important U.S. battles of World War One and the biggest battle of U.S. engagement since Appomattox, and the largest engagement that American Marine troops had ever had with a foreign enemy.

This visit was very emotional for all of us, but for two—Ron Trudeau and me—it was especially so. At the end of our visit, it was closing time for the cemetery and the custodian asked our group if there were any U.S. military veteran members who would like to assist the staff in lowering and securing the American flag from two flagpoles. Ron, who served in the U.S. Navy, and I, who served in the U.S. Air Force, volunteered, and thereby adding to a lasting memory of this great week. À Votre Santé! 🍷



The beautiful countryside of Champagne.



A view of the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Reims.



Ron Trudeau assists with the lowering of the flag at Aisne-Marne American Cemetery.



The Aisne-Marne American Cemetery is located at Belleau Wood.



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

Barrington resident Jim Bryant is pursuing his passion and love of wine as an international wine consultant. This follows a 30-year career in senior financial and general management positions at two Fortune 100 companies. He is the owner of James R. Bryant L.L.C.; contact him at profwino@comcast.net.