

Canal and River Barging Trends

One of the fastest growing segments of cruising is canal and river barging by Hotel-Barges: traditional commercial barges once used for transport of goods that have been refurbished into beautiful and comfortable “floating country inns”.



Many Western European countries, France in particular, are laced with a network of canals that once served to connect the country’s main waterways and aid in the transportation of goods.

Today these canals serve mostly recreational purposes and one popular mode of travel that has developed is the barge cruise, which allows tourists to see the countryside at hand while floating down these scenic waterways.

For the independent traveler who is seeking a personalized and enriching travel experience, authenticity, fine dining and a total immersion into the local life of the destination, barging is the ideal way to get off the beaten path, while still enjoying a stress-free vacation with no need to pack and unpack.

Luxury doesn’t have to be compromised either, thanks to the newly commissioned barges which feature virtually all the choices and amenities found on larger vessels.

From the casual floating B&B to the ultra deluxe palace, there are many barges to choose from. But they all offer two distinguishing features: the unique intimacy of sharing an experience with a pre-formed group or with a relative handful of new-found friends, and the opportunity to go where larger vessels cannot.

The classic canal barge carries 4 to 24 guests, with a high crew to passenger ratio.

While Hotel Barges can be booked on an individual cabin basis for singles and couples, the majority of the smaller size barges (4 to 8 guests) are for private parties who charter the entire barge.

As the cruising industry is experiencing an unprecedented growth in the segment of small ship cruising, including exotic & adventure cruising, **coastal cruising**, and in particular riverboat cruising, it is with no surprise that the canal & river barging industry was the first to benefit from this trend.

While still comprised in majority of independent barges -- owner-operated vessels with their own charm and character -- several established barge companies are establishing their own fleet with their own standards, from the well known Orient Express group to the British company European Waterways Ltd.

In France only, Hotel Barge cruises specialist France Cruises has estimated a market growth specific to the canal and river barging from 10 Million USD in early 1990 to over 45 Million USD today.



Along with this exciting growth came other trends:

Diversification of the canal & river barging passenger profile who tends to be younger (median of 48 down from 56) including multi-generational family vacations, more active and more interested in tailor-made cruise experiences (including special interest trips, shorter and extended cruises);

Diversification also of the barge product itself from budget “Barge & Breakfasts” to 5-Star “Yacht-Barges” and from standard cruise programs to “A La Carte” itineraries;

Finally, diversification of the destinations: While canal barging is often associated with Burgundy or Provence in France, hotel barge cruising is available beyond France, in England, Holland, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Belgium, Italy and even the Czech Republic.

Travel Agent relevance: The canal & river barging concept is no longer unknown by travel professionals and barge cruisers use travel agents at higher rates every year, especially luxury cruisers. With an average cruise-only fare of USD 3,500 per person and a high percentage of repeat business (above 35%), many travel agencies have now established themselves as important distribution channels for the product.



Global Demand: Another characteristic of this market growth is the increasing globalization of the source of business within the canal & river barging industry.

While North America is accounting for almost 2/3 of total demand and the European market is remaining distant, emerging travel markets such as Brazil, China, India, Russia and the Arab market account for an increasing share. Most importantly, a strong cruise interest and demand from “new” markets such as South Africa, Australia and New Zealand which is experiencing a 20 per cent growth in the number of people booking cruises and particularly river cruises, indicates that the barging industry is positioned well for continued growth and market penetration worldwide.

This growth and diversification of demand gives a clear indication of the enormous potential for expansion, ensuring a promising future for cruises.

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