

River Cruising the Rhone and the Saone

Uniworld describes its collection of cruises as a “boutique” experience, bringing to mind a high standard of service and facilities while still retaining a sense of individuality, both in the atmosphere of the ship and among the guests. Certainly my vessel for a week, the River Royale, boarded in southern Provence’s ancient city of Arles, offered that sense of maximum comfort combined with individual intimacy and a whole lot of personal attention from 38 staff from nine European countries.



While my stateroom met every expectation of amenities and services, it was the public spaces that spoke of an intriguing originality that magnetically drew the 130 guests gravitate to them with every on-board opportunity. Clustered in intimate groupings, the lounge's colorful sofas and chairs encouraged introduction to strangers and stimulating conversation, while the open-seating, single-sitting dining room, bright with natural light and upbeat in blue and white, acknowledged the famous Mediterranean light associated with the southern segment of River Royale's route. I appreciate bright colors and plenty of light any time, so I was delighted to learn that one of Uniworld's owners, Beatrice Tollman, was instrumental in the interior decorating of this particular ship.

Out of the five main rivers in France, only the Rhone is designated as masculine, Le Rhone, because historically it has been perceived as “powerful and dangerous”, according to our vessel's Hotel Manager, Eric Christophe. Sailing through Provence and Burgundy south to north, in a straight line from Arles, the River Royale cruise covers 172 miles/277 km on the Rhone until it narrows and becomes more turbulent after Lyons.

The remaining 99 miles/150 km of the cruise is spent on the gentler Saone River (La Saone, of course!). My week was in mid-October when the water levels reflected a dry summer season already reducing the flow, but I could well imagine that the spring waters would demonstrate a much

stronger current.



On our route there were 15 locks: 12 on the Rhone and 3 on the Saone. Built mainly between 1950 and 1989, the Rhone locks were a successful attempt to domesticate the river in all seasons for both commerce and tourism. These are not the quaint, sometimes hand-opened, locks of a bygone era, but rather imposing multi-storey engineering feats that qualify more as a modern dam bristling with technology. Once in the lock, with the River Royale either descending or ascending within a tightly enclosed space, it was only a matter of minutes before the lock gates opened to send us on our way at a comfortable pace averaging 20 miles per hour.

On board there were informative pre-arrival briefings on each town, and even a crepe suzette cooking demonstration by the pastry chef. With a little deeper educational challenges, we were also treated to a lecture on French icons and one on Vincent Van Gogh, a nautical lecture about the rivers, and a silk painting demonstration.

The two- to three-hour shore excursions were a particular treat, starting with the city of Arles where the Romans left well-restored monumental constructions as witness to their mighty presence. Each of our cruising days, there was also half a day for independent exploration in addition to the included tour option either morning or afternoon, or guests could sign up for a second tour option for which they paid extra.



With its 15th century ramparts, Beaune was a city of medieval enchantments that a week wouldn't have covered them all. Its Hotel Dieu hospital, built for the poor by the Duke of Burgundy in the mid-1400s, is now one of the most intriguing museums in a country of museums. And, of course, there are a Burgundy vineyard wine tasting, not to be missed.

Uniworld (Uniworld.com) is a much-awarded river cruising company sailing 11 of the world's most breathtaking rivers in 20 countries throughout Europe, China, Egypt and Russia ... and Vietnam and Cambodia too starting in 2012! Style and elegance are hallmarks of its fleet of ships averaging 130 guests per vessel. Gourmet dining and included shore excursions reveal the best of each region. Uniworld is the only river cruise line to appear in Condé Nast Traveler's 2011 Gold List.

By Alison Gardner

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