

RIVER TOURISM IN FRANCE GROWING IN POPULARITY



After 2016 marked by a fall of river tourism in France because of the terrorist threat, in 2017 the sector reached almost the record level of 2015.

With 11.2 million passengers carried in 2017 (+ 13% compared to 2016), **river tourism has returned to growth in France**. The economic benefits of river tourism for the territories are estimated by VNF at 630 million euros per year.

Even though the total number of overnight stays (1.8 million), decreased by 5.55% year-on-year in 2017, due to shorter stays on ocean liners, "the sector has almost reached its 2015 level, the year of records," said Guillaume Dury, director of development of Voies navigables de France (VNF).

Foreign customers – representing 70% of the total clientele – are back, including the Americans, after shunning French rivers and canals in 2016, following the attacks of 2015.

The boat rides – which represent most of the traffic – carried more than 10.5 million passengers in 2017 (+ 14%), of which 52% were foreigners. Ile-de-France river tourism attracted 7.4 million passengers. Cruise ships, where mainly foreign customers (78%) spend several days, received 404,700 passengers (+ 9%) and hotel barges 106,330 (-10%). Rentals of habitable boats have decreased by 4.1%, based on the number of nights.

The potential for growth remains significant for the lucrative market of cruise ships, since 53 boats sail on the French river basins off the Rhine, when 171 stop every year in Passau, in Germany on the Danube, the European site concentrating the highest traffic. In this segment where "supply creates demand", the number of cruise ships has already increased this year, "especially on the basins of the Seine". Activity is also rising on the Rhine.

The challenge, to further develop river tourism in France, is now both to "open the range of destinations" – the Canal du Midi is saturated in summer – says Frederic Millet, VNF Territory, Tourism and Services Division Manager. And to "allow operators to expand their season" in May–June and September–October, when it is now concentrated in August, and to a lesser extent in July. **Finally, it aims to attract more French customers**, for example by offering long weekends at attractive prices. Foreign customers have the vocation to grow mechanically.

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