

Back and beyond

Natalie Marsh sets sail on the smaller waterways of northern France

@NatalieMarsh_TW

There's something quite satisfying knowing that we're the only boat on this part of the river right now. We're drifting slowly along the River Somme, through a rural and picturesque part of northern France, barely overtaking the locals strolling along the riverbank.

I'm on board *Natalia* for a taster day with Backwaters Cruising, the new kid on the block of river cruises. Our three-and-a-half-hour journey takes us from Amiens to

Corbie, a distance that would take less than half an hour by car - but taking the road (or river) less travelled is much more appealing.

Natalia, Backwaters Cruising's first boat, operated its debut season last summer. Aimed at mature travellers, customers don't stay on board, but rather disembark to stay in local accommodation. Spearheaded by the desire of Backwaters chief executive Lynn Woods to explore the lesser-cruised waterways of France, *Natalia* was custom-built to do just that.

There are more than 6,000 miles of

navigable waterways in France and Belgium, many of which are too narrow for existing river cruise vessels. *Natalia's* dimensions were therefore dictated by the width of the rivers and the length of the locks, and couldn't exceed 38m by 5m.

But the boat feels far bigger in reality. It might be because it's really a 'floating lounge', with no separate rooms except the crew quarters and the bathrooms; because it has huge windows that fill the boat with natural light; or because the number of people onboard is capped at 40, even though it can hold 55.

"We fancily call ourselves Backwaters, but it's a good name because it's what we're doing," says Woods.

"We're offering people the chance to

see and experience places they can't get to on the water unless they hire a boat or buy one."

▶ WINDING WATERWAYS

Standing outside on the back of the boat with the crew, we approach the first of the three locks we'll tackle today. I must admit it's a squeeze, but as per its precise dimensions, expertly guided in, we fit.

Things move at a slower pace on the river. With a delicious locally sourced lunch, a glass of wine in hand and the beautiful scenery ahead, it's hard to imagine being any more relaxed. Sometimes *Natalia's* speed is even leisurely enough for guests to walk along the path next to the boat. ➔



RIGHT:
Inside *Natalia*



FAR RIGHT:
Natalie on the banks of the River Somme



ASK THE EXPERT



Andrew Iwasyszyn,
head of river
and third-party
ocean cruising,
Saga Holidays

“Backwaters Cruising offers a convenient way to get to the heart of a region. We know that many of our guests have been on the main rivers, but there is a huge network of smaller rivers and canals that aren’t accessible by larger river ships. Our customers love the slower pace of life on these smaller waterways, as well as the fact that you are so close to the banks you can see the region you are cruising through, as well as the locks, water bridges and viaducts.”

➔ A typical day on a Backwaters tour consists of a morning or afternoon onboard, and a half-day excursion to a local attraction or place of interest. Guests are transported by coach company Buzzlines across the Channel, to and from the boat, the accommodation and the attractions each day. Lunch is taken onboard, but guests eat dinner at local restaurants.

“We are bringing jobs and business into the local economies we visit rather than capturing it and keeping it all ourselves,” says Woods. “That makes us very different and it makes us much more welcome in these communities that we work with.”

STAYING SUSTAINABLE

Sitting inside, watching the countryside float by, the boat is almost



Natalia creates little noise and pollution, and can travel for up to six hours on electric propulsion

completely silent. *Natalia* runs on hybrid electric engines, creating little noise and pollution, and can travel for up to six hours on electric propulsion alone.

Having been awarded Best European Tourism Project by the British Guild of Travel Writers last year, Backwaters places sustainability and responsible tourism at the forefront of

its strategy. The boat’s design means it produces hardly any wash, so that it doesn’t contribute to the erosion of the riverbanks, and the company is committed to recycling and avoiding disposable plastics onboard.

“It’s against our personal philosophy and against our business interests to do anything else,” says Woods.

With two more boats on order, Backwaters will have a three-strong fleet touring the lesser-cruised waterways of France in 2020.

Book it: A seven-night Rivers of Wine itinerary on the River Yonne costs from £1,199 per person, departing July 27, including six half-day cruises and excursions, seven nights in a hotel, all meals, coach travel from Folkestone and transfers.

travel.saga.co.uk



French **fancies**

What else can you do on a Backwaters Cruising tour? Natalie Marsh lines up the landmarks

VISIT A MEDIEVAL ABBEY

Visit Fontenay Abbey, the world's oldest-preserved Cistercian abbey, on Saga's seven-night Waterways and Châteaux itinerary. Located in Burgundy, the 12th-century abbey and its gardens sit within a 1,200-hectare valley. Guests will travel to the abbey, which became a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1981, from their hotel in Auxerre. Tours depart on June 15 and August 3.

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LEARN ABOUT ANTIQUES FROM AN EXPERT

Backwaters invites antiques expert Michael Hogben, who has appeared on *Bargain Hunt*, on board for its Creeks and Antiques itinerary in the Burgundy region. The cruise passes down the Canal du Nivernais, with guests staying in Auxerre. Tours depart on July 7 and September 29.

backwaters.tours



SIP SOME CHABLIS

Chablis is a famous wine region in Burgundy, producing its wine from the Chardonnay grape. Customers on Saga's seven-night Rivers of Wine itinerary will have the chance to visit a vineyard in the town of Chablis to sample it for themselves. The cruise also features visits to other vineyards in the area, including in the villages of Joigny and St Florentin. Tours depart on June 8 and July 27.

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ENJOY LIVE CLASSICAL AND JAZZ MUSIC

Backwaters is offering passengers on two itineraries the chance to chill out to live music. The Cruising with the Radnor Trio cruise will feature music from the classical group, with tours departing August 11 and October 12. Meanwhile, the Cruising with a Twist of Jazz itinerary, departing on October 5, will see evening entertainment provided by John Beckingham and his JB's Swing Band. Both itineraries will cruise from Auxerre to Clemency, stopping at Unesco sites and quaint villages on the way.

backwaters.tours



SEE THE BASILICA OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

The Romanesque Basilica of Saint Mary Magdalene in the town of Vézelay in Burgundy has become a famous landmark in the Christian religion. The town is also a starting point for the St James's Way pilgrimage, which guests on Saga's The Classic Nivernais itinerary get to explore. The tour, which departs on August 31, includes a visit to the limestone caves of Arcy-sur-Cure and a dinner in a wine cellar.

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