

Uncork Bordeaux

A glass of the good stuff is never far away on a wine cruise through southwest France, finds Jane Archer

You've got to hand it to the French. Faced with grapes infected with a fungus called botrytis, do they switch to selling potatoes? Of course not. They name it 'noble rot' and produce costly wine from the fruit that, once infected, looks like a shrivelled raisin.

It's a particular feature of France's Sauternes region – which gave its name to the wine, rather than the other way around – and is caused by a mist created when the waters of the Garonne and colder Ciron rivers meet, which then settles on the vineyards.

The wine is delicious: sweet, with a slightly thick consistency, a perfect partner to foie gras or rich desserts.

We've just tasted some and I look longingly at our hosts, hoping they will pour more, but guide Janneke is ushering us to the door because our river ship, *AmaDolce*, is docked in the nearby town of

Cadillac and waiting to take us back to Bordeaux.

FRENCH FANCIES

I'm cruising in southwest France with APT, sailing the Garonne, Gironde and Dordogne rivers on an itinerary known for ease as Bordeaux, because the city is the start and end point of the voyage and also is never far from the places visited.

In fact, nowhere is very far on this cruise, which will total barely 20 hours of sailing time by the end of seven days. That's fine, because we're here to learn all about wine in some of France's top wine-producing areas.

At least that's what we keep telling ourselves. Actually, we're here because the itinerary promises wine-tasting galore – and all for free as APT includes everything in its prices, from flights, transfers and excursions to drinks and gratuities. ➤



AMADOLCE

AmaDolce is part of AmaWaterways' fleet but is chartered by APT for a few seven-night Grand Bordeaux cruises each year.

Built in 2009, it features two decks of cabins with French balconies. Facilities include a lounge and bar, a massage room and a gym. Bikes are available for guided tours or DIY sightseeing.

As well as the main restaurant, there's the intimate Chef's Table, which serves a complimentary seven-course tasting menu with treats such as white asparagus soup and duck crepinette with orange sauce. Bookings are taken on board.

Book it: Eight days' all-inclusive starts at £3,445 per person, departing September 24. aptouring.co.uk

BEST OF BORDEAUX

☼ The Miroir d'Eau is a shallow patch of water on the promenade that, when the sun shines, literally reflects the stunning facade of the Bourse, and at other times is a play area for kids.

☼ La Cité du Vin offers an interactive guide to the history and art of viticulture around the world.

☼ The Marché des Capucins is a typical French market with stalls piled high with exotic cheeses, charcuterie and fruit.

☼ The 18th-century Grand Théâtre, one of Europe's finest concert halls, hosts opera, ballet and music events year-round.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *AmaDolce*; La Cité du Vin; wine-tasting; Saint-Émilion
PICTURES: Gerald Lechner; Mamie Boude; Vincent Bengold; Shutterstock



Our Sauternes tour is followed by trips to châteaux (the name for wineries, as well as castles, in this part of France) in Medoc and Saint-Émilion, where we admire the vineyard, take a quick peek at the humongous vats used to ferment wine, and then head to the tasting rooms, where our hosts pour generous quantities of their best reds.

In Libourne, I join a market tour that takes in the extravagant fish and cheese stalls before hastening to a local cafe for charcuterie and wine, undeterred by the fact that we've only just had breakfast.

There's wine to accompany a culinary tour in Bordeaux, and even a visit to a *tonnellerie* (barrel maker) starts with a couple of glasses of red. After all, in wine country, how else are you going to welcome guests?

BEYOND THE BOTTLE

Wine tasting aside, don't get the idea that you have to be an expert to enjoy this cruise. No one is testing us and there's plenty more to enjoy. The Sauternes excursion also includes a tour of the grand Château de la Brède, a castle built in the middle ages that was the erstwhile home of the 17th-century French philosopher Baron de Montesquieu.

He might not be a household name in the UK, but he's a rock star in France for his novel, *Lettres Persanes*, which criticised the then king, Louis XIV, and is said to have inspired the French Revolution. His theories on the need to separate the powers of the state and judiciary,

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meanwhile, influenced the Founding Fathers when they drew up the US constitution.

In Saint-Émilion, we go underground into a cave that legend says housed a kindly monk who gave his name to the town, and a monolithic church where wine and treasures were hidden from the Nazis during the Second World War (they knew, apparently, but fled with the wine and left the treasures).

On a tour of a vast citadel on the banks of the Gironde in Blaye, we creep through dimly lit escape passages, built in case the defenders ever needed to scarper.

Later that afternoon, I saddle up and set off on a guided bike tour to Bourg. It's barely 10 miles and would have been easy were it not for some mean hills along the way that had us all puffing, panting and pushing. I breathe a sign of relief when Bourg, where *AmaDolce* is now docked, finally looms into view, and another when I see the barman. After all that pedalling, I need a glass or two of something red to recover! **TW**