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HD **Afloat in a French idyll**
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Cover story

Brian Johnston sips and sails on a river cruise through France's fabled **wine** country.

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From the moment I arrive at Bordeaux Airport, I feel as though I am an extra in an SBS late-night movie. Locals peck arriving friends on the cheeks - kiss, kiss, kiss - as **chin**-stubbled gendarmes loiter.

I heave my suitcase into a funny little taxi and off we race. Everything is downsized: matchbox Renaults, narrow streets, tiny dogs, short old men, shrunken traffic lights.

We pass a park the size of a handkerchief and boutique boutiques draped in skinny dresses.

My ship, Viking Forseti, floats in Bordeaux's Garonne River, large and sleek and jaunty with white parasols that bloom on its open deck. With efficient smiles I'm decanted into my stateroom. Crisp cottons scream at me to lie down, but I banish jetlag in the shower. I love this moment when a new city awaits. Damp-haired and eager, I scurry down the gangplank.

Bordeaux on a sunny afternoon makes me smirk like a poodle in a park. Could anywhere be more French? The pavements are a minefield of dog droppings, benches splattered with pigeon poop. Pedestrian streets have slick cobbles and buttery limestone buildings.

Statues of saints lounge on church facades. On a monument to the Girondins slaughtered in the French Revolution, cherubs are incongruously jaunty.

Water nymphs bare their breasts at locals waiting for the tram. Behind, a temporary funfair occupies Place des Quinconces in a blur of fairy floss and neon. Statues of Montaigne and Montesquieu brood among raucous rollercoasters and shooting galleries.

At sunset I sit on the open deck of Viking Forseti, red **wine** at my elbow, gazing along a waterfront crescent of grand 19th-century buildings and tulip-popping promenades.

This is one of Europe's best urban river-scapes, increasingly theatrical as dusk descends and floodlights glimmer.

Bordeaux has more listed buildings than anywhere else in the country beyond Paris, gargoyle-studded and laced with wrought iron. Travel should be about stomping on stereotypes, but in Bordeaux I can't help indulging in French fantasies. This is a city for kisses under street lamps and Margaux **wine** in backstreet bars.

It's frustrating, next morning, to be sailing away, but this just-launched Viking River Cruises itinerary teases; we'll be back in Bordeaux for the climax.

Meanwhile, we're heading downstream to Pauillac. Navigable rivers are short hereabouts. We'll sail the Garonne and Dordogne and their union that forms the Gironde, which is technically not a river but an estuary thanks to its salt tides.

We'll backtrack and loop through **wine** country that seems to demand such a lazy meander. This isn't a cruise for those who like shipboard life and a feeling of perpetual motion.

We won't be much afloat, but enjoy plenty of time on shore.

The Gironde is wide and sluggish, pockmarked with tree-topped islands. I pace the deck under a fresh blue sky, chilly with Atlantic breezes and loud with seagulls.

The Medoc peninsula, wedged between estuary and ocean, slides by. Before lunchtime, we're docked at Pauillac, where some of the world's priciest wines are produced: Chateau Latour, Lafite Rothschild, Mouton Rothschild.

A talk in the lounge - part of the educational ethos of Viking River Cruises that I've always appreciated - provides background to this fabled **wine** region's gravelly soils, renowned **wine** labels and mostly cabernet sauvignon grapes.

Then we're off on a coach through tidy hills and vineyards not yet in bud. We stop at Chateau Lynch Bages for **wine** tasting, Chateau Kirwan for an evening meal.

Next morning, I've only just devoured my breakfast omelette when we arrive at Blaye in that effortless manner only river-cruising can provide. Beyond the dining-room windows, a rocky outcrop is crowned with fortifications designed by Vauban, Louis XIV's fabled military engineer.

It's a hop from the ship to the ramparts, where enough spring breezes redden my cheeks. This place is King's Landing from Game of Thrones. Crows hop and ancient kings of Aquitaine lie in tombs beneath the rock. Beyond, in the little town of Blaye, Peugeot's splutter and well-wrapped old men sit in cafes, heads swivelling as baguette-toting women walk by.

For the rest of the day I'm off on an optional excursion to Cognac.

It's over an hour away by coach, but worth the journey for a visit to the cellar door of Camus, the largest and one of the few remaining family-owned cognac producers. In the barrel-filled cellar we're inducted into cognac tasting. Our first drop is a light, floral Fins Bois often used as a base for blends because it lifts the aromas of other cognacs.

"It's lively and youthful," says Philippe, a Camus master blender. "Vivacious. But it has no length and character."

Then we're on to a cognac produced from grapes grown in Borderie, the signature district for Camus. It's a more supple, rounded affair. "It has a little tenderness, it's like velvet, feminine but with a touch of spice," purrs Philippe, who looks like Richard Gere and has an accent like melted toffee.

We're set the challenge of blending a cognac based on our preferred proportions of the four available. The two others are more masculine and woody, and we're invited to describe their taste: a hint of orange, walnut, a little kick of ginger. By the time I've mixed my blend, carefully noting down its proportions, my head is swimming.

There's much giggling among passengers as we head to the cognac barrels to decant the correct proportions of each into a full bottle.

Cognac gurgles out of spigots. Then our bottles are labelled and sealed and laid to rest in wooden boxes. The blend is recorded in a ledger so we can order it again. "The hardest thing is to wait three months before you open the bottle, because the molecules from each cognac need time to marry," advises Philippe, before bidding us adieu.

Back on the coach, we drift off into a collective cognac-soaked snooze.

By late afternoon we've sailed down the Gironde and veered off into the lazy, lovely Dordogne River. Viking Forseti docks at the fortified town of Libourne where, next day under pepper-pot towers, I sniff truffles in the market. Winter lingers in piles of cauliflowers and turnips.

The pears are as small and knobbly as the hands of food-prodding grandmothers. Later in the year, I imagine this market must be lush with strawberries and peaches and wasp-buzzing plums.

Up the road lies Saint-Emilion, another of the legendary names that gives me a rush of pleasure, even though I'm no particular wine expert. Some of the world's most prestigious vineyards - Petrus, Vieux Chateau Certan, Cheval Blanc - look rather denuded so early in the season but, with trees bare branched, it's easy to admire passing chateaux. The church spire of Pomerol rises across the vines like an exclamation point.

Our Viking guide, Maxine, says I can buy a bottle of Pomerol at Comptoir des Vignobles in the centre of Saint-Emilion.

"It has a full collection of fine wine from 1945 onwards. For your Christmas wish-list, that's the place to go," she says, wildly overestimating my budget.

Instead I buy a box of Saint-Emilion's other specialty, macarons. No green and pink prettiness for these traditional treats, which are as golden and soft as the limestone from which the town is built. History rises in layers from the catacombs where Saint-Emilion's eponymous saint lived, up cafe-lined streets and flights of stairs, and culminates in gravelled terraces with views over red roofs and raked hillsides.

I could think of spending a week in Saint-Emilion, pedalling through vineyards and picnicking on brie.

But on a river cruise, the pace is ever onwards. Next morning we're drifting along the Garonne River and docking at Cadillac. Across the river at Chateau d'Arche we're introduced to the glorious process of noble rot that goes into making sauternes.

Elsewhere this might be just another cellar door, another wine.

On this cruise, every stop brings us to another icon. I feel like a lush but I'm not doing any spitting of sauternes. The dessert wine is as mellow and lovely as the sunset that evening, as light dims behind the bulk of Cadillac's old town, and swans paddle in the shadows.

Languid contentment oozes among passengers as we sail back towards Bordeaux next day. We plug in our earpieces for an informative city tour that assures me I won't miss the highlights. Then we're let loose to explore at our own pace for the evening and all next day.

Bordeaux is a city transformed over the past decade. It was once shabby and dirty, with a derelict waterfront and sense of stagnation.

"Now we've awakened the sleeping beauty and revealed her beautiful blonde stone," says our guide Janice, of the concerted effort to reinvigorate the town. "It shows off its classic beauty, but it has a lively, contemporary feel too."

Bordeaux is elegant, monumental and civilised. Soot has gone from church facades, boulevards are pretty with flowerbeds, trams prowl silently down car-free streets.

Its unity of 18th-century architecture is a dream. On the riverfront just past Viking Forseti's dock, a mirror of water reflects the palaces of Place de la Bourse in a shimmer of sculpted grandeur.

The old town is pitted with history but vibrant with people: buskers, indolent teenagers, shoppers, waiters smoking at the back doors of bars.

And yes, maybe I can't be bothered looking beyond the stereotypes. But why would I?

I pass patisseries and brasseries, a statue of Louis XIV, street corners where yellow lamps make damp cobbles glow, women pedalling back from the market with celery and mushrooms. In bars, patrons are probably discussing the poetry of Rimbaud. I want to be French, and there could be no better measure of a pleasurable holiday.

The writer travelled as a guest of Viking River Cruises.

TRIP NOTES

MORE

INFORMATION

tourisme-aquitaine.fr.

GETTING THERE

Etihad flies from Melbourne and Sydney to Abu Dhabi (14.5hr) and Paris (7.5hr), with onward codeshare flights to Bordeaux (1hr) on Air France . Return economy fares from \$2086 from Melbourne and \$2107 from Sydney including taxes. Phone 1300 532 215, see etihad.com.

CRUISING THERE

Viking River Cruises' eight-day Chateaux, Rivers and **Wine** cruise in the Bordeaux region costs from \$3995 a person twin share, including meals and shore excursions. Some optional excursions incur an extra cost. Phone 1800 829 138, see vikingrivercruises.com.au.

STAYING THERE

Extend your stay at the Grand Hotel de Bordeaux & Spa, a neoclassical palace in the heart of Bordeaux and a member of Leading Hotels of the World. Rooms from \$467 a night for two. Phone 1800 222 033, see lhw.com.

STAYING

SHIP SHAPE

ON VIKING FORSETI

Viking Forseti is one of Viking River Cruises' Longships, the largest and newest river-cruise ships in Europe. On-**board** amenities are kept to a minimum in favour of spacious public areas which, thanks to floor-to-ceiling windows, provide flooding light and great riverscapes. However the library, which occupies its own space aft in older Viking ships, is relegated to an upstairs lobby and is thus more waiting area than library. A sundeck occupies the top deck and has plenty of shaded outdoor seating. The indoor-outdoor Aquavit Terrace at the bow, with its fold-back glass wall, is another relaxed space providing scenic outlooks. Light meals served here are an alternative to restaurant fare.

Viking Forseti's high-quality food is typical of Viking, but lovers of French cuisine will be disappointed: meals are cautiously international. Dining tables seat a minimum of six. Some appreciate the socialising, others may long for a peaceful dinner a deux.

Cabins have thoughtful touches such as heated mirrors and floors in bathrooms. Showers are excellent. Larger veranda staterooms provide an armchair and sit-out balcony. If you spend most of your time in lounges and open decks, French balcony staterooms will suffice. Standard staterooms are slightly larger but have only a somewhat claustrophobic half-height picture window.

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