



**VIBRANT:** Cape Town's V&A Waterfront, with Table Mountain in the background

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# Taking a slow boat to the land of plenty

By **Susie Boulton**

**DECKHAND** Albert may look like Manuel from *Fawlty Towers* but with his expert knowledge, unflappability and dexterity, he couldn't be more different from the hapless Spanish waiter.

We are on *La Belle Epoque*, a European Waterways barge built in the Netherlands in 1930 to carry cargo. It has since been transformed into a floating hotel, and Albert is one of the six crew pampering the passengers on this six-cabin vessel.

Bedecked with potted flowers and herbs, *La Belle Epoque* drifts along the scenic Burgundy Canal between Tanlay and Venarey-les-Laumes.

It is a world apart from ocean-going cruisers or 200-passenger boats that sail the rivers of Europe. We travel at a snail's pace, covering just 40 miles in six days.

The pace is so sedate you can stroll alongside the boat on the towpath or burn off calories by cycling ahead and veering off to explore hamlets on the hillside. Those staying on board can savour the timeless pastoral landscape from the comfort of sunloungers or the on-deck Jacuzzi – a perfect antidote to city life, the silence broken only by birdsong or the splash of a heron diving for fish.

Skipper Pierre Yves steers with aplomb, while young Irish chef Brendan concocts exquisite dishes and hostess Erell gives passionate descriptions of the wine and cheeses for dinner.

Wine pairing is as professional as you might expect in such a prestigious region, and over six days we drink our way around the region (and beyond), starting with Chablis and ending with a big-hitting Charnes-Chambertin Grand Cru. We also visit a family-owned winery in the Chablis area.

Dinner is a candle-lit, multi-course affair. And whether it is wild green asparagus, stuffed escargots, smoked beetroot mousse or Charolais beef, the



**FLOWER POWER:** Wooden gateway in Flavigny-sur-Ozerain

## GETTING THERE

**European Waterways** ([europeanwaterways.com](http://europeanwaterways.com), 01753 598555) operates 17 barges. Themed cruises are also available and barges can be chartered. Prices for a six-night cruise start at £2,450pp and include all meals, wine, an open bar and excursions. Prices do not include transport to the pick-up point in Paris or onward transfers to the barge.

ingredients are sourced from the larder on the doorstep and enhanced by herbs from the onboard garden. Every dish is a treat.

Between meals, Jolanda organises visits to Renaissance chateaux, the Cistercian Abbey of Fontenay and Alesia, where Vercingetorix failed to resist the Roman siege in 52BC.

At Noyers-sur-Serein, a medieval market town, we have pork en croute, pâtés and rabbit terrine. Returning to the barge, we are greeted with exotic cocktails and canapes – anyone for frogs' legs or foie gras?

The last excursion takes us to hilltop Flavigny-sur-Ozerain, famous for aniseed sweets and as the setting of the sinfully delicious film *Chocolat*.

The foodie theme is never far away in this land of plenty.

## GETTING THERE

**Best Of South Africa Travel** ([bestofsouthafricatour.com](http://bestofsouthafricatour.com), 01233 802727) specialises in tailor-made itineraries. A six-night holiday costs from £4,409pp, including return flights from Heathrow, transfers, two nights' all-inclusive at Sabi Sabi's **Earth Lodge** with game drives and walking safaris, and four nights' B&B at **Cape Grace Hotel** in Cape Town in a luxury suite.

When Eddie studied the menu in restaurants he would point out wines for £20 which would easily cost £80 a bottle in Britain.

**O**N THE spur of the moment, one day we decided to hike up Table Mountain, which took about two-and-a-half hours. We were warned that it could be very windy at the top, but fortunately the weather was really warm and sunny during our jaunt.

On another occasion, our concierge service again came up trumps by securing a table at the trendy and very popular Shortmarket Club restaurant in the city centre. The restaurant serves modern food with a South African twist. We'd been looking forward to a



## ON THE PROWL:

Denise, above during her trip, was lucky enough to see a leopard on a game drive

fairways and greens were well manicured and the course had amazing views.

A good round of golf was followed by a great meal in the club's fine bistro, where we had a glass of sublime local wine.

The whole holiday was perfect and at the end I said to Eddie: 'I don't want to go home!'

When we left for the airport, I had tears in my eyes, and that doesn't happen very often.

I really want to go back and next time I'll take Betsy, because I think she will love it.

And Eddie is keen to go diving with sharks. I think I'll give that experience a miss... perhaps I'll go shopping with Betsy that day instead.

round of golf since our arrival, as South Africa has some famous courses. We had an excellent round at the Steenberg Golf Club. The



**LEISURELY:** La Belle Epoque winds through the Burgundy countryside

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