



# Barging Through Burgundy

Six days along the Canal du Nivernais combines leisurely travel with slowly changing, picturesque scenery.

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY Stephen Harby



Much is made in today's fast-paced world of the desire to reduce speed. As plein air artists, our choice to carefully record with our hands and eyes in lieu of (or in addition to) snapping a picture is a strong vote for slowing down. The good news is that, even in the jet age, it's possible to spend six days traveling fewer than 30 miles on a restored cargo barge, or *peniche*, on one of France's most historic and picturesque canals. It's a journey that could be made in less than an hour by car.

The Canal du Nivernais, deep in the wine region of Burgundy, connects the medium-sized cathedral town of Auxerre with the decidedly smaller town of Clamecy, and a journey along this segment is possible in either direction from May through October. I traveled it first in 2017 and again this past October on the *Luciole*, a restored cargo barge originally launched in 1926 when the extensive canal network in France was used to move cargo such as grain and coal. The earliest of these canals dates from the time of King Henry IV in the late 16th century, when travel by road was difficult, but canals continued in use for shipping bulk goods well into the 20th century.

The *Luciole* was discovered by its current owners and refitted in 1966 as

**Cruising on the Vermenton Canal** (graphite and watercolor on paper, 13x9½) shows a branch canal off of the main Nivernais Canal that leads to a small harbor beside the charming town of Vermenton. This studio watercolor is based on a quick study I made during my canal travels.

a hotel barge—the first of its kind—with eight comfortable but compact cabins. By day she travels slowly along the Canal du Nivernais and the River Yonne, which runs beside it. The river descends on its course, producing rapids, falls and shallows not suitable for navigation; however the canal is flat and of consistent depth, made possible by locks, which accommodate elevation differences. We traversed 32 of them.

With stops for going through the locks—pauses to let the water flow in or out to raise or lower the vessel—it's possible to walk along the canal faster than the barge progresses, and a fleet of electrical-assist bikes enables journeys further afield. Stops along the way allow passengers visits to nearby cathedrals, chateaux or wineries; Chablis is but one of the famous wine producing towns on the route. For the painter, opportunities abound to capture spontaneous vignettes as the vessel moves through constantly changing scenery, as well as to create more sustained works at one of the many stops.

Traveling the Canal du Nivernais offers one of the most lovely and varied landscapes in France. While lacking the drama of the Alps or the coastal regions, there's a subtly layered order and beauty that's gradually revealed, thanks to the steady immersion this

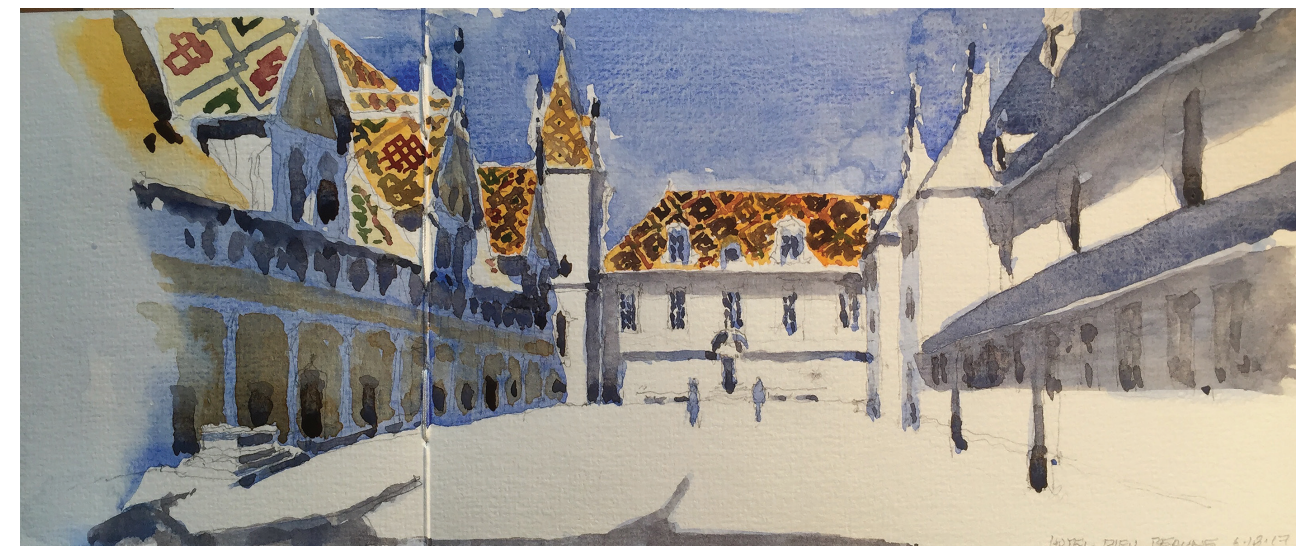
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## SKETCHING METHOD 1: WATERCOLOR



**Four-sketch series**  
watercolor on paper, 3¼x4½ each

Even when traveling on a slow-moving barge, one must work quickly to create watercolor sketches. Before starting my four-sketch series, I'd already taped off four panels on a cold-pressed mounted board and had the paint mixed and ready to go. As the vessel glided past the magnificent farmland turning to fall colors, there was no time to wait for the watercolors to dry; I either let them run together or strategically deployed dry, white areas between colors.



In Beaune, a two-hour drive from the Canal du Nivernais, I painted **Les Hospices de Beaune** (graphite and watercolor on paper in sketchbook, 5x11¼). Since its founding in 1443, the hospital has provided medical care to the needy. The multicolored, glazed-tile roofs is the focus of my sketch.



## SKETCHING METHOD 2: GRAPHITE AND WATERCOLOR

Sketchbook page  
of quick vignettes  
graphite and  
watercolor on paper,  
10x8



Sometimes I made visual notes by devoting a sketchbook page to small thumbnail sketches laid out quickly in pencil and then painted equally fast, either with the scene before me or right after it slid from view. The two sketches on the left show the narrowness of the locks—often just wide enough to let a barge slide in with mere inches to spare. Between locks, the canal is wide enough to permit two barges to pass, as seen in the sketch above. I later developed that sketch into a separate finished watercolor (see *Cruising on the Vermenton Canal*, page 6).

## SKETCHING METHOD 3: GRAPHITE



Cathedral sketch  
graphite on paper in sketchbook, 6½x5

My canal travels ended at the city of Auxerre. Walking through the town in late afternoon, a view of the Auxerre Cathedral (Cathédrale Saint-Étienne d'Auxerre), built in 1215–1233, caught my eye. The transept, bathed in golden light with a backdrop of dramatic dark clouds, rose at the end of a narrow, inclined lane. Spending no more than five minutes, I captured the composition and light values with a soft Derwent Graphic pencil (see *Cathedral sketch*, above). I also took a reference photo of the Gothic tracery in the window and portal for a subsequent studio painting (see *Cathédral Saint-Étienne, Auxerre*, at right).

For the studio painting, I laid successive washes to arrive at the simplicity and chromatic density required to convey the drama of the lighting. The initial wash, done with cadmium yellow and burnt sienna, covered everything except



*Cathédral Saint-Étienne, Auxerre*  
graphite and watercolor on paper, 13x9½

the lightest surfaces, the vans and the man's shirt. Next came a cobalt and ultramarine wash for the sky and everything not in direct sunlight. Then dark washes established the hierarchy of shadows necessary to describe forms.



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mode of travel affords. The geological condition of the valleys, cut by the meandering River Yonne, is of limestone escarpments, producing an often precipitous topography on both sides of the waterway. Rounding a bend in the river may reveal a small town perched on a hill or hugging the side of a cliff at the water's edge.

My strategy for capturing all of this as the boat moved forward was to draw, with a few lines of graphite or gestures of paint, the major shapes, on which I could elaborate later. From these references in my sketchbook, I then developed larger paintings either that same day, once we were moored, or at home, weeks later. 🍷

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Hotel barge *Luciole*

## PLAN YOUR TRIP

There are many sources of information on canal barge travel on any of several canals in France, including the Canal du Midi, the Canal du Bourgogne and the Canal du Nivernais. Emma James-Aldridge, CEO of Hotels Afloat ([hotelsafloat.com](http://hotelsafloat.com)) is a knowledgeable agent who can assist in narrowing the search, choosing levels of service and making an eventual booking. The hotel barge *Luciole* ([bargeluciole.com](http://bargeluciole.com)) can be booked directly through its owner (Penny Liley) as can any of the other full-service vessels, such as the *Athos* ([athosdumidi.com](http://athosdumidi.com)), which plies the Canal du Midi, in the Languedoc province of southern France.