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Bordeaux river cruise indulges passions for wine, castles and medieval villages



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The 14th-century castle of Roquetaillade is included in an excursion on AmaWaterways Taste of Bordeaux cruise. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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We stood on the cobblestone square looking up at the bell tower, its cupola splitting the sun into shards of light. The guide on our river cruise had suggested we climb it. Just 196 steps, he said. Could we manage?

My husband turned the key in the old lock at the base of the belfry and up we went, around and around the narrow stone steps spiraling inside the 15th-century tower. Panting with effort and anticipation, we emerged on a balcony, archways framing an incredible view. I slipped my arm around his waist as we stood staring at the russet tile roofs on buff-colored buildings stacked on

terraces below. Just beyond them, acres of green rolled to the horizon, vineyards producing some of the world's finest wines. "I could live here," he said.

Saint-Emilion was just one of the storybook towns we explored on AmaWaterways weeklong Taste of Bordeaux cruise on the waterways of southwestern France. We hiked through vineyards, biked on back roads, toured châteaux and tasted wine.

Lots and lots of fine wine.



AmaWaterways AmaDolce docks on the café-au-lait waters of the Gironde Estuary during its Taste of Bordeaux cruise. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Good for grapes

The Bordeaux region, with the Pyrenees on the south and the Atlantic on the west, contains a mix of soils and microclimates -- terroir, we were told -- producing world-class wines in 60 appellations. Two main rivers, the Dordogne and Garonne, course toward the ocean joining to form the Gironde Estuary. For 50 miles it flows, café au lait-colored currents mixing fresh and saltwater with twice-a-day tidal bores strong enough for surfing. Limestone cliffs rise from the right bank. The flat, gravelly left bank had been swampland drained by the Dutch long ago. Some 8,000 wineries dot both sides turning out simple table wines to prized premier cru. Red wine accounts for 82 percent of the production.

Grapes have grown here since Roman Emperor Augustus ruled Aquitania, but it was Eleanor of Aquitaine who made the wine famous. One of the most beautiful women of Western Europe during the High Middle Ages, she patronized poets and philosophers and drew up a code for love that fueled her reputation as a coquette. She married the future King Henry II of England and Aquitaine remained part of England for 300 years. Wine from the region -- the English

called it claret -- grew so popular profits from its sale became the chief source of revenue for the Crown.



AmaDolce crew member Elitsa Todorova serves wine and a smile to passengers on AmaWaterways Taste of Bordeaux cruise. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Bordeaux by river cruise

AmaWaterways provides an ideal means for exploring Bordeaux. Board the AmaDolce, one of the line's 23 vessels, unpack and let it take you to ports around Aquitaine, often docking right in town. With a maximum of 144 passengers, the ship doesn't feel crowded. Meals are included with open seating in the main dining room or by reservation at the Chef's Table specialty restaurant. Complimentary soft drinks, beer and, of course, wine, come with lunch and dinner.

The cruise begins and ends in the city of Bordeaux, largest metropolitan area in Aquitaine with a population of 250,000. It became a UNESCO World Heritage site after an urban renewal project redeveloped the riverfront and cleaned the classical facades of buildings facing the water. Along with a gothic cathedral, public squares and gardens, you'll want to see La Cite du Vin. The wine museum opened in 2016 in an unusual glass building shaped like a decanter. Films and interactive exhibits tell the story of wine regions around the world. An observation deck on the eighth floor wraps around a wine bar. One taste is included in your admission ticket.

You'll find plenty of opportunities to sample wine in other ports on your own or on included excursions by motor coach, on foot or bicycle using the AmaDolce's fleet of two-wheelers. Five ratings of difficulty help you choose a tour to match your level of fitness.



AmaWaterways passengers who climb the bell tower in Saint-Emilion are rewarded with a view of the UNESCO World Heritage village and surrounding vineyards. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

An excursion from Pauillac travels through Medoc and Haut-Medoc vineyards producing some of the world's most famous wines: Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, Latour, Mouton-Rothschild and Margaux. It stops for a tour and tasting at a grand cru wine estate.

U.S. expat Lori Westmoreland entertained our tour group at Chateau Leoville-Poyferre on a walk across the grounds and down into a chilly cellar stacked with barrels. The wine is a blend of four grape varieties, principally cabernet sauvignon and merlot, she said. Medoc's maritime climate protects grapes from frost and the gravelly soil heats up in summer to ripen the low-hanging fruit. Grapes are picked by hand and sorted twice to ensure top quality. In the tasting room, she schooled us in the subtle flavors and aromas of three vintages we happily sampled.

You'll taste a rare and very different wine in the Sauternes region. The golden, sweet liquid accounts for only two percent of Bordeaux production. High humidity causes a fungus, a "noble rot," to form on the skin of the grapes creating a chemical reaction that gives sauternes a full-bodied flavor pairing well with foie gras.



A guided bike tour stops at a château near Blaye during AmaWaterways Taste of Bordeaux cruise. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Castles and medieval villages

Wine tasting is a must in châteaux around Saint-Emilion and so is a tour of this UNESCO World Heritage village. Golden limestone walls date back centuries. Steep streets are paved with cobblestones, ballast left behind by ships returning to England filled with wine. The largest monolithic church in Europe lies underground, chiseled by monks from solid bedrock at the beginning of the 12th century.

"Carved out of rock" translates as the French word *Roquetaillade*, the name of a castle 35 miles south of Saint-Emilion that's a major cultural attraction in Bordeaux. Though its fortifications date back to Charlemagne, it's the 14th-century castle that garners most of the attention. It has been in the same family for seven centuries and five family members still live there. One of them, *Vicomte Sebastien de Baritault*, guided our tour group pointing out a Renaissance fireplace, 16th-century tapestries and windows that replaced arrow slits where archers once fought off intruders. Bright copper pots hung from stone walls in an ancient kitchen the vicomte said his family still uses.

Lovers of medieval history and architecture will find many other sites to amuse them on trips ashore. A walking tour through the village of *Cadillac* -- yes, like the luxury car -- visits a 16th-century château that later became a notorious women's prison and mental institution. In *Blaye*, you can tour a 17th-century citadel on foot or take a bike excursion around the fortress and into the countryside, wheels spinning past rows of grape vines flanking country roads in fields resembling bolts of green corduroy.

Châteaux dot the countryside around Bordeaux. Many, like the 18th-century Chateau Boutinet, lie in ruins. Owner Nathalie Escuredo led us on a hike through her vineyards. As we walked she told us her story, a love story really. She had been a Bordeaux tour guide who became so enamored with wine she decided to attend school to study oenology. There she met her future husband. In 2011, they bought the wine estate where they've nurtured their children along with their grapevines.

She wrapped up our visit with a wine and tapas tasting, passing around photos showing her love for her family, her land, her wine. One day the couple hopes to turn the crumbling château into a bed-and-breakfast, perhaps with a cooking school to indulge another of their passions. When and how will be subject to the whims of the wine world, she said. "Dreams, you know, they have no deadline."

- Information for the article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by AmaWaterways.

Taste of Bordeaux

AmaWaterways' seven-night Taste of Bordeaux itinerary has departures from March 19 to Nov. 12 in 2020 starting from \$2,349 to \$4,099 including shore excursions; optional pre-tour in Northern Spain and post-tour in Paris and the Loire Valley for an additional cost. Get information at [AmaWaterways.com](https://www.amawaterways.com) or (800) 626-0126.

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