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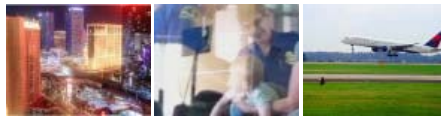
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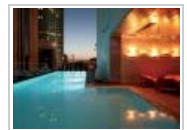
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ONBOARD THE SS ADRIENNE, France (Part two) -- Our barge cruise is underway at last. Our captain, a long-time veteran with French Country Waterways, welcomes us with a champagne toast and an overview of the journey. Over the week ahead, he says, we'll cruise at the speed of an escargot up the Marne River into the adjacent canal, surely the most pleasant way to explore the heart of rural Champagne. For 300 years these waterways have transported people and goods: wine, cheese, salt, soap and wool. Lockkeepers, operating the original system of locks and gates, raise and lower the water levels as the elevation changes. Noting the many smaller barges that pass, we learn that for many French families, barging on their own workaday vessel is a popular holiday.



And yes, the Adrienne is just that kind of barge, a former workhorse, her broad decks piled high with boxes and bales. Long, low and ever-so-sleek, she's now a renovated beauty. Katie loves the water-line view from our porthole; I'm delighted with our cleverly organized cabin, so spacious that after I unpack my suitcase it vanishes into a closet. There's nothing missing except reliable internet service. But who's complaining? Fresh croissants delivered before dawn by local bakeries, and hot coffee and juice awaiting us at the breakfast table. Cuisine prepared onboard by our chef and paired with the right Grand Cru wines. In a nod to civility, chilled champagne, dew forming on the bottle, beckons us at twilight. Do we miss our daily emails? Not a bit, praise be. Which is just as it should be. Communicating with the outside world would be a buzz kill. (Continued in Part 3)



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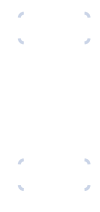
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