Eau de Vie

a wine, spirits, and travel newsletter

Vol.83 November 2025

Not exactly as planned

There is a quote that goes like this, "If the plan doesn't work, change the plan, not the goal."

Our goal for 2025 was to move our little boat from Alsace to Burgundy. Our plan was to go up the Rhine (remember, the Rhine flows from the Alps in Switzerland, north to the Netherlands) and then travel on to the Canal du Rhone au Rhin (the canal that links the Rhine and Rhone rivers.)

This plan was somewhat fraught with danger because the Rhine is a major commercial waterway. The ships that ply it are always moving, both day and night and all year long. The largest are over 500ft long and almost 60ft wide. There are cruise ships, fuel barges and triple length combo behemoth barges. The biggest locks are almost 1000ft long and 80 ft wide. Our boat in contrast is only 42ft long and 12ft wide and would be minuscule when stuffed into a lock with the floating titans of European commerce.

Then there is the weather. Our plan was to travel in late May and the Rhine often floods in May and June. It all depends on the weather. How much snow is in the Alps? How quickly is it melting? Did it or is it going to rain and if so how much? All of these things matter because they can substantially alter the flow rate of the river and according to our plan we need to go up river.

The Swiss and French governments do publish hourly flow rates at various points along the river which seems helpful but it isn't really. This is because the river widens and narrows, speeding up and slowing down. It's not easy to calculate the rate at which you'll be slowed because we won't always be at the same place in the river. Also, our boat is designed for almost no flow. It is almost flat bottomed and performs best with minimal resistance. A strong head wind will slow us noticeably. A tail wind will propel us to an early lunch or a evening cocktail. The boat's name has the word Relax in it. Thinking about the flow rate on the Rhine was anything but relaxing. There was a real possibility that we could get out onto the river and only be able to travel at 1-2km per hour! There was also the possibility that we wouldn't make any headway and that we would be flushed down stream to where we started!

Despite all these concerns, we plowed ahead with the plan. It took us two days to get to the lock that allowed us to get onto the Rhine. As required, we scheduled a time to use the lock with aid of a lock keeper. The morning of our planned entry onto the Rhine, while waiting for her to arrive, we noticed a mechanical problem. Our engine cooling system was broken and we cleverly, but worryingly, fixed it with tape. When she arrived and the repairs were still being made we queried her about how we were supposed to hail the lock keepers on the Rhine (there were 6 massive locks we were going to have to traverse with the commercial traffic). She said, "You call them on the radio and wait until the commercial traffic goes in first and then you fit in where ever you fit."

Oh, I thought, "Ok, we have an old radio that came with the boat let's dig that out." When turned on, it didn't. When charged, it didn't. It didn't work at all.

Our lock keeper, who's name was Blondine, said to us, "I don't think you should go. It would be very dangerous not to have a radio. You have to talk to the lock keepers and the other ships. I think this is not good for you."

Despite her reservations, she was willing to allow us to try. She gave us the phone number to call the first lock keeper and said, "You must call them, wait your turn and get the number from them to call the next one. If you want, you can go. It is not illegal but it is dangerous and you are nice people."

We had a crew meeting. There was another way to get to Burgundy. It was longer, with more locks and would take more time but crucially, it avoided the Rhine.

We told Blondine we agreed with her expert advice. We turned around and changed the plan but not the goal.

We made it to Burgundy, traveling the long way around. We traveled 671km, traversing 231 locks, 6 tunnels and 1 elevator. We put 131 hours on the engine in 35 days and it was marvelous.

I made vlogs every other day on this journey and if you need a winter binge / reality show follow this link to the playlist.

YouTube

Join us in Burgundy in 2027?

Click the image above to download the 2027 planner

We'd love to host you in 2026 but all the spots for 2026 are sold! How about we travel with you in 2027?

This year we are doing something different. Instead of traveling to France twice, once in the spring and then again in the fall, we are splitting the time with our boat partners. Rick and Carla are taking reservations for spring trips and Sara and I are taking reservations for Summer and Fall.

Sara and I will be offering 4 weeks of cruising in Burgundy in 2027. The exact routing is still to be determined but it will follow the weather. Meaning the weeks in August and early September we will travel more on river systems so we can take advantage of the cool river and swim. While the weeks later in September we will travel more on canals and venture into the vineyards to experience the best of Burgundy's bounty.

Click the link above to download the 2027 planner for more information. Please contact me if you'd like to travel in France in 2027.

Here, let me pour you a glass of wine and let's talk about Burgundy.

Curious about France and Boating? Join us at Community Ed:

We are teaching 4 Community Ed classes in Duluth. Two in November and repeating them both again in March 2026:

November 6: **Planning a Trip to France**

November 13: **Planning a Barging Trip to France**

Classes are at Denfeld High School from 6-8pm in the commons. Cost: $10 - please register through Duluth Community Ed. Bring a notebook and pen.

March 12 & 19, 2026:
Planning a Trip to France &
Planning a Barging Trip to France
Also held at Denfeld High School from 6-8pm in the commons. Winter session registration is not yet open.