

# Sailing down the Seine on the ‘Scenic Gem’

Discovering historic riches of Normandy on river cruise

**JANICE AND  
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*Contributing writers*

**Is Benedictine really a secret elixir originally created by a 16th century monk?**

Or was Alexandre Le Grand, the wine merchant who started producing the golden liqueur in the mid-1800s, just a shrewd businessman pulling a fast one? No matter. The mystery shrouding Benedictine ensured the success of the after-dinner drink. We're intrigued. And we get to tour the Benedictine Palace, which Le Grand built, in grand style.

We're sailing on the Seine in France on the 118-passenger "Scenic Gem." Scenic Cruises, the Australian company which operates this and other river ships in Europe, has organized a special dinner ashore at the Benedictine Palace in Fecamp. So, dressed up and



The Chateau de Chantilly consists of the Petit Château, built around 1560, for Anne de Montmorency, and the Grand Château, destroyed during the French Revolution and rebuilt in the 1870s. PHOTO SUPPLIED **JANICE MUCALOV**

champagne glasses in hand, we wander through its rooms with its flamboyant arches and stained glass windows.

A trio of classical musicians plays in the background. After admiring Le Grand's collection of historic books

and art, we dine in a chandelier-lit hall on lobster, duck pate and lamb charlotte – followed by generous pourings

of Benedictine, of course.

All of Scenic's river cruises include an added special "enrich" experience like this, not offered on similar cruises by other lines. But really, so many of our activities are memorable in their own way that it's hard to flag our dinner at the Palace as the "premier" experience. On our 10-night trip from Paris to the Normandy Coast and back, we cruise past chalk cliffs and gently rolling banks of green, passing through several locks on the way. We stop to see centuries-old castles and cathedrals, blooming gardens, artist studios and off-the-beaten-path museums – the sights and scenery along the way reminding us that the Seine valley is the cradle of Gothic France as well as the birthplace of Impressionism.

We perhaps have the most fun on the e-bikes (the river ship has 25 well-maintained electric bicycles onboard). At Caudebec-en-Caux, we join

the guided bike ride to the Victor Hugo Museum in the pretty hamlet of Villequier. Our short ride is easy, thanks partly to the new, flat, paved Seine Valley Cycle Route, which runs 120 kilometres alongside the Seine River.

The museum was once the family holiday home of a wealthy ship owner whose son married Victor Hugo's daughter, Leopoldine. Tragically, Leopoldine and her husband drowned in a sailing accident nearby on the Seine, shortly after their wedding. Today, the rooms of the house – decorated in period furnishings – contain letters, photographs and manuscripts illustrating the lives of the famous French writer, the doomed young couple and other family members. And who is that lovely young woman with the come-hither eyes? Ah, that's Hugo's mistress, his lover for 50 years.

After visiting the elegant riverside museum, we leave the group and continue pedalling on the river path – pushing the e-boost on the bikes to the max, laughing as we ride faster than we've ever bicycled before – until hunger drives us back to the ship for a barbecue lunch on deck.

In Vernon, we cycle again. But this time we're on our own. Aussies, who make up about half of Scenic's passengers, are intrepid travellers, we learn. They like having the flexibility to explore independently. So Scenic has these nifty personal audio devices with pre-programmed walks and maps to use if you don't feel like joining a guided tour. For our ride from Vernon, the tour director also hands out printed maps for those of us who still like the feel of paper between our fingers. So, under bluebird skies and with summer-like temps (in October, no less!), we risk sunburn and find the riverside path to Claude Monet's home and gardens in Giverny. Monet spotted the

*See Monet page 19*



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The Scenic Gem cruises the Seine River from Paris to the Normandy Coast. PHOTO SUPPLIED **SCENIC CRUISES**



Along the riverside path to Claude Monet's home and gardens in Giverny, France.  
PHOTOS SUPPLIED JANICE MUCALOV

## Monet's masterworks come to life in his Giverny gardens

From page 18

pink stucco house with its jaunty green shutters while traveling on a train – and immediately fell in love with it. For 40 years until his death in 1926, he lived and worked here, capturing the region's ever-changing light and soft scenes on dozens of canvasses. His water garden is especially enchanting; the light dances on trailing orange nasturtiums, neon-coloured dahlias and roses. Alas, throngs of other visitors are also out and about today. Unlike the Victor Hugo Museum, which we had all to ourselves, we have to patiently wait our turn for the best picture spots in the gardens and as we go through the rooms of the house.

Inside, his blue sitting-room has been restored as it was, along with the cozy yellow and cornflower-blue country kitchen where he dined with his eight children and Alice, his mistress-cum-second wife. His flower gardens are glorious to stroll through too. "I must have flowers, always, and always," Monet once said. We walk between rows and rows of trailing orange nasturtiums, neon-coloured dahlias and roses. Alas, throngs of other visitors are also out and about today. Unlike the Victor Hugo Museum, which we had all to ourselves, we have to patiently wait our turn for the best picture spots in the gardens and as we go through the rooms of the house.

It's impossible to talk about Normandy without mention of the D-Day beaches. The epic events of the Second World War Allied landing on June 6, 1944 to liberate occupied Europe are an integral part of the psyche of Normandy. Full-day tours are offered by Scenic, with one excursion option a visit to Juno Beach, where the Canadians landed.

At the D-Day Museum in Arromanches, we watch a grainy black-and-white film



The seaside town of Honfleur on the north coast of Normandy has long been an historic port.

about how massive modular harbour sections were built in England and floated across the English Channel to create the port for delivering troops and supplies. Outside, concrete remnants poke up through the sea. German bunker ruins also still dot the long wide stretch of golden beach. They're in stark contrast to the cheerful beach windkarts (or sand yachts) – basically tricycles attached to huge sails – awaiting present-day riders to whiz along the hard-packed sand.

Our river cruise takes in many more sights and activities. There's the impossibly picturesque seaside town of Honfleur with its half-timbered homes, cobbled alleyways and patisseries filled with tempting meringues and macarons. The sunset visit to an organic manor-farm for cider and Calvados tastings, accompanied by local creamy cheeses. The storybook Chateau de Chantilly, housing the second largest collection of antique paintings after the Louvre (must see: two exquisite works by Rafael, the Italian Renaissance artist). The vast gardens laid out behind the palace of Vaux de Vicomte (on which Versailles

was modelled) and the posh seaside resort of Deauville.

Everywhere the Seine flows in Normandy, it paints picture-perfect scenes that belie the region's rich and turbulent history. And in Paris, which book-ends this cruise, swans gliding unruffled on the river add an air of serenity to this vibrant city of ineffable charm.

### If you go:

Scenic Cruises offers some of the most deluxe river cruises in Europe. Dubbed "space ships" because of the large public areas, the ultra-modern ships come with lots of bells and whistles like showers with multiple jets (get a back massage while lathering up). Most cabins have glass balconies that cleverly turn into enclosed sun rooms at the touch of a button. Virtually everything is included in the rates – all excursions, cocktails and premium wines (French on our cruise), dinner in the specialty restaurant, mini-bar restocked daily, tipping, even one bag of complimentary laundry. All guests have butlers too. And we loved that there are no ship announcements. For more information, visit [scenic.ca](http://scenic.ca).

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