

Bordeaux, the Loire & Carcassonne

PRELIMINARY TRIP INFORMATION

Editor's Note: A full trip information kit, including photos, larger maps and additional details will be available in the next week or so. Thank you for your patience as we compile the final color version for your enjoyment.

Tour: Bordeaux, the Loire & Carcassonne

Dates: October 2020

Main Trip, Lower Deck D: **\$4,795** per person

Main Trip, Lower Deck C: **\$4,995** per person

Main Trip, Lower Deck B: **\$5,095** per person

Main Trip, Main Deck A: **\$5,395** per person

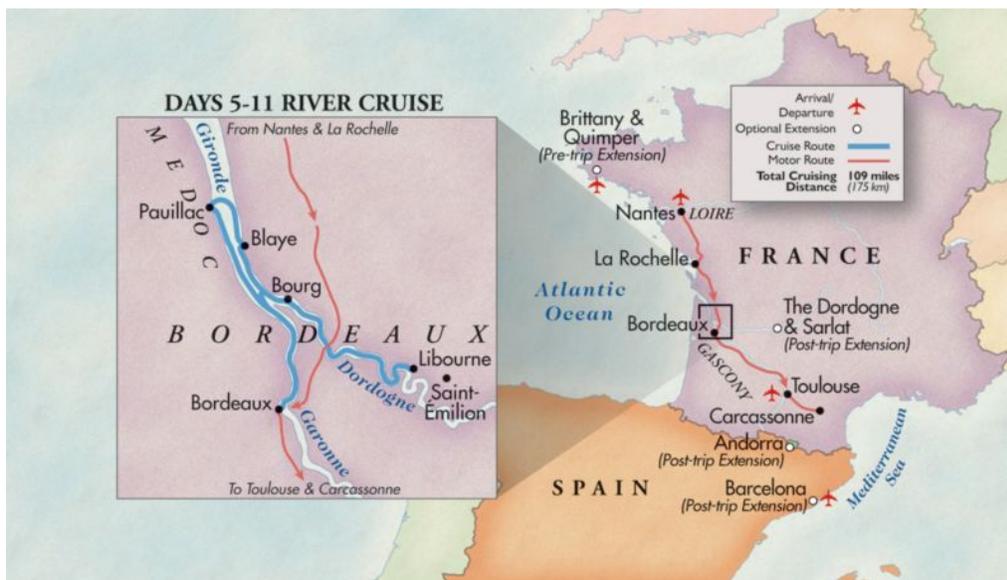
Airfare from Detroit (DTW): **\$1,300** per person

Travel Protection: **\$699** per person

TRIP OVERVIEW:

The Loire, Bordeaux, and Carcassonne offer the best of France—its valleys, vineyards, and magnificent châteaux are steeped in history and alive with the warmth of its people. Experience them like never before. Cruising with your small group, you'll sail three stunning waterways—the Garonne, the Gironde, and the Dordogne—enjoying panoramic vistas and disembarking for cultural discoveries.

Begin your discoveries in Nantes, once Brittany's capital city, and encounter fantastical feats of artistic machinery at The Machines of the Isle of Nantes. Then travel south from the splendor of the Loire Valley, stopping to admire the beautiful seaport of La Rochelle before embarking on a seven-night cruise aboard our intimate, 75-passenger vessel. Witness the 18th-century opulence of Bordeaux—the Roman capital of Aquitaine. Then disembark in Bordeaux to travel to the vibrant city of Toulouse, and visit the majestic medieval citadel of Carcassonne, a UNESCO World Heritage city. Space is on a first-come, first-serve basis and is truly limited. To reserve your spot, call Southern Exposure at (269) 962-1255.



TEXT-ONLY ITINERARY:

DAY 1

Depart U.S.

Depart today on your overnight flight to Nantes, France.

DAY 2

Nantes, France

Bienvenue and welcome to France. You will arrive in the city of Nantes today where you'll be met at the airport and transferred to your hotel.

Situated along the banks of the beautiful Loire River, Nantes is an artistic, innovative city with a Celtic soul and the heart of France. Founded by the Celts around 70 BC, the city today is an energetic cultural hub. Spend the afternoon exploring its lively streets on your own, or choose to join your Program Director for an orientation walk and get acquainted with the area around your hotel.

Early this evening, gather with your fellow travelers for a Welcome Drink at your hotel, before setting off for dinner on your own. Your Program Director can suggest restaurants where you can eat as the locals do. Between fresh perch from the Loire and oysters hauled up from the nearby Atlantic, seafood is a popular option. The Loire Valley is also known for its classic white wines; pair one with your meal tonight.

DAY 3

Nantes • Welcome Dinner

After breakfast this morning, learn a few key phrases in French from your Program Director before setting off on an included tour of the city in your small group of 25.

Though a modern university city, Nantes' history is long. Step back into medieval Brittany with a stop at Château des ducs de Bretagne, a stately castle whose legacy dates back to the 13th century. The structure you see today has gone through considerable transformations since then.

Continue your journey through time with a walk along the narrow cobblestoned streets of the medieval district of Bouffay. Then leap forward in time to the 1800s and discover the cinematic Passage Pommeray, an ornate shopping arcade with a vaulted glass ceiling and statue-lined walkways.

You'll also visit the elegant Île Feydeau neighborhood, so named as it was an island until the 1930s when one of the arms of the Loire River was blocked. You'll round out your explorations with a visit to the Abolition of Slavery memorial. Erected in 2012, this relatively new addition to Nantes is a stark, striking monument to the victims of the Atlantic slave trade—the city Nantes being a main French port for slavery—and to commemorate the 150th anniversary of France's Abolition of Slavery.

Break off for lunch on your own, then continue to discover the city at your own pace. Perhaps you'll choose to hop onboard a local ferry to discover picturesque Trentemoult. Once a traditional fishing village, the area is now famous for its artsy vibe, colorful red-tiled houses, and the occasional roaming cat.

Tonight, enjoy a Welcome Dinner at a local restaurant.

DAY 4

Nantes • Home-Hosted Visit • The Machines of the Isle of Nantes

After breakfast and a relaxing morning, you'll break off into smaller groups and join a French family in their home for friendly cultural exchange and to learn about day-to-day life in France.

After lunch at a local restaurant, step into the whimsical world of Les Machines de L'île, or The Machines of the Isle of Nantes. Inspired by the wildly imaginative works of writer Jules Verne—born in Nantes in 1828 and known as the Father of Science Fiction—the park is an artistic wonderland of massive puppet and automaton machines. Among its main attractions are the astounding Grand Éléphant—a majestic feat of mechanics that can carry up to 50 passengers for the most unique ride of their lives—and a whimsical multi-story carousel.

The balance of the evening is at your leisure, and dinner in Nantes is on your own.

DAY 5

Nantes • La Rochelle • Bordeaux • Embark ship • Captain's Welcome Dinner

After breakfast, bid adieu to Nantes and begin your journey south from the chivalric splendor of the Loire Valley. As fortune would have it, along the way is the breathtaking city of La Rochelle, located on the Bay of Biscay. This seafaring city is a mélange of vaulted walkways and homes shingled in slate tiles, with grinning gargoyles waiting for you at every turn. During an included walking tour, admire how the sun reflects off the cityscape's limestone facades.

This ancient seaport dates back to the time of the Romans, who produced salt and wine here for their expanding empire. La Rochelle was just a small fishing village when it was founded in the tenth century but expanded and flourished into a major harbor during the twelfth century. The city was also immortalized by the novel *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas, who was inspired by the 1627 Siege of La Rochelle—the result of a war between French royal forces of Louis XIII and the Huguenots of La Rochelle.

A dark cloud fell over La Rochelle in 1941 when the Germans established a U-boat bunker at La Pallice—the city's main port—during World War II. Despite serving as a strategic port for the Germans during the war (and being the last French city to be liberated at the end of World War II), the salt-stained, limestone walls of La Rochelle largely escaped damage from Allied attacks. Today, however, La Rochelle's whitewashed architecture is a shining reminder of its maritime heritage, justly earning its moniker as the “White City.”

You'll savor an included lunch before continuing south to the city of Bordeaux where you'll be welcomed aboard your intimate private river ship, the M/S River Chanson. Over the next seven days you'll sail some 109 miles on two rivers, the Garonne and the Dordogne, and on the wide waters of the Gironde estuary. Your exact schedule will vary as your captain must account for the tides and currents.

Tonight, you'll gather for your first Port Talk and get better acquainted with your ship, the crew, and the cruise experience itself. You'll also learn about each town prior to arrival, so you can make the best use of your free time. Whether you want to relax in the in the ship's friendly lounge or explore like a local on one of our 14 complimentary standard or electric bicycles, the choices are there for you.

This evening you'll also enjoy the Captain's Welcome Dinner. Bon appetit!

DAY 6

Bordeaux • Bourg

After breakfast, begin your cruise as you sail on the Garonne, passing the elegant neoclassical facades of the city. Heading downstream, you may even pass ocean-going ships as we enter the one-to-two mile wide tidal Gironde estuary, and sail some 17 miles to Bourg on its left bank.

Mid-morning, you'll be treated to an array of culinary delights onboard—tasting some of the region's illustrious wines and local specialties such as canelé, a rich, bite-sized pastry flavored with vanilla and rum.

After lunch, you'll disembark with your group of 25 and join your Program Director on a walking tour of Bourg, a fairy tale village in France's Aquitaine region. A hidden gem on the left bank of the estuary, at the confluence of the Dordogne and Garonne rivers, Bourg exudes a charming, authentic feel that has remained largely untouched by the tourist circuit.

Following your walking tour, you'll enjoy a hands-on experience at a local organic farm. Family-owned and operated, the couple who runs the self-sustaining farm will lead you through their daily routine—you'll even have the chance to lend a hand by picking vegetables from their garden or perhaps helping to feed their livestock, a collection of sheep, goats, and llamas. Later on, as you enjoy a taste of the farm's bounty, get to know your hosts on a more personal level—an experience you'll appreciate more in your smaller, more intimate group.

Tonight, enjoy dinner onboard.

DAY 7

Bourg • Blaye • Pauillac

Relax on deck this morning as your ship continues to sail through the Gironde Estuary, the longest in Europe. Its strong tides provided a wealth of diverse fish—which the little fishing shacks you'll see as you sail take full advantage of. Along the way, you'll pass by islands that serve as nature preserves and popular spots for adventurers, perhaps spotting seafaring birds or local flora and fauna before arriving in Blaye.

Once you disembark, join an included walking tour of the town's citadel, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In 1685, Louis XIV appointed famed military engineer Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban to upgrade the citadel's aged and outdated fortifications. The fortress was strengthened in order to protect the city of Bordeaux, 30 miles south of Blaye. Many of Vauban's designs are still standing today, including the Porte Royale, the citadel's main gate. Walk along the top of the fortified walls during your tour and enjoy a panoramic view of the Gironde Estuary and the surrounding town.

Then enjoy some free time to explore on your own, perhaps opting to visit Blaye's farmers market. Feel transported back in time as you immerse yourself in this quintessentially French market, run for and by the area's farmers and artisans. Stroll past stalls packed with fresh meats, breads, and produce; you may even take part in some local interactions along the way.

This afternoon, you will set sail for your next port—Pauillac, renowned for its fine wines.

After dinner onboard, join your Program Director for an evening stroll and get your first taste of Pauillac, a small town overlooking the Gironde estuary.

DAY 8

Pauillac

This morning, you'll take part in your first winery visit, and get a taste of some of the Médoc region's most renowned wines.

Next, you'll delve even deeper into the creation of France's finest wines with a visit to a tonnellerie, or wine barrel maker. Here, expert coopers spend three years making each barrel for the region's famous wines—as well as for wineries around the world. In your small group, you'll get an up-close look at the meticulous barrel-crafting process. Coopers hold the specifics of their barrels like state secrets, so each tonnellerie has its own unique process and blend of woods. One of the barrel coopers will share his craft with you, inviting you to see the various oak staves—a blend of woods from different forests. Whenever you raise a glass throughout the rest of your journey, you will see the wine differently because of this unique experience. And when you set sail, you'll recall that these same waterways were what carried these lauded wines, and their special barrels, across the country and beyond.

Round out your day of wine-making discoveries with a tour of a local château. Hear about its history, enjoy a stroll of the property, and learn all about how grapes are grown and picked. Afterwards, put your newfound knowledge to use as you sample the château's wine.

Return to your ship for lunch, after which you'll have ample free time to discover more of Pauillac. Perhaps you'll stroll along the waterfront where you'll find a collection of cafés and small shops. As you explore, you may pass by the 19th-century Church of Saint Martin, a memorial dedicated to those who lost their lives when the city was bombed during World War II. You may also witness numerous homes built in the charentais style—two-story, rectangular structures built of stone, with gently sloping roofs made of red tile. A small, walkable town, today would be ideal for a ride on one of your ship's bicycles.

Dinner will be onboard this evening.

DAY 9

Pauillac • Libourne • Saint Emilion

Depart Pauillac and sail into the winding Dordogne. Cruise some 40 miles toward Libourne, where you can witness one of France's most unique natural spectacles—the Mascaret tidal bore. Tidal bores are large waves caused by the funneling of a high tide as it enters a long, narrow inlet. Your ship will need to leave the pier and you may have the choice to ride out the wave onboard or explore onshore until the ship returns.

You'll also have the opportunity to take part in one of our Exclusive Discovery Series discussions regarding a controversial topic of the region, such recent political developments in France.

Later this morning, you'll dock in Libourne, a charming town on the banks of the Dordogne River boasting a lovely main square. As you walk its welcoming streets, your Program Director will make a special stop at a local patisserie to give you a first-hand look at how the shop's famous chocolates are made. Because of your group's small size, you'll be able to gather in the chocolatier's cozy kitchen—something completely out of reach for larger touring groups.

Enjoy lunch onboard before transferring to Saint Emilion, a delightful medieval village and wine Mecca nestled in the heart of Bordeaux's rolling vineyards, and the first landscape to be designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The region's unique limestone soil not only helps in producing superior grapes for Merlot, but since the ninth century has also contributed building materials for many elegant châteaux. The extraction of limestone blocks also accounts for fascinating underground monuments and a monolithic church—named for the town's patron saint—which you'll discover on an included tour with a local guide.

Afterwards, you'll have some free time to spend at your leisure. Perhaps you'll explore one of the town's many boutiques. Besides its wines, Saint Emilion also prides itself on its macarons and lays claim to the almond variety, which were first made in 1620 by Ursuline nuns who lived in the village. The secret recipe was handed down for generations until 1930, when the sisterhood shared the recipe with a local bakery—which still bakes them by hand today.

Rejoin your group later this afternoon for a visit to a wine cellar, where you'll sample some of the world's most highly rated wines. Afterwards, you'll transfer back to Libourne and return to your ship.

Enjoy dinner onboard tonight.

Please note: Your tour of Saint Emilion will include walking over cobbled paths and steep hills.

DAY 10

Libourne • Bordeaux

Depart Libourne this morning and set sail for iconic Bordeaux—the quintessential French wine city. Be sure to take advantage of your last day of sailing. It's a good one, too—you'll cruise all three rivers, pass the famous Entre deux Mers, and admire the passing scenery as the landscape transitions from peaceful estuary to impressive cityscape.

Upon arrival after lunch, set off into Bordeaux—whose historic center is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site—for an included city tour. During your visit, you'll embark the public tram, which follows a picturesque route winding past the region's famed vineyards.

Originally established as a trading center by the Romans, Bordeaux lies on the western side of the Garonne River. Its Old Town includes lovely walking paths wending through elegant 18th- and 19th-century buildings laced with wrought-iron and stone figures. As you explore, you'll admire the beautiful façades along its waterfront, and visit the renowned Classical Grande Théâtre, one of the most acclaimed in the country. Also of note is the Place de la Bourse—an elegant town square designed by famed architect Ange-Jacques Gabriel, who is also responsible for Paris's Place de la Concorde and parts of the Palace of Versailles.

The rest of the afternoon is yours to continue your discoveries before returning to your ship for dinner.

DAY 11

Bordeaux • Captain's Farewell Dinner

This morning, delve into the culture of Bordeaux during a visit to an open-air market with your Program Director, followed by ample time to explore at leisure. Perhaps you will opt to travel like a local—by bicycle. Today would be a perfect opportunity to take one of the M/S River Chanson's onboard bikes for a spin. Or you may opt to walk and experience the city at a slower pace.

As your three-river cruise draws to a close, spend tonight with your fellow travelers celebrating the discoveries you've made—and the ones yet to come—during your Captain's Farewell Dinner. After dinner, raise a glass of golden Cognac—the twice-distilled brandy. This Exclusive Discovery Series event will conclude with a tasting, bien sûr.

DAY 12

Bordeaux • Disembark ship • Toulouse

Bid adieu to the M/S River Chanson this morning and begin your transfer to the last leg of our journey—the vibrant city of Toulouse. Your drive will take approximately two-and-a-half hours, during which time you can sit back, relax, and enjoy southern France’s idyllic scenery.

This afternoon you’ll arrive in Toulouse, a cultural hub renowned for its historic Théâtre du Capitole ballet and opera house. Known as La Ville Rose for the pale-red brickwork common in its traditional buildings, Toulouse offers elegant reminders of the past stretching all the way back to the medieval era, as well as glimpses of the future, with its three major universities. The city is also the headquarters of the plane maker Airbus and other aerospace companies. You’ll enjoy lunch at a local restaurant before settling into your hotel. Then embark on a short orientation walk to discover the neighborhood surrounding your hotel. Dinner will be on your own this evening.

DAY 13

Toulouse • Carcassonne

Today you’ll discover the walled city of Carcassonne, a fortified hilltop citadel whose medieval beauty is said to have inspired Walt Disney to design his castle-like theme parks. Really two towns, Carcassonne is divided into the medieval Cité, the largest fortified town still in existence in Europe, which crowns a ridge overlooking the River Aude; and the Ville Basse, or New Town, which was created after the Crusades in a grid-like pattern and is home to the Cathedral of St. Michael and Church of St. Vincent, both from the 13th century.

Your walking tour includes La Cité, with its double-lined ramparts and the turreted Château Comtal fortress, which overlooks its winding, narrow streets. The Basilique Saint-Nazaire here shows the handiwork of the 11th-14th centuries, with a Romanesque nave and Gothic choir illuminated by stained glass windows. You’ll enjoy lunch on your own here and time to explore at your own pace before we return to Toulouse late this afternoon. This evening, dinner is on your own.

DAY 14

Toulouse • Farewell Drink & Dinner

Today, uncover the gems of Toulouse—the “Pink City”—on your own. Perhaps you’ll visit the church of Les Jacobins Monastery, home to the relics of Thomas Aquinas. Or you may soak up millennia of culture in one of the city’s museums: Les Abbatoirs, next to the Garonne River, boasts a collection of modern and contemporary art, while the 19th-century Château d’Eau houses photography exhibits spanning the past 100 years in a transformed brick water tower. For an oasis within the city walls, perhaps you’ll stroll through the Jardin des Plantes, a lush botanical garden sculpted 200 years ago. Or to see the opulence of eras passed, visit one of the ornate 16th-century hôtels particuliers, grand townhouses that were once home to the city’s elite.

Toulouse has a proud gastronomical culture as well. Perhaps you’ll savor its signature cassoulet, a rich, slow-cooked casserole, paired with one of the region’s dark Cahors wines—made with Malbec grapes.

This evening, join your fellow travelers at a local restaurant for a Farewell Drink and Dinner to toast your explorations of beautiful western France.

DAY 15

Toulouse • Depart for U.S.