

Bordeaux River Cruise

This cruise has certainly been a long time coming. Originally slated for 2020, and then 2021, we're finally visiting one of the most celebrated wine regions in the world. The SS Bon Voyage is Uniworld's reimagined vessel for Bordeaux and one of the best-appointed ships in France. We're traveling at an opportune time. Schools are still in session, weather is ideal, and the bulk of American travelers to Europe won't arrive until June.

This letter will provide some insight into what to pack, what you'll experience aboard ship, and little things you should know to enhance your travel to France.

Please look over this letter. Between this document and the information available to you on the Uniworld site, I believe just about every question you can think of will be answered. If you have a specific concern, let me know.

Uniworld.com. Your cruise confirmation number is printed on your boarding pass. Using this number, you'll want to log on to <https://www.uniworld.com/us/already-booked/need-to-know>

This will bring you to a page to create a personal Uniworld account and complete a Personal Information Form. This form will facilitate your check in and provide a platform to enter dietary requests and other details. You'll need your passport information. **Skip over the section dealing with transfers** to and from the ship. Uniworld has already been apprised of your transportation.

Your cruise is all-inclusive. Accommodations, dining, beverages of all sorts, taxes, and gratuities are part of the cruise. The bar serves a range of drinks. It's also important to note that your **corkage fees are waived** on this cruise. If you find a great bottle you want to share at dinner or in the lounge, there is no charge for this. While most standard liquor, wines, and beer are included, the ship has a "top shelf" menu that comes at an additional charge.

Elephant in the Room. Covid restrictions and concerns. Masks, vaccine passports, contact tracing, quarantine requirements, testing have all been moving targets, now

trending toward more freedom of movement. It makes no sense to tell you what the current requirements are in a world where those requirements change daily.

It appears that Delta Airlines, once insisting on surgical masks, now allows cloth masks on board. France is opening up. Masks will not be required on board the ship or in public areas away from the ship. You're still required to mask up on public conveyances.

Instead of speculating, I plan to send an update to the group with current conditions before I leave for France on May 10th. Be assured that if testing is still required to return to the United States, you'll get the information and assistance you need.

Travel Insurance

Though not mandated, it's worth considering. Travel insurance programs likely won't provide coverage if the world shuts down again, but it will reimburse you for your tour costs if you have to cancel at the last minute. Many policies now provide compensation if you're forced to pay out of pocket to isolate. Take a look at this company. I've found them to be more reasonable than most others...

<https://www.allianztravelinsurance.com/>

Airport Check in

Please check in for your flight at least 2 hours prior to flight time. I always recommend an early check in for a trip like this. You'll need to have your passport and confirmation/ticket number for your flight. Masks will almost certainly be required by the airlines. Be sure that you've got a surgical mask as cloth masks don't meet requirements. N-95 type masks are fine, though may be more mask than you need.

Baggage ID

Be certain to attach a name tag with to each of your bags.

24-hour clock

Get used to using the 24-hour clock. Most of Europe works this way. 11:30 pm is noted as 23:30. All scheduled transportation will be listed this way. Add 12 to PM times to come up with the correct number. Two PM becomes 14:00. Five AM is 05:00.

Suggested Dress

Resort Casual is what we'll call it. Collared shirts, slacks or shorts, sundresses. Dinner will be somewhat dressier (no shorts for men), but not too much. There is absolutely no reason to pack any formal wear. Be comfortable. The leaflet from Uniworld suggests a

sports jacket, but this is merely a suggestion. The cruise line asks that no shorts be worn in the dining room at dinner.

Morning tours may be a bit chilly, with warming as the day goes on. We may also experience some precipitation along the way. Layer up in the morning if it's chilly. Remove layers as the day progresses. Bring a **lightweight raincoat** and/or a collapsible umbrella with you.

Be certain to bring comfortable walking shoes. Break them in before the trip. You'll be dealing with cobbled streets and uneven surfaces just about every day.

Bordeaux Weather in May

Our cruise begins and ends in the city of Bordeaux, and we don't get more than 40 miles away during the entire week. Temperatures will range from 62-73 degrees, though check the weather before you leave. I've been in Bordeaux in May and had very hot weather. We may see some showers. Pack accordingly.

We've got daylight hours to spare during our time in France with sunset a little before 6:00 AM and sunset not occurring until close to 9:30 PM.

Dining on board

Dinners aboard ship are open seating. If you'd like to dine with friends, you'll want to arrive in the dining room at the same time for seating together.

Entertainment

Uniworld has booked live entertainment along the route, which will be posted daily. In addition, we'll have some live discussion with Damon and Drew as well as a Trivia night. You'll have at least one day to put a team together before we dive into this contest.

Tour options

I'll have your tour schedules to you in a separate letter in late April. I'm still working with the cruise line on transportation times. I'll continue to investigate more tour opportunities as well.

Parlez Vous?

I have a bit of college French and just downloaded the Pimsleur French level two as a refresher. I can certainly understand more than I'll ever be able to speak.

Between sign language, pantomime, and friendly persuasion, you should be able to get your point across. Don't let a lack of understanding of the language get in the way of communication.

Despite what you might have heard, you will find the French people appreciate an effort to speak in their native tongue. A simple Bonjour is a necessity in beginning ANY conversation in France. France is extremely egalitarian. If you fail to greet a shop keeper, counter person, or taxi driver with a “bonjour”, it’s viewed as a snub. You’ll have an uphill battle from that point on.

A French Language phrase book/dictionary is a MUST. At the very least, you will be able to determine what’s just arrived on your dinner plate. Used book stores are a great resource for guides like this.

A few words/phrases you’ll want to use.

Bonjour	Hello or Good morning. Bonsoir in the evening hours
Merci	Thank you
l’addition sil vous plait	Check please! You can also make a gesture of signing a check*
Où sont les toilettes	Where is the toilet
Au revoir	Good bye
Sil vous plait	Please
Numbers 1-20	

*If you’re dining off the ship at any time, it’s important to note that you likely won’t not see your bill until you ask for it. The French dine slowly and your waiter would consider it rude to bring your bill before you were ready for it.

Learn some phrases in advance of the trip. Practice over dinner with your fellow traveler. Next time you’re wine tasting in Woodinville, pretend that French is all you speak.

When you arrive in France, give your language skills a try. Don’t be disappointed if your French counterpart turns to English. At least you gave it a shot. I guarantee the effort is appreciated.

Wi-Fi on Board

Uniwold offers complimentary wi-fi on board. Like most 4-G systems, service on board may be a little slow. It’s convenient for sending and receiving emails, but not a lot else. Generally, service is quicker if the ship is docked and we’re near a cell tower. Don’t expect to stream or skype. If you need to get some work done, there is almost always a café or bar nearby that you can access for the price of a beer or snack. Another tip- WIFI signals are generally better close to the ship office, so move close to reception if

you need to get some work done. You're also competing with others using limited bandwidth. Your efforts may be more successful when others are off the ship touring, or late at night when guests are sleeping.

Remember your passport

Make a couple of photocopies to place in your baggage and another with a friend at home. If lost or stolen, passports are much easier to replace if you have a facsimile copy. Take a picture of the signature page as a backup.

No visas are required for France (for US Citizens), but your passport must have at least 6 months validity remaining when you enter France. If there are changes to the current situation, you'll get an email from me. **Check your passport expiration date today.**

Electrical plugs and adaptors

You will need an adaptor and convertor for most US manufactured electrical devices that you take. The convertor changes the voltage, and adaptor allows you to plug it in. US Voltage is 110-120, and Europe runs on 220-240 volts. Battery chargers, curling irons, hair dryers are among these items. You can buy adapter/convertor kits at most drug stores. They come with many adaptors. There is a wide range of plug types. You only need your Type F plug as shown in the diagram.

Your laptop, tablet, or phone, if you bring one, should have already come equipped with a transformer/convertor in the plug. Check the voltage requirements on the transformer portion of the power cord. If it comes with a transformer in the cord, you will just need a plug adapter, not a current convertor.

Adaptors/convertors are available at travel stores, Target, Amazon, etc.



Telephones

Call your provider to see what they recommend for phone coverage overseas. I've typically found that plans that cover calls in Europe are very pricey and sometimes require the purchase of a new device. This has changed somewhat in the past year or so. Call your service provider in advance of the trip to see what they can set up for you.

One of the most affordable options is to buy a simple phone over there with pre-purchased minutes. There are many local phone stores in France that will sell inexpensive phones with preloaded minutes if you need to have the means to call home. An inexpensive smartphone preloaded with 300 minutes will probably cost you less than \$100.

If you're not using it already, Whatsapp is a great way to message and talk while you're overseas. <https://about.facebook.com/technologies/whatsapp/>

Currency

The Euro has been the official currency in France since 2002. At this time, it takes about 1.11 USD to buy 1 euro. Bear in mind that these are the rates at which banks buy from other banks. You are going to pay a slightly higher exchange when you purchase overseas. The Dollar moves up and down a few pegs in a week's time, but seems to be fairly stable against the Euro. Keep your fingers crossed that the trend continues until our return.

Spending overseas

The ATM or Bancomat (also known as GAB, Gichet automatique de banque) is the best way to go. Plan on a daily trip to the ATM with draw that day's cash. You get the best exchange rate and won't have to worry about whether a place will take a credit card.

Credit cards give you about the best exchange rate you will find. Many bank cards charge 1-2% for purchases made in foreign currency, which offsets the beneficial rate somewhat. Chase Bank and a few others offer cards that do not charge the foreign exchange fee.

Credit cards offer a very good exchange on your purchase. Make sure you keep your receipts. I have found that Visa cards seem to have the widest acceptance, followed by Mastercard. It is sometimes difficult to get a vendor to accept American Express, perhaps because of their fee structure. There are still some vendors in France who shy away from credit cards, likely due to the roughly 4% processing fees.

I have updated this information over the years. In its last iteration, I spent much time discussing the slow acceptance of US banks to issue "chip and pin" or "chip and sign" cards.

A vendor may wait for you to enter your pin to finalize a credit transaction. Simply say you have no pin.

This “chip and sign’ method works well in most cases. The only places you may have serious problems are automated ticket machines and highway toll booths with ONLY take chip and pin cards.

Bringing US Currency and hoping to exchange banknotes is a mistake. Banks keep shorter hours. Some don’t do foreign exchange, and many others won’t like the condition of the bills you want to change.

These are all problems I have encountered that can burn an entire afternoon. You should be able to order some Euros from your bank if you want to arrive there with some (though it’s not necessary). There is usually a fee and you have to allow time for your bank to secure the currency. It’s easiest just to hit the ATM at the airport or the nearest one to your destination. At each ATM Stop, get enough cash to last you for a couple days. **Traveler’s checks are a thing of the past.**

NO MATTER WHAT, you MUST contact your bank within a week of your departure to let them know that you will be using your credit card, debit card, or ATM over there. If you don’t do this, the security department of your bank will block usage. They will want to know detailed itinerary information, specifically dates and countries visited. Don’t forget to add any place you may be connecting on your way there or back.

You may do this online with some banks. Otherwise get in touch with the customer service section of your bank. (updated note for 2022-My bank, Chase, tells me I no longer need to notify them of overseas spending. I do anyway to avoid having my card suspended when I need it most.

Another Note: I have a wallet that is RFID protected. Some credit and debit cards can be read remotely using a reader. Add a level of protection by purchasing RFID sleeves for your cards. You can also find wallets online.

Packing your bags

Please try to limit your bags to one large and one small, carryon bag. There are laundry opportunities on board and in most hotels.

There are a few excellent websites dedicated to the art of packing for a trip. I have reproduced some of that information here, but you may want to visit some of these sites yourself. The links are www.oratory.com/travel, and <https://www.ricksteves.com/travel-tips/packing-light/ricks-packing-list>.

Please do what you can to reduce the size of your bag. This is doubly important if you’re touring before or after the cruise.

Make sure you have a bag with wheels. Don't overpack. Leave some room for the wine you'll be taking home. Pack lightly, with the idea that you can launder items on the ship or at your hotel.

Laundry

The ship provides a self-service laundry for guests as well as a full-service laundry for a fee. Here's an idea of those costs. Shirt €3.50, Skirt/Trousers €4.00, Underwear €1.20. Pressing only is about 50% of these prices. Allow 24-48 hours to get your clean clothes returned to you. There is no dry cleaning aboard ship.

Hotel laundry services are similar in cost. Be sure to allow 24-48 hours to get your items back.

Security/Safety

There is not a significant amount of violent crime toward tourists in France. There is, however, a great deal of pickpocketing and scams in which tourists are a prime target. I could write a few pages about what to look out for. Here's a thumbnail.

For starters, take a photo of your passport with your phone. It's also a good idea to photocopy the data page and zip it into a suitcase pocket. Leave a copy with a friend or relative that is able to fax or email that copy should you need it. It's much easier to replace a lost or stolen passport if you have a facsimile to present.

Rick Steves and people that have used them, swear by a money belt. I've always found them to be somewhat uncomfortable, but you may want to give it a try. Please! No wallets in back pockets! Purses and backpacks should always be zipped closed and held in front of you in crowded situations. See the section on RFID protection under Banking.

Buddy up! If you're going out, don't go alone. There's safety in numbers.

Most common scam is where someone gives you a plant sprig, necklace, bracelet, etc. It's not a gift. They will then ask for a donation, becoming increasingly belligerent until you give them something. Don't take anything if approached.

You'll be asked to sign petitions and approached by people pretending to be deaf. Don't believe a word of it. They want money and can become quite unpleasant if you refuse. Say no and walk away.

Be cautious. The closer you are to main tourist sites, the more you need to be aware of what's going on around you. En Garde!

Suggested Gratuities

Your gratuities for the ship staff are included in your cruise fare.

Restaurant service typically adds 15% to the total, so it is not necessary to tip more, though rounding up to the next dollar is a nice gesture.

Taxis are generally offered an extra 1-2 euro in the city. If you get help with your bags and you have an exceptional driver, then 5% is a nice addition.

Hotel porters-generally 1 € per bag.

Guide services are covered for the week on the river. If you are traveling before or after the cruise, it is customary to tip any local guide €2-€4 for their services.

Coach drivers are also covered on shore tours, but otherwise drivers are generally tipped €1- €2 per person, per day.

Arrival in Bordeaux

If you're arriving at Bordeaux Airport on the 15th, Uniworld will provide your transportation to the ship. You'll find transfer information in your document envelope. The cruise line has your flight schedule. Look for a representative in the baggage claim area. If you are traveling to the ship on your own on the 15th, your estimated cost from the Hotel de Seze or from the Saint Jean Rail Station by Uber to ship at Quai des Chartrons is 12-15 €.

Boarding begins at 1:00 PM, but you are able to drop bags off as early as 9:00 AM you arrive in Lyon early. Your cabin should be ready to occupy by 3:00 PM.

Departure from Bordeaux

We are about a 13€ fare away from the Saint Jean rail station while docked in Bordeaux. If you're departing from Bordeaux Airport on May 22nd or extending with my group to Normandy for the 3-day program, your transportation is taken care of. You'll be notified toward the end of the week when your airport transportation will depart. Otherwise, Uber or a taxi to the TGV Station, hotel, or rental car counter is the way to go.

Uber

My first Uber experience was in Lyon. It worked wonderfully and saved me about ½ the cost of a taxi. I've since it in 5 different countries. It's usually cheaper than a cab, and the charges go to the credit card tied to the account, eliminating the issue of currency exchange and tipping. It's an easy app to download on your phone.

Reading/Viewing List. By no means complete, here is a short list of books and videos you may want to look into as you prepare for your France tour.

A year in Provence	Peter Mayle
A Good Year	Peter Mayle
The Yellow House: Van Gogh, Gauguin in Arles	Martin Gayford
Rick Steves Travel Guides (or videos)	Rick Steves
Provence	Lawrence Durrell
Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown Lyon segment	
Van Gogh, The Life	Gregory White Smith/Peter Naifeh
My Life in France	Julia Child
Long Ago in France, The Years in Dijon	MFK Fisher
Flirting with French	William Alexander

Traveler Name list

I typically do not release a list of travelers in advance of a tour. I will have copies available on board for distribution for anyone who wants one.

SS Bon Voyage	Time in Port	Time cruising
Sunday, May 15th		
Bordeaux	9:00 AM-6:30 PM	6:30 PM-9:30 PM
Blaye	9:30 PM-overnight	
Monday, May 16th		
Blaye	Overnight-1:30 PM	1:30 PM-3:00 PM
Bourg sur Gironde	3:00 PM-overnight	
Tuesday, May 17th		
Bourg sur Gironde	Overnight-8:30 AM	8:30 AM-11:00 AM
Cussac-Fort-Medoc	11:00 AM-6:30 PM	6:30 PM-8:00 PM
Bordeaux	8:00 PM-overnight	
Wednesday, May 18th		
Bordeaux	Overnight-5:30 AM	5:30 AM-8:15 AM

Cadillac	8:15 AM-3:45 PM	3:45 PM-11:30 PM
Libourne	11:30 PM-overnight	
Thursday, May 19th		
Libourne	Overnight-overnight	
Friday, May 20th		
Libourne	Overnight-1:00 PM	1:00 PM-5:30 PM
Bassens	5:30 PM-6:30 PM	6:30 PM-7:30 PM
Bordeaux	7:30 PM-overnight	
Saturday, May 21st		
Bordeaux	Overnight-6:30 PM	6:30 PM-6:45 PM
Bordeaux	6:45 PM-overnight	
Sunday, May 22nd		
Bordeaux	Overnight-Morning disembark	
 Brad Cilley		
Northwest Travel Service	425 375 2676	brad@nwtravel.com