

# Profiting With a Wine-Tourism Niche in Burgundy, France

By Barbara Diggs

**T**he lavender fields of Provence may have inspired the poets of yore, but for wine lovers there are few sights more exhilarating than the vineyards of Burgundy. When driving through the heart of this region, it feels as if you're afloat in a golden-green sea; all around you, row after row of impeccable vines tumble down the hillsides in fluttering waves.

The striking landscape alone is worth the trip. And for wine aficionados, being able to enter the cellars of some of the most celebrated wineries in the world—or even stroll among the grapevines—can be an experience that borders on divine. So, it's no wonder that the Côte d'Or, the center of Burgundy's wine-growing region, draws in some 2.3 million visitors per year...and that's not counting the tens of thousands of day-trippers who stream down from Paris.

As you might expect, a slew of tour guides await in Burgundy, eager to help visitors make the most of the wine experience. But Tracy Thurling, a British citizen who has lived in the Côte d'Or area for nearly 10 years, saw that there was still plenty of business to go around...and a niche to fill.

"Around 2009, I was working in a wine cellar when a French tour guide asked me if I could help out with his tours," Tracy explains. "It was mostly wine tours but also cultural. I started doing that on a part-time basis."

When she realized that she was making more money as a part-time tour guide than at her job, Tracy leapt at the chance to open her own operation. In 2012, she quit her job and founded Burgundy by Request, a tour service offering private, fully customizable tours throughout the entire Burgundy region.

"When I was working for others, I realized that most people in the region were just offering what we call 'bums-on-seat' tours: very basic minibus tours. I decided I was going to offer private tours because there were a lot of people who wanted different things," she says. "For example, people with little knowledge of wines might want to taste as many different wines as possible, while others who knew a lot about wines wanted to focus only on certain wineries."



*Burgundy draws some 2.3 million visitors per year to its rolling green hills dotted with medieval villages and world-class wineries.*

Moreover, by making the tours private, Tracy knew she could give her clients exactly what they wanted. From one day to the next, she might be conducting a genealogical tour for someone tracing their family history in Burgundy, or exploring local vegan vineyards (no animal products used in processing), or helping a client get to know every nook and cranny of a single Burgundian village. Some days she takes her clients hot air ballooning over the patchwork countryside or for a picnic among the vineyards.

"Every day is different," says Tracy. "I love the variety."

By going the extra mile, Tracy was able to price her tours at the top-end of the market, charging a minimum of \$640 for a full-day tour, excluding lunch costs, for two people. "It was a niche market," she says. "At that time, no one else was offering anything like this."

With Burgundy by Request, Tracy shrewdly hit upon a way to capitalize on all of Burgundy's riches. Although the sun shines brightest on its wine trade, the region has no shortage of other attributes:

picturesque medieval towns and villages; excellent restaurants, from traditional homey spots to upscale Michelin-starred; and any number of glorious chateaux, abbeys, cathedrals, and other historical spots. Tracy's tour company offers a close-up exploration of it all.

Tracy's turnover for Burgundy by Request is about \$65,000 per year. She says it's hard to gauge profitability but acknowledges that it could be more profitable if she subcontracted out more work. But at the moment she has no interest in doing that. Although she could hire another guide and take on a more managerial role, she enjoys the tours and prefers doing them herself. "If I hired anyone, it would be a secretary," she laughs.

Business is booming at the moment, and although others in the region have begun to offer private tours, Tracy feels that Burgundy by Request stands out because of the personalized attention she gives her clients. Her work consists of far more than giving tours. She spends a great deal of time learning her client's tour goals, drawing out the exact experience that they're hoping for, and then working to create it.

For those clients who aren't certain of what they want, she lists an assortment of pre-designed tours on her website. For example, she offers a "Classic Wine and History Tour," where the clients visit historic sites in the famed wine-making town of Beaune, then have a private tour and tasting at a local vineyard and chateau. Other pre-set tours focus exclusively on the most renowned vineyards, historical Burgundy, and wine-tasting education.

Tracy runs Burgundy by Request almost single-handedly, from dealing with administration to marketing to conducting 90% of the tours. During high season, which lasts from April through October, she is constantly on the go, running as many as four tours a week.

"The hard part is handling the administration. I'm out touring all day, and then I have to deal with paperwork and answer emails. But I have kids, so that has to wait until evening." She says this schedule can be a problem since the majority of her clients are American and their emails often arrive overnight, several hours before she has time to respond. "Sometimes when I've gotten back to them in the evening, they say—oh, you didn't get back to me so I've booked elsewhere. That's why I'm now looking at online booking for simple tours."

Still, she's thrilled that she has a business where she's able to control her hours. "People thought I was crackers, giving up a salaried position," she says. "But I knew I was earning more with the tours, and that I could fit my work hours around my kids."

Getting her business established was on one hand fairly simple and on the other, somewhat complicated. While still working at the wine cellar, Tracy created the website with an [online template](#), for which she paid

(and still pays) about \$23 per month. The only major start-up cost was the purchase of a large car suitable for chauffeuring her clients around.

"It cost about €20,000 (\$21,790)," she says. "To be a chauffeur, your car has to meet certain specifications. It has to a certain height and certain length. It also has to be less than five years old." She adds that while she made back her initial investment in the car over the years, she's since had to buy another to stay compliant with French regulations.

The more difficult aspect of getting the business started was abiding by all the French rules. "It was more than I expected when you try to comply with everything—getting the right insurance, doing the ongoing training, and just keeping up with the legislation," says Tracy.

One thing that made the business-building process longer and more complex for Tracy than for some other tour guides is that she's gone to great lengths to legitimize herself in the eyes of the French state.

Unlike many expat tour businesses, Tracy's business is fully licensed by the French Tourism Board. While having a license isn't necessary to be a tour operator in France (see sidebar), the accreditation is beneficial for working with travel agencies or the tourism bureau and gaining access to museums as an official guide.

"It didn't take terribly long to get licensed," says Tracy. "And I'm now also licensed as a chauffeur."

Also, even though she'd worked for years in the wine industry, Tracy went above and beyond to prove that she was knowledgeable about wine. "Two years ago I went to the University of Dijon to get a diploma in wine culture and history. Not everyone goes so far,

but I thought it was important to differentiate myself."

Tracy recommends that anyone looking to learn more about wines consider the [Wine & Spirits Education Trust](#), a wine-education company that offers courses and qualifications in wines world wide.

Although not being fluent in French doesn't bar you from working in the tour industry, Tracy acknowledges that it's been an asset. "You're limited as a foreigner unless you can read and write the language. I've lived in France for many years and speak French well, but I still don't have the same nuances in French as I do in English."

She urges expats thinking about starting a business in France to be certain to hire someone who's fluent in French to handle the administration and interpret the relevant legislation. "Not speaking French is why many expat businesses fail. They don't understand what they're supposed to be doing. The rules in France are very complex."

That said, when it comes to marketing outreach, Tracy works mainly in English. Most of her clients find Burgundy by Request through the website. But she's also active on TripAdvisor, where she gets her name out there by answering questions about Burgundy, and advertises in English-language travel guides, such as Burgundy Today and Burgundy Eye.

Right now, it's reaching the end of high season for Tracy. The harvest is almost complete, and bookings will slow down by the end of October. During the rainy winter months, she doesn't get much business—just a few tours a month, if any—so she'll spend it "getting reacquainted" with her kids, cleaning the house, and working on improvements to the Burgundy by Request website.

This winter she plans to implement an online booking system as well as raise her prices. The basic tour price will stay the same, but the customized tours will soon start at \$750 for two people.

"They take time to plan," she explains. "You can spend two full days trying to perfect what the client wants, and then they might cancel." She says that cancellations are rare, however. Under Burgundy by Request's cancellation policy, clients lose their 20% deposit if they cancel, although they're welcome to reapply to a future tour.

If she had to say what she enjoys best about her work, she'd say it's the variety. "Not only is every day different, all my clients are different," she says. "I learn so much from them."

## Savvy Tips for a Tour Operator Wannabe

In general, anyone seeking to become a certified tour guide in France must receive a license from the *Federation Nationale de Guides Interpretes et Conferenciers* (the National Federation for Interpreters, Guides, and Lecturers). You can obtain a license by taking a year-long tourism course and passing exams in a particular area, such as history or art. Getting into the course has one major obstacle: you must speak French and at least one other language well. See: [fngi.fr](#).

Having said that, many foreigner tour operators are not officially certified as such and have discovered loopholes to legally operate in France. Depending on the nature of their business, they can characterize their duties as something other than a tour operator. For example, one antiques expert who accompanies clients on visits to antiques shops in Paris is officially registered as a "personal shopper." Another guide is categorized as a freelance "companion." To be certain that you're acting within the rules, speak to a lawyer or accountant with a good reputation.