

France: Boating on the Canal Du Midi

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Introduction

We had a great holiday travelling on a canal boat across the waterways of Wales a few years ago, and that wetted our appetite for another boating adventure. A good friend had just travelled down through Southern France on the Du Midi Canal and so without much hesitation – and high expectations – we travelled to Europe for what turned out to be another wonderful water-based experience.

Day 1

After a last night in swaying London (the body no longer ‘swings’, and mild oscillations could be considered the upper limit of the expression of our excitement), we had an early 4.00am start and descended to the almost-deserted reception area of the Hampton Park Hilton, a great central city location with a hint of previous luxury.

The driver we had booked the previous evening duly arrived and ferried us to a deserted St Pancras Station. From there we journeyed on an equally deserted train to Luton Airport. On arrival, the apparent deserted city was transformed into a sea of fellow travellers at a crowded bus stop waiting for the shuttle to the actual airport. At the airport there was an even bigger crowd patiently waiting at the cheap and infamous Ryan Air check-in. More airport food and crap coffee. I was tempted to follow the example of three British couples who appeared to be involved in some serious ‘pre-match’ preparatory drinks but instead I chose a toasted sandwich and poor coffee.

By now the habit of ‘crowd surveillance’, i.e. watching the passing crowd, had become a natural response and I passed the next hour constructing strange and exciting biographies of the sea of tired faces that sat opposite. Finally onto the plane and we were off to the city of Beziers.

The trip through customs was non-existent. We picked up our bags and went straight out to the taxi rank and on to Port Cassafieres. The driver had little or no English but was very helpful, and we enjoyed the very different landscape as we passed through small towns and fields – so different from the landscape we saw in England and nothing like home.

We had booked an early canal boat pick-up but on arrival, we were told we were too early and therefore had to wait. This was annoying as the early pick up had cost about \$150 and we spent most of that time sitting in Le Boat reception area. This was our first experience of ‘Le Boat’ – soon to be christened Le (see your thesaurus for ‘junk’ and fill in your own words). The staff was excellent, friendly and helpful but the company policies were directed at maximizing the extraction of our Euros for things like a lantern for the top deck that we only used once – and then only to justify the cost of hiring it! This was the first experience of the company policy of profiteering and the workers’ excellent customer service.

While waiting for our boat we met three couples from Australia who were just completing the reverse journey from Castlenaudary to Beziers. This was another annoying thing about Le Boat – we were refused that route and because our journey ended at Castlenaudary we had to travel back across that area of France to continue our journey onto Barcelona. The Aussies related their adventures, strongly advising us to make sure we checked everything thoroughly before leaving, as all of them had experiences of problems with their boats. But when I asked if they would do it again there was a unanimous ‘yes’ – they’d had a great time! Soon it was our turn to enjoy the wonders of the Canal Du Midi!



Le Boat Reception Area

Eventually we were called to have a lesson in boatcraft. I had some experience in boats and soon felt I could handle the distinctive and creatively named 'Horizon 2'. This unique nomenclature made it easy for us to distinguish from say 'Horizon 3' or 'Horizon 16' – all very necessary after some late nights out. However, there was one occasion on the shake-down cruise when I could not steer Le Boat (or the soon-to-be affectionately referred to as 'No. 2') and the instructor, after some difficulty, got us back on track. As it turned out this should have been a warning to the 'experienced' instructor!

So off we went, sailing from Port Cassafieres, and headed to the town of Beziers to pick up supplies. Not long into the journey I began to have some further problems with the steering, and soon the wheel was spinning freely on its shaft while the boat moved out of control. I stopped as best I could and using the jets that helped guide No. 2 into the many locks, we eventually made shore and tied up to some sturdy trees while we waited for help to arrive.

While waiting I examined the wheel and found that the key that sits in the slots of the wheel, and the shaft locking the two parts together, just didn't exist. When the young mechanic arrived, we pointed the problem out to him and he had to return to base for the part, so we faced a large part of our first morning sitting waiting without supplies and feeling tired from our early start.

The mechanic returned and we continued to Beziers, arriving in time to get through their entry lock and onto our first mooring. The charming Harbour Master, whom I quickly referred to as 'Pierre', was such help that soon my besotted fellow crew member hung on every word. Unfortunately (but in hindsight quite fortunately), we picked up the news amongst his French Gaelic chatter that the lock keepers were planning to strike the next day and so we would be stuck in this charming harbour for two nights. We would have to wait for confirmation in the morning.

After mooring for the first time, we headed into the town to get supplies and came across a modern shopping centre (it could have been a Westfields) where we bought supplies including some wines (sauvignon blanc style) plus a soon-to-be preferred rosé. I would not have believed how soon I adopted the French preference for rosé as a light, refreshing alternative to their fine reds.

After stowing the supplies away and having a late siesta, we ventured into the town for a meal. Pierre had given Marcia a map of the town and highlighted some good restaurants and so we set out to explore Beziers. The town was on a hill and we followed the narrow streets up to the main square to look for the suggested restaurants – but to no avail. Hunger became an important drive so we settled for a meal at 'Le Café de Comedie'. Despite my concern over the name of this establishment, it turned out to be an

excellent choice – the food was fantastic and the maître de' such a help despite our clumsy attempts to understand each other.



Sunset on the harbour at Beziers

Walking back through the town we could feel all the stress and concern melt away and we faced the next ten days full of anticipation and excitement. We were not to be disappointed!

Day 2 – Beziers

After a restless night in Le Boat we arose to take in the morning sunrise over the water up to the locks. The scenery is so 'French' and the anticipated excitement was realised. We got dressed and went for an explorative walk around the opposite side of the canal and discovered a large pond that supports the water flow. Behind a bush was an old house that I guess was home to the engineers that worked the locks and harbour. We finished our early walk with a coffee at a local café where many 'workers' called in for a coffee and for many a cigarette. The coffee was not even good but to sit and watch this town wake up was wonderful.

After breakfast Marcia went to see Pierre and was greeted with the news that the strike was 'on' so we were stuck for the day.

So off we went to explore the city. Beziers has its centre on top of a hill that rises up from the canal. Situated on the side of this hill is a beautiful garden with some caged animals and birds, an ornate water sculpture and statues of great literary figures of France. One of the main statues was that of Pierre-Paul Riquet, a native of Beziers, who was the driving force behind the Canal. For a long time the problem of shifting wheat from Toulouse to the Mediterranean hampered trade. This canal opened up that region and continued to dominate transport until the steam train made it redundant.

There was a market in the main square where stalls sold various items of bric-a-brac, fruit and vegetables and other 'market stuff' that you could see in any weekend fair at home. We enjoyed the walk but by lunchtime the heat had taken its toll and we selected an interesting restaurant that was full of locals. I have always suspected these are the places to eat at. I was not disappointed.

The language barrier remained with Marcia digging deep into her memory of school-day French while I could only contribute the French for the verb 'to have'. I must say the reputation the French have for rudeness and impatience for those who don't speak French is not deserved. They were calm and polite and helpful and delightful companions.

We settled on a dish of melted Camembert cheese, a most sumptuous dish for lunch. To balance this indulgence we washed the cheese down with local beer and returned to No. 2 for a well-deserved (or should I say well-needed) siesta. When talking with Pierre he had suggested a small train ride around the city for the afternoon and so we booked in for 2.00pm. We were expecting a small tram-like vehicle but were amused to find ourselves in a miniature train. It was soon obvious that most of the locals were also amused at these 'tourists' riding about like some sort of oversized group of children.



Tour through Bezier

The tour took us through most of the town we had already covered but also pointed out historical spots and important buildings. Bezier was founded by the Roman Empire in 36 BC and was an important link in their expanding empire. A significant event in its history involves the violent challenge when church and state fought for dominance. This Catholic town saw 20,000 locals slaughtered and you get a sense of the effect that genocide has on the character of the people and their culture. This is a history repeated all across this region of France.

The most significant stop was at the famous Fonseranne Lock, consisting of eight steps through seven chambers, that lift the canal 21.5 metres in just 300 metres. This is the most important series of locks we would face and it looked quite daunting, even though it was idle because of the strike. Some local had created a straw lock worker in distinctive clothing and had hung it in the centre of the middle lock!

We cooked our first dinner on the boat that night and had a few wines sitting on the deck taking in the Gaelic atmosphere. We drank a toast to the lock keepers for allowing us to really enjoy Bezier, a town that makes you want to return.

Day 3 – Off to Capetang

Once the lock starts moving boats in a chosen direction it remains that way for about 90 minutes. Our starting time was 10.00am but those coming in the other direction left at 8.30 and were soon sailing past us. At 10.00 we started our journey with two other boats through the Fonseranne Lock. The system requires one crewmember to stay on the boat while the other one works the bank, running from lock deck to lock deck, securing the rope for the deck hand and using their own rope to hold No. 2 steady. This is hard work and the gloves our friends gave us became very useful.

The weather was good and we soon settled in to enjoy 54 kilometres of lock-free canal and the passing scenery and our fellow travellers. The landscape consisted mainly of fields where the dominant crop was grapes, with rows and rows feeding out from the canal. We moved through small towns and past occasional houses that were full of character, and sometimes they shared the same character as No 2's crew – just old!

We arrived at our planned destination, Capestang, and with the help of our Harbour Master we safely moored for our second night. Once we had paid our fees and secured No.2 we walked up through the town.

Capestang is on a major roadway and at first we had to negotiate heavy traffic, but within 200 metres we disappeared into a maze of alleyways that found us in the heart of the French rural town centre. We found our way to the local square and arrived as a local produce market was closing. We bought some pork from the butcher's stall (not being sure what part of the pig we had purchased) but this pork, along with bread, vegies and of course wine and beer, was the centrepiece of that night's dinner.

After shopping we decided to follow the farmers into a local restaurant and had a most beautiful wholesome meal washed down with beer and wine. We got a sense of the community in this establishment and the service and quality of food was excellent – especially for the price!



Streets of Capestang



View from Capestang Cemetery

Back to the boat for an afternoon snooze and later we explored the town visiting the Collegiate Saint-Etienne Church which was a typical large ornate building. The other attraction we walked around was the Chateau de Puisserguier, a large fortress that perhaps protected the locals as the crusade came directly to Capestang after dealing with Beziers. This impressive building had been restored in the 17th Century.

After this we settled into a local café to enjoy some local ales and enjoy watching the locals appreciate their town square. You soon understand people are the same all over the world – little children are full of wonder, teenagers are full of something else and the rest should enjoy life. This community gathering is something we have lost in the West and we are poorer for that.

Back to the boat for dinner and we enjoyed the pork along with some sausages and vegies, sitting on the deck sipping the obligatory wine. Life is good!

Day 4 – On to Argens Minervois

The day started with an early walk over the bridge and into the local cemetery. There were council workers already busy maintaining the rows of graves with many crypts and vaults that dated well into the last century. This was somewhat moving and reminded us that wherever we are, life is just a journey and so with new determination we proceeded to the village to get the most out of the day.

We returned to the village square and did the French thing – drop in on the local boulangerie for our morning bread stick. The shop was full of locals getting their daily supplies which, I must say, included lots of beautiful pastries and small rolls covered with pizza-like toppings. We purchased some rolls and a couple of ‘pizzas’ for lunch.

We were in time for the start of school and two female Gendarmes directed the children through the narrow streets and monitored the many cars that ferried the locals to work. Just like home the kids were escorted to school, mostly by mum but a significant amount by their grandmothers. It seems that unpaid baby-sitting extends to rural France.

We set off for another day of easy motoring with Paraza our planned destination. The Le Boat described this town as a good place to stay but what they forgot to tell us was like many destinations, services often cease during the winter break so not much was open.

We had a look around. There was the usual church, the Notre-Dame de l’Assomption, that had been moved to make way for the canal. Another highlight is a winery in the town that advertised tours and tastings, and an adjoining restaurant but this was also deserted.



Streets of Argens Minervois

We stayed for an onboard lunch and set out for Argens Minervois. We continued through the beautiful scenery either side of the canal and the twists and turns accentuated the pleasure of this form of lazy travel. The Boats only reach about 6 - 8 Km/Hour so we soon adjusted our own pace to suit. It’s amazing how quickly you relax and enjoy life.

When we arrived at Argens Minervois the mooring was just that, a place to tie up for the night. We had arrived late in the afternoon and I suspect the siesta was still in full swing, or most of the villagers were at work. Despite no water or electricity we decided to stay.

The town was typical of many canal destinations where the main square is on top of the hill that leads from the canal. Perched on top was the local castle, an impressive structure. This had its beginnings in the time of the Catholic annexation of these independent city-states during the 12th Century. Since that time it has been purchased by a family and still sits impressively on the top of the hill.



Sunset at Argens Minervois

We enjoyed the walk through the deserted streets where the atmosphere was reflected in the occasional cat sleeping in the sun. We couldn't find anything open but the recommended café La Guinguette looked good and seemed to be preparing for the evening meal. So with nothing left to see we went native, a couple of reds and a siesta!

La Guinguette was indeed well and truly open and we were seated in a covered outdoor area. The chefs were on display, one working the open kitchen and the other a sort of chargrill/barbeque at the front of the restaurant tables. The latter fancied himself as a bit of an entertainer. His best trick was to squeeze a plastic pig that squealed every time he finished a serving. The hopeless comedy was not matched by the cooking, which was first class. This became obvious as the place was full and Marcia enjoyed a special fish dish while I opted for some lamb. This was washed down with a carafe of rosé wine.

After a relatively hot day it was great to finish the day on the upper deck of No. 2 with a relaxing nightcap.

Day 5 – On to Homps

We woke to another beautiful day and after a quick walk around town, we spotted the crew (a German family) returning with some supplies. We were soon pointed towards the lower side of the village across the Argens Minervois' stone bridge to a general store in a quiet street. The shop was a modest operation but filled with locals sharing coffee and friendly banter around the counter that was attended by a friendly local.

We purchased our now mandatory bread roll, some cheese, meat, some beautiful pork pate and of course some excellent wine. By now we had come to the realisation that the poor people of France had not discovered the joy of screw top wine bottles – they still relied on the old fashioned cork stopper – never

mind the absence of any efficient cask. There are things about culture they could learn from our Australian sensibilities!

By now we understood the importance of carrying plenty of supplies because all too often you would arrive at a lock at 12.30 and they would be shut for an hour. On one occasion a yacht heading in the opposite direction told us the lock keeper had the water flow reduced so that he would not have to work a minute over 12.30.

Instead of being bored, moored to the canal bank we could create a very tasty platter of meats, cheese and fruits; 'uncork' a chilled Rosé and laze around the top deck of No. 2. A most civilized approach to the midday meal and I suspect the lock keeper had the same attitude!

At this stopover we chatted with a couple from England who spent their winters on the French canals. They had an old style long boat that they discovered was too wide for the English canals and so spent their time in Europe. They told us that the Canal Du Midi was the pick of the French canals because the ones elsewhere, particularly in the north, were a bit run-down through lack of trade.

We shared a few locks with this couple as we cruised on to Homps, a small village that is home to a Le Boat facility. We backed into a small gap between a virtual fleet of Le Boat craft waiting to be hired. This really confirmed the importance of picking the month you booked the Canal. We could only imagine the crowds of craft in the peak season and the waits to get through the lock. In our whole trip we were never held up at a lock.



Mooring at Homps

We checked into the Le Boat office and witnessed two families of Americans who were returning their boat early and were quite abusive to the staff. They certainly had not enjoyed the cruise and let the poor woman know. From what we gathered their complaint was not against the people working along the lock – it was the lack of detailed finish to the preparation of the craft and the 'extra' costs incurred in the hire fee. They couldn't believe they paid 200 Euros but then had to empty their own rubbish bin! One of the males really gave the office lady a piece of his tiny mind!

Once settled in we walked across the stone bridge past a few locals happily fishing, down along the far bank where we settled into a local bar for a couple of beers. I inadvertently ignored the landlord who was sitting drinking with locals and was not off to a good start but as soon as he realised I was from Australia and therefore uncouth we had a very enjoyable relax beside the lock watching the river craft slip idly by.

Homps is a small town and it didn't take long to explore the local streets. At the edge of the village, next to a busy highway, sat the local supermarket/garage where we could get supplies for the evening meal. There was a butcher in the supermarket and Marcia picked out some beautiful pork and matching pate. She did this in two visits to the butcher, who cheekily inquired if she was right this time!

It was my task to get the matching wine for an evening meal on the deck of No.2 – to end another fantastic day on the Canal.

Day 6 – On to Trebes

One of the problems with the two days we'd been forced to spend in Beziers was that we were a little behind schedule, and so we chose today to put in a long haul aiming to get to Trebes tonight. After stocking up with groceries for lunch and a possible evening meal we set off.

We had noticed that the trees along the canal, predominantly the Plane trees, were being systematically removed and replanted. We had seen evidence of this throughout the first days of the trip but the further we travelled the more intense was the activity.



Tree-lined Canal Du Midi

After a little investigation, we found that the trees that provided the restful shade and provided a stunning border for the canal had been infected by a fungus brought to France in the Second World War in the ammunition boxes of the US Troops. There is no remedy and so each tree is felled, burned off-site and a new tree replanted in its place. There are thousands of trees to be replaced and at three thousand euros per tree it is obvious the French Government is determined to keep the canal open for tourism.

Again we came across a lock just before 12.30 but by now we were well aware of the routine and so we quickly organized a wonderful lunch on the top deck, with the canopy providing welcome shade and the canal breeze making this a very enjoyable break.

After lunch we sailed through Le Somail, a popular destination where we could have taken a break to enjoy its famous restaurants, particularly Le Comptoir Nature nestled next to the Canal in the shadow of a beautiful old bridge.

Further on, at the lock at L'écluse de L'Aiguille we witnessed one of the most remarkable collections of naïve sculptures created by the lock keeper. The area around the lock, his cottage and the adjoining fields were full of interesting works of sculptured art. These were all for sale and if not for their size I think we

would have made an impulsive purchase. We had fantasized about the relaxing life of a Lock Keeper and the production of so many sculptures was a clear indication of their pace of life.



Lock at L'cluse de L'Aiguille

More locks with wonderful stretches of canals and passing towns saw us arriving at Trebes at 5.40pm to tie up for the night. Trebes is another Le Boat port but arriving so late there were no moorings available. When signing on to the trip you are given the impressions that at each Le Boat port you would have access to free moorings with water and electricity. In our whole trip this only happened once. The trouble is they store their fleet for the high season in the best places so travelling out of the peak times means you are lucky if you get a spot. We would not have been annoyed if they had been realistic about our chances.

The wind had come up late in the afternoon and after carefully tying up outside the main port, we did a tour of the town that was another example of the narrow cobble-stoned streets still bustling with life. A really distinctive characteristic of these villages – and even in the cities we visited – was the buildings' lack of colour. Most were old and grey with a suggestion that at one time they had been covered with white wash or paint – but no one had bothered applying another coat.

Because we had arrived quite late we called into a restaurant that looked interesting. Just because we had not had our 'siesta' this didn't mean France had stayed awake for us. When we approached the door we were very politely told to come back later. I'm certainly glad we did because at the L'Arganier we enjoyed a wonderful Moroccan meal with Marcia having a chicken tagine while I had lamb.



Canal at Trebes

This small establishment in the back streets was near the top of the hill over which the main bridge out of town is situated. Two young local females who provide patrons with excellent service with a special African/Mediterranean charm manage this first-rate dining experience. It is a noticeable that there are a

number of locals with obvious African heritage. We saw no resentment but suspected this particular section of each community were not recent arrivals. There was no evidence of any recent refugees reaching these sleepy towns.

Day 7 – On to Carcassonne

The next morning we took our customary stroll around the town visiting the local church and that other place of French worship – the boulangerie – where we bought some bread sticks and pastries. Back on No. 2, I cooked a non-traditional breakfast of scrambled eggs on toast. It seemed quite exotic in light of our newly-acquired tastes – but very enjoyable.

The plan was to have two nights at Carcassonne so we can spend a day at the famous citadel. After the Eiffel Tower, La Cite de Carcassonne is the most famous tourist attraction in all of France. We were not far from the port and arrived well before lunch.

The harbour master was quite a contrast to the suave Pierre of Beziers – we were greeted by a friendly, very attractive young lady who was most helpful. Marcia quickly swung into gear and soon the two of them left me to pack up the boat while she accompanied the officer to her office. She returned with the receipt for our mooring, plus plenty of advice on eating that proved to be first-rate.

The mooring provided much-needed power and water and apart from her administrative skills, the harbour master also taught us how to tie the stern of the boat from the canal side, which limited the amount to which the boat could swing out from the shore. This became our favoured technique and I advised future fellow travellers on the value on 'MY' expert knowledge!

Carcassonne is quite a large town and so we made our way up the main retail boulevard to the town square where we had a nice snack with a couple of excellent local beers. We sat outside the café across from the square where we could observe families enjoying the atmosphere while their children played around a quite impressive sculpture. We could hear this high-pitched whistling and finally tracked the source down to a group of young and not-so-young individuals who were entertaining themselves. These provided the first example of an under-class in the region, as they had all the hallmarks of those lost to drugs and alcohol. I am reluctant to make this judgemental call but it was the sad familiarity I recognised and like all these discounted people across the world, they caused no problem for the rest of us. Maybe they just want us to notice them.

We returned back to the boat for a rest before adventuring out for an evening meal. Not for the first time we arrived before the restaurant recommended to us was open, and so we explored the back streets of the city. The streets further from the centre are more modern with cobblestones replaced by bitumen on the roads and pathways provided. It is like you can date the age of the city by the distance from the centre. However, within these more modern dwellings there were frequent large older buildings that were probably attached to some wealthy landowner or church official. One thing is constant – evidence of painters and decorators being employed was missing and the same drab colour scheme prevailed.



La Grande Bouffe Restaurant

Finally we were seated in a great double-roomed dining area in the La Grande Bouffe surrounded by local families. The restaurant boasted its menu of beef but Marcia chose a beautiful piece of grilled salmon while I feasted on my favorite, duck. It was an excellent meal, excellent service and an excellent way to finish a busy day. All that was left was a nightcap on No. 2 and a good night's sleep.

Day 8 - Exploring Carcassonne

We started the day with an early walk up the 'centre' of the town where there are many excellent shops. After the usual crusty breakfast we left the boat for the bus stop that would take us to the massive medieval castle that dominates the skyline of Carcassonne. The trip was only one Euro each and it took us through the outskirts of the town and up to what is considered the second most visited tourist destination in France.



Castle at Carcassonne

When you arrive outside the doubled walls of this massive fortress you get a sense of the size of this settlement. Despite this early assessment, when you enter into the building it is even more impressive. Looking through the tourist information you learn that the castle is strategically located. The earliest settlements are thought to be as early as 3,500 BC but it was the Romans who established the first major structures in the 6th Century BC and fortified it around 100 BC.



Outer castle wall



Le Saint Jean Restaurant

The walls are very extensive and a protected city was established inside them. There are still a substantial number of residents living within the bulwarks and they run a very extensive tourist industry. In the 10th Century the ruthless Simon de Montfort reclaimed the settlement as part of the crusades by the Catholic Church to establish the dominance of the Vatican. From this moment on the settlement fell into decline and was at risk of total decay but a young Frenchman, Viollet-de-Due, commenced a restoration project that restored the castle to its current glory.

You can easily spend the whole day at the castle with tours through a museum, walks around the battlements, a visit to the wonderful cathedral and much time in the tourist area where plenty of souvenirs are on sale. As you would expect the prices were inflated and you can get the same keepsakes in town for quite a lot less.

There are plenty of restaurants in the citadel but they looked very jam-packed and busy feeding the hoards of visitors. Our harbour master had told us to avoid these establishments and gave us the name of an excellent bistro off the main tourist trail.

Sitting outside Le Saint Jean we enjoyed a cool beer while we waited for our lunch of cassoulet to arrive. Like all modern tourists we had immersed ourselves on YouTube to get hints about how to get the most out of our trip and ended up watching Rick Stein's series on the canal. He raved about a meal made of pork, duck, beans and assorted fillers. This is the famous cassoulet that comes in various styles across France, and we really enjoyed this is a most excellent meal, washed down with a couple of glasses of Rosé.

We returned back to the Canal late in the afternoon to rest up before the evening meal. After that, we set off for our evening meal and found an interesting establishment where we enjoyed fish and fresh vegetables and a chardonnay-style white wine. We sat next to a couple of Australians – not an unfamiliar happening as there seems to be a lot of our countrymen following the Canal.

Returning to No. 2 through the quite deserted streets of Carcassonne, we were very impressed with this wonderful town and felt we could really spend much more time exploring its sights and tastes.

Day 9 – On to Bram

There is a lock at the end of the harbour that is directly under a bridge and we had been informed that this opens at 9.00am, and so we set our goal to get moving early. So after a quick stroll through the town to stock up on supplies we had a quick breakfast and cast off for another day on the Canal. The lock opened on time and we set off from Carcassonne. We planned to make it to Bram where they had advertised a friendly port with a good restaurant on site with power and water.

During the trip along the canal we synchronised with a couple of other boats, one a private long boat with a British crew and the other a sister Le Boat with a German couple on board. The experience of sharing a lock seems to encourage passing friendships and we enjoyed each other's company through to Bram.



Approaching a lock on the way to Bram

An issue had emerged with No 2. When I engaged the side thrusters to make fiddly adjustments to the position of our boat entering the lock, this caused the engine to intermittently stall. This meant I was halfway into the lock with no control! Eventually I mastered the art of quickly getting the power restored and regaining control however, when this first happened I got the boat completely sideways in the lock and it took a lot of effort to rectify the problem. This proved to be most embarrassing as watching the boats pass through the locks is a source of interest to land-based locals and tourists. I'm sure I provided comic relief for the crowd!

We had the traditional lunch outside a lock and arrived in Bram early in the afternoon. The promised restaurant and port facilities were not available so we tied up with our fellow travellers and walked about 1.6 kilometres to the nearby town of Bram.



The lockmaster's house at Bram



The circular streets of Bram

Like most ancient towns and villages in this area of France, Bram had its beginnings with the Romans, who settled here to take advantage of the good climate and its position on the trade routes. Bram developed into the centre of the Cathar religion, a quite progressive faith. It had a church at the centre of a walled city. The homes were built on a radiating series of streets.

In 1210 the infamous de Montfort attacked the city and in his cruel imposition of Catholic domination, he cut off the nose and top lips of the male inhabitants and except for one, gouged out their eyes. That citizen

who retained his sight had to lead the tortured men to Lastours, as a warning to what they would face if they resisted his crusade. Lastours was the centre of the Cathar religion but capitulated to de Montfort.

The town is quite obviously built on a circular pattern and expanded outside the remains of the wall. We visited the amazing church, which I must say had a different atmosphere and the mood was quite subdued. There was a lack of the glitz that most churches have around their altar.



The cathedral at Bram

The narrow cobble-stone streets weaved around very old homes full of character with their colourful shutters and pot plants. Many of these had been restored and were outstanding examples of their old-fashioned design.

Bram is a small town with not a large commercial centre, but there was an excellent boulangerie where we bought a ham and cheese pastry – but due to our lack of French we had brought twice the quantity we thought we had ordered. We moved on to the local store and had to patiently wait while the store manager listened to a lady talk endlessly – apparently oblivious to our presence.

The walk back to the boat was a bit unpleasant as the wind had got up and the tractor in the adjacent field stirred up a lot of dust. We walked past a group of farm workers who were planting potatoes in gouged out furrows. The boat was protected from the wind and we enjoyed a quiet night devouring the good food purchased during the day.

Day 10 – Finally to Castlenaudary

For once we passed up on our usual morning walk, planning to make Castlenaudary the final destination of our trip. We had decided to get there a day early because we had to hand the boat in by 9.00am in the morning and we knew we had to get through five locks outside the town – and four of these were in line just before the harbour.

The day was a bit rough with the high wind that buffeted the boat, especially when navigating the locks, and this was exacerbated by the problem with the thrusters cutting out the motor. Despite this we made good time on our last day on the canal. At one stage we passed a large industrial barge servicing the most

intense tree felling and regeneration we saw on the lock. They are certainly investing in the future of this canal and I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't make a return trip.

The last series of locks were the most challenging of the trip. It might just have felt this way because we were tired and at the end of the trip, but sailing into the beautiful harbour gave us both a feeling of huge satisfaction. The annoying thing is that Le Boat does not advise those ending the trip into Castlenaudary to arrive the day before. There is no way you could get the boat in by 9.00am when the locks don't operate until then! We were reminded of an American couple who were charged a late fee at the beginning of our trip and that was still relatively early in the day. They are quick to make those extra dollars!



On to Castlenaudary

However, again Le Boat advertises free mooring at their facility that doesn't exist. We were forced to tie up at the end of a line of cruisers that were forced together by the high wind. We went to the Le Boat office where we asked for a mooring and some help to tie up, and eventually one of the mechanics took No. 2 into the company moorings.

After getting organised we went up into the town through the streets that led us to St Michel's church at the top of the hill. The history is similar to other towns we visited, first established by the Romans being on the trade route to the major port of Toulouse, then the de Montfort period but there was a better resistance by the locals of the Cather faith. After a look through the town and church we settled into a café in the commercial centre to enjoy a couple of beers and watch the locals socialize at the end of their working day. Very friendly and a great atmosphere and there was a sense of sadness on our last day in France.

We were told there would be a reluctance by the French people to welcome us as tourists, especially if they thought we were English, but we never ever experienced anything but a warm hospitality wherever we went. The food and drinks are great but the people made this trip a fantastic experience.

That night we cleaned up our left-over food and drink, packed our bags and did a final cleanup of the boat. Then we retired to the upper deck to toast ten days on the Canal Du Midi. The evening view of the harbour is a spectacular way to finish out trip – what an experience! I will finish with 'au revoir' and not 'adieu' – WE will see this palace again!



Evening at the port of Castlenaudary

Contributor details

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John was the Principal of Holsworthy High from 2000-2016 and before that, Campbell House School. He is interested in behaviour management of children with extreme behaviours and loves to travel!