

CRUISE ABOARD HOTEL BARGE THE ELEGANCE ON THE CANAL DU MIDI

Karen Tait and her husband Paul travelled with Barge Lady Cruises along the Canal du Midi in southern France recently and gave Canal Boat magazine a guided tour



As our huge 30-metre barge headed cautiously round the narrow bend – yes, that’s right, a bend in the canal – a grubby white hire boat hurtled towards us. If we were Goliath, this particular David didn’t stand a chance of winning the encounter. Our highly experienced captain, who until then had been serenely calm, started yelling in French at the other guy – who promptly steered into the bushes at the side of the bank and started going sideways before realising our skipper was giving him loud but sound advice on how to pass us without causing an incident. Somehow, we passed by each other without putting a scratch on the pristine paint of our barge, the Elegance, freshly coated for the summer season. Another mark on the hire boat would hardly have been noticed!

We were on the Canal du Midi in southern France, on a stretch between Narbonne and Béziers which is surprisingly winding, due to the local topography, making cruising more of a challenge for our captain Matthias. Our vessel was his beautiful hotel barge, which he had just completely refitted with an astonishing Art Deco style interior inspired by the Orient Express.



He had even sourced some genuine René Lalique glass panels for the salon, which had originally been on one of the luxury passenger trains. The elegant furniture, ornaments, crystalware, fabric and woodwork immerse you in the Golden Age of the 1920s – I felt as if was embarking on a grand tour. Luckily, the dress code was casual!

With three cabins catering for six guests, the comfortable barge has an elegant salon and dining room, where you can relax, enjoy a drink and, of



Barge interior



course, experience authentic French cuisine, a key element of a hotel barge holiday in France. The kitchen, occasionally glimpsed through swing doors, was the domain of our on-board chef Véronique, who began preparing our lunch and evening meals just after we'd finished breakfast. The most mouthwatering aromas came out of that kitchen, and despite a full continental petit déjeuner and three courses for lunch and dinner every day, it was so delicious we were always ready for more!

DAY 1

Our journey started in Sallèles-d'Aude, a pretty little town on the Canal de Jonction, which along with the Canal de la Robine (Robine means canal in the Occitan dialect) link the Canal du Midi to the city of Narbonne and the Mediterranean Sea. This branch of the canal includes 11 locks over just 37 kilometres, some of which we would experience the next day.

We had been picked up earlier from Narbonne train station – many of the trips include a visit to Narbonne's colourful market halls, although sadly our itinerary was a day too short to fit this in. Having been before, I can recommend Narbonne though. The historic city has the Canal de la Robine running through its centre, as well as a grand cathedral and archbishop's palace. A section of the Via Domitia road in the main square harks back to the city's importance in Roman times.

Our trip started excellently with a champagne and canapé reception onboard where we met our fellow travellers, a delightful couple from

Florida, and our team for the week – captain Matthias, chef Véronique and driver Enzo. Barge hotel holidays are particularly popular with Americans who love the history along the canal and the gastronomic fare onboard. Although the barges operate independently, at times we would travel in convoy, with the Esperance (also owned by our captain Matthias) and Johannes barges, both carrying American guests.

Our first night aboard set the tone for the week. We took time to settle into our stunning cabin, noting all the little Art Deco touches including a beautiful Lalique lamp and antique clock. Above our bed, an ornate Japanese screen had been imaginatively repurposed as a light. Matthias is passionate about interiors and really went overboard (pun intended) with the design of his latest barge, including the opulent colours and textures of the carefully chosen wallpaper and sumptuous bedlinen and curtains. The cabins are all ensuite with compact but well-designed shower rooms.

By now, tantalising wafts of our evening meal were drifting down the corridor (which, incidentally, has been designed to reflect a train carriage) so we moved to the salon. Having lived on a Dutch barge ourselves, we immediately noticed the unusually large windows all along the boat and presumed they'd been retrofitted. In fact, they were already in situ as the boat had been used as a passenger craft back in the day. They were one of the things that attracted Matthias to the barge – he could



Three boats moored at La Croisade



Johannes at La Croisade

immediately envision what he would do with the interiors.

The generously proportioned salon includes a comfortable seating area with Chesterfield-style sofas and a highly polished dining table. As it was still early in the season, it was a little chilly to eat on deck – although typically, the thermometer hit 28 degrees on our last day. Our meals were complemented by wines chosen by Matthias – he is justifiably proud of the wines of his region. While the Languedoc wine trade has been more a case of quantity rather

than quality in the past, this has changed over the last couple of decades and there are many fine vintages to be sampled from the vineyards of Corbières, Minervois, Fitou and Saint Chinian.

DAY 2

Our first day's cruising was all about the locks – we travelled through five, all automated, from Sallèles-d'Aude to the junction with the Canal du Midi at Cesse, as well as a couple of low bridges where we all had to duck down and the



automatic canopy was lowered. We then headed east until we arrived at the pretty canalside village of Le Someil.

In the heart of the Minervois vineyards, Le Someil retains the charm of years gone by, with stone buildings little changed from the 17th century when the canal was built. An original ice house dates from 1864 and there are some quirky later additions too – the Trouve-Tout du Livre second-hand bookshop, housed in a former wine cellar, draws bibliophiles from all over the world to see its shelves packed with over 50,000 books! Then there's the floating épicerie, a boat-cum-grocer's shop supplying travellers along the canal. While in Le Someil, you can also visit La Maison Bonnal with its multimedia tour of the Jonction, Robine and Midi canals.

After lunch we jumped in the minibus and headed off to L'Oulibo, an olive cooperative founded in 1954, to learn all about the history of olive production in the area (including devastating frosts in 1956 which almost wiped out the trees), sample some olive oils and buy some treats to take home with us.

Before another evening of delicious food and fine wine, we met up with the guests from the other barges, organised by our host Barge Lady Cruises, for a group apéritif in a charming little bar in Le Someil. All along the Canal du Midi you'll find charming villages like this, mostly with a restaurant or two.

DAY 3

This part of southern France is blessed with historic cities and one of the very best is Carcassonne with its Unesco-listed medieval walled citadel, complete



This way to Carcassonne



Karen and Paul with other guests



Pezenas

with castle, double ramparts and 52 towers, and the destination for our morning excursion. Despite the unseasonably cool temperatures and wind whipping round the ramparts, we enjoyed a fascinating guided tour of the winding cobbled streets and squares before ducking into one of the many restaurants for a reviving chocolat chaud! As well as the scenic River Aude, the Canal du Midi also passes through the lower town; its large basin is a popular spot for passenger boat trips.

Back on the boat (which had moved up the canal while we were away), and after another fine lunch, we continued our journey, watching the gentle countryside pass by. I even tried out the hot tub onboard, a rather surreal experience, cruising along the canal and under bridges in bubbling hot water – I spotted a few surprised faces among dog-walkers and joggers on the towpath!

Our mooring for the night was alongside the Auberge de la Croisade and was the first time all three barges were moored up together – it was quite a sight to behold. A gentle walk or cycle ride along the canal helped us build up an appetite before yet more superb gastronomic offerings that evening. Earlier, we spotted our chef wandering along the towpath with a pair of scissors in hand. She returned with sprigs of greenery and unusual seed pods, which she dressed the table with. This was a delightful touch and every evening she or our captain Matthias would treat us to a new natural table setting.

DAY 4

Our morning cruise took us along open stretches of the canal, with none of the usual shady trees lining the bank. Sad



Have grape vine will travel

stumps are a reminder of the fungus (brought to Europe by US soldiers in World War II) that has attacked the iconic plane trees along the Canal du Midi and for which there is no cure. Tens of thousands of trees have been chopped down, changing the southern French canal landscape for ever. A mix of alternative species are being planted, to ‘hedge’ their bets and protect against a similar situation in the future.

While this is sad news indeed, it does at least make navigating easier for our captain Matthias, as he can see much further ahead, especially as this part of the canal has some considerable bends. Tourists aboard the boats can enjoy far-reaching views of the Languedoc countryside and vineyards, with pretty villages and chateaux dotted here and there.

Our afternoon excursion was to the spectacular village of Minerve. Classed as one of the Plus Beaux Villages de France (most beautiful villages of France), it’s set high above a gorge carved out by the River Cess before it disappears underground into a natural tunnel. The rocky peninsula was strategically ideal for a fortified medieval village. In 1210, a group of Cathars sought refuge here during the Albigensian Crusade; following the surrender of the town, some 140 Cathars were burned at the stake. Despite this traumatic past, the streets of Minerve are now a peaceful place to stroll and admire the charming stone buildings before treating yourself to a drink, ice-cream or meal in one of the pretty cafés and restaurants, or popping in to one of the boutiques to buy artisan souvenirs.

Back on board, we made our way to Capestang, one of the larger villages along the canal. You enter the small basin via one of the lowest bridges – we crouched down on deck, admiring the skill of our captain as he steered the huge craft through the tiny opening without a scrape.

Once moored up, we took our chance to explore some of the other barges – all the captains know each other and sometimes work together to accommodate larger parties. The Johannes, freshly fitted out this winter, has a beautiful minimalist white interior, very zen, while the Esperance’s cavernous interior revealed an open-plan kitchen and living area and large bedrooms. The Roi Soleil is unusually double-decked, with the cabins below deck and the wheel at the fore of the



Exodus



Fonseranes inclined plane

large wheelhouse and living area which stretches most of the length of the barge. By contrast, the wheel on the Elegance is very alfresco; Matthias plans to add an awning of some sort to protect him from the elements.

We had just enough time before dinner to cycle into the centre of Capestang, a quintessentially southern French small town with a huge church dominating the square with its smattering of restaurants and shops and weekly market.

DAY 5

Today we had one of our most memorable experiences along the canal, but more of that later. First, we headed off on our morning excursion to Pézenas, one of the most charming and well-preserved

medieval towns in the region. It’s known for its connections with the French playwright Molière, who performed here in the 17th century.

The narrow streets are flanked by tall hôtels particuliers – not hotels but large townhouses, whose wooden doors hide magnificent stone courtyards and staircases. Shops sell everything from artisan leather goods to the local sweet treat, berlingots, and there’s also a vibrant antiques quarter as well as a plethora of restaurants and bars. The Saturday market is one of southern France’s biggest, taking over the whole town.

Back to the barge for another amazing lunch and then we were cruising again. This was the stretch of the canal where we had our near-miss with the hire boat assassins – we also just squeezed past one of the large passenger boats, packed with tourists all looking enviously at our comfortable sofas on the spacious deck of the Elegance.

As you drift gently along the canal, the soporific pace and serene scenery work their magic, and you slip into a half-asleep-half-awake state, almost like meditation. That was my position when I noticed Véronique and Enzo making their way on deck, joining Matthias at the wheel. “You mustn’t miss this,” they called. Up ahead I could see the canal disappearing into a tunnel, something different from the locks and bridges so far. I couldn’t see light at the other end, so it looked like it cut some distance through the rock.

As we steered gently into the mouth of the tunnel, it was eerily silent and cool.

Then suddenly the most haunting music started up, making the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. It continued for the 165 metres of the tunnel and was a truly magical experience. Excavated in 1679, the Malpas Tunnel was Europe's first navigable canal tunnel and is a monument to the skills and determination of Pierre-Paul Riquet, the Canal du Midi's chief engineer.

Our overnight stop was at Colombiers; we cycled into the surprisingly modern marina with a restaurant overlooking it, before heading back to the barge for our penultimate dinner.

DAY 6

Our last day of cruising dawned bright and sunny. I sat with Matthias at the wheel as he told me his fascinating life story, involving setting sail to foreign lands as a teenager before making a living in the barge world in the Netherlands and his native France. The hours went by quickly and before I knew it, we were approaching our final destination. Across the fields we could see Béziers, with its huge cathedral set high above the city.

We visited the historic city later, on our final excursion. Béziers is France's second largest conservation area after Paris. Elegant 19th-century Hausmannien buildings line wide boulevards while narrow medieval streets reveal unique shops and tempting restaurants and bars. We strolled down the contemporary suspended walkway from the Romanesque cathedral to the lower town, and discovered remains of a Roman amphitheatre before relaxing in the lovely gardens of Plateau des Poètes.

For our final night aboard the *Elegance*, we moored up at the start of

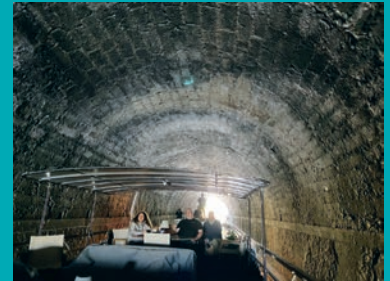
one of the most amazing sights of the whole Canal du Midi. The Écluses de Fonseranes consists of no less than eight oval-shaped lock chambers (characteristic of the Canal du Midi, as this shape was found to withstand the weight of the water) and nine sets of gates, creating a staircase of locks, built to cross the River Orb, which was 48 metres lower than the canal. At one point the locks also gave boats access to the River Orb, but in 1858, an aqueduct was built to replace the crossing of the river. Boats now enter and exit through the side of chamber seven, which is permanently kept at its upper water level, with the lower gates closed. The locks have just one set of gates between each chamber and water levels are maintained by use of a side pond.

As if seeing the staircase of locks wasn't exciting enough (what a shame we didn't actually pass through them), the site is home to another engineering behemoth – or rather, white elephant. The Fonseranes inclined plane or water slope was built in 1983 next to the locks, to take commercial traffic and boats too large for the locks. However, the project encountered technical problems, and after many years and millions of euros spent trying to resolve them, the project was abandoned in 2001.

Béziers was the birthplace of the Canal du Midi's engineer Pierre-Paul Riquet. The locks at Fonseranes must have felt like a particularly satisfying challenge. I have to wonder what he would have made of the inclined plane project – and if his skills and determination might even have led to a successful conclusion over 300 years after his death.

Karen travelled with Barge Lady Cruises
www.bargeladycruises.com

CANAL DU MIDI



The Canal du Midi is often called a feat of 17th-century engineering, and rightly so, with its unique locks and first canal passage ever built through a tunnel (Malpas). There were plans to build a waterway joining the Atlantic and Mediterranean as far back as Roman times; Leonardo da Vinci also came to France in the 16th century to tackle the project. However, it wasn't until 1667 that construction actually began, under the reign of Louis XIV, with chief engineer Pierre-Paul Riquet at the helm. He designed and built the Canal Royal de Languedoc (as it was then known), but sadly never saw it completed. It opened in 1681, just a few months after his death.

The canal was renamed the Canal du Midi during the French Revolution, and by 1856 it was transporting over 100,000 tonnes of cargo (wheat, wine and textiles) and a million passengers a year. With the arrival of the railways, trade almost dried up. Now, the picturesque canal attracts boating tourists from around the world, while the towpaths are popular with walkers and cyclists. It joined the Unesco World Heritage list in 1996.

KEY FACTS

- Canal length: 240km
- Maximum boat length: 30m
- Maximum boat beam: 5.5m
- Locks: 65 (originally 86)
- Maximum height above sea level: 189m
- Navigation authority: VNF (Voies Navigables de France)
- Chief engineer: Pierre-Paul Riquet (1609-1680)
- Building dates: 1667-1681
- Start point: Toulouse
- End point: Etang de Thau

