

I have been a practicing Francophile for over 30 years now. If only to persuade you to read on, let me reassure you that, as a Francophile, I am passionate about France and “things French” - be reassured that I have no abnormal feelings about ex Spanish dictators. I am also a canalaholic. These two admissions explain why my wife, Lesley, and I arrived in Calais on our barge, in October 1988, having left our “comfortable lives” in the City and our mooring on the Grand Union canal at Tring. For at least ten years prior to our arrival in France we had holidayed in France and on the canals.



A wonderful cruise down the ‘platane’ lined Canal du Midi

Unesco World Heritage site. Built by Pierre-Paul Riquet in the 17th century

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS MIKE GARDNER ROBERTS

The vacation has become a vocation

So when we went through the sea-lock and on to the inland waterways it was the start of the realisation of our dream; our dream to take our own boat, our floating home, all the way through French canal network from Calais to the Med. Initially, this dream was to be a sabbatical lasting a year. But the dream has become our lives and the vacation has become a vocation. We have been living on the French waterways since October 1988 and we spent four years working on hotel barges. Out of holiday season we were living on the Midi, at Capestang.

We loved the Midi. Steeped in history, bathed in sunshine and with the Mediterranean beaches a stones-throw away, it is a wonderful place to live. The entire Canal du Midi is a UNESCO world heritage site. Built during the reign of Louis XIV, in the 17th Century, by Pierre-Paul Riquet, it was built to link the navigable River Garonne at Toulouse with the Mediterranean.

The Midi starts its journey towards the sea at “Ponts Jumeaux” in the heart of Toulouse. “Ponts Jumeaux” is also a large basin where canal and Garonne river barges used to tie-up. Not surprisingly, “Ponts Jumeaux” got its name



“...Le Somail...”

from the two bridges; one crossing the Midi and the other crossing the short Canal de Brienne that descended on to the Garonne. However, since the opening of the Canal Lateral à la Garonne in the mid-19th Century, “Ponts Jumeaux” should perhaps have been renamed “Ponts Triplés”. Leaving the basin, the canal takes you right through the heart of Toulouse. Known as the “Pink City” due to the colour of many of the buildings.

Twenty years after first arriving in France we were leaving Toulouse, on BÉATRIX our Grand Sturdy 29.9 AC. We were met with all the sights that are synonymous with the Canal du Midi: the elliptical locks, the almost semi-circular arched bridges of stone, and the magnificent plane trees lining the canal on both sides.

300 days sunshine per year

The plane trees serve several purposes. Firstly, their root network binds the banks together thereby preventing erosion. Along the Midi, the bank protection afforded by the trees would appear to have proven itself very efficient over the years.

Secondly, the impressive root network also provides many very secure temporary mooring possibilities!

Another reason they were planted is the shade afforded by these trees. We did receive many enviable glances as we cruised gently along with our aft deck beautifully shaded by the bimini on BÉATRIX. Much of the tourist literature of this region proudly boasts 300 days sunshine per year. That is no exaggeration. Obviously the canal was built for transport by horse-drawn barge. It was also foreseen to use the canal to transport troops and their equipment. It was therefore important to endeavour to keep both the horses and their cargo, especially the human cargo, protected from the sun.

From Toulouse the canal climbs towards the summit, passing the old “bastide” town of Villefranche Lauragais and on to a unique site on the French canal network. The Canal du Midi, built in the 17th Century, has its own motorway service station! We moored-up and “just for a laugh” had a look. Actually, this service station is worth stopping at. There are plenty of moorings but, particularly, there is a permanent, interesting exhibition on the history of the Canal du Midi. Port Lauragais (as the motorway services is known) is on the summit level. So we soon passed the feeder canal from Naouze, and started our descent towards the sea.

We soon reached Castelnaudary, arguably the home of cassoulet and definitely the home of the French Foreign Legion (we didn’t argue with them!). Cassoulet is probably the regional dish. Toulouse and Carcassonne will also claim to

have “found” it and have their own variation on the recipe. They do however, all agree that cassoulet contains white beans and garlic and needs to be cooked very slowly in an oven for a long time. The variations tend to be on the choice and combination of duck, goose, pork and sausage. It is delicious and should be your choice from the menu on at least one occasion.

Carcasse Sonne

Our next port of call: Carcassonne. This is one of the finest preserved medieval fortified cities in the world and has to be visited. Not surprisingly it does attract hordes of visitors, so visit mid-week in the morning. The Port de Plaisance at Carcassonne is well equipped, very welcoming and with excellent access to the “newer” town. To get to the old Cité, we caught the shuttle bus.

Carcassonne is one of the Cathar sites. Today the Cathars would probably be viewed as a religious sect. Meaning “purified” or “cleansed”, the Cathars (from where we get



“...almost semi-circular arched bridges of stone...”

cathartic) broke away from what they considered to be a corrupt Catholic church and established a substantial following in the south of France. There followed a vicious and bloody suppression of the Cathars resulting in the slaughter of thousands. As many of the Cathars sought refuge in heavily fortified châteaux, Simon de Montfort, who led the army ordered to wipe them out, resorted to laying siege in an attempt to starve them into submission. One such siege took place at Carcassonne. Legend has it that as the town was on the point of yielding, the besieged catapulted animals out from Carcassonne onto de Montfort’s army. Believing

therefore that the town had such a plentiful supply of food that they could throw it away (some considerable distance at that), the morale of de Montfort's army was broken and they moved on. At the raising of the siege, all the bells of the Cathar churches rang-out - "Carcasse sonne" was the cry: Carcasse was ringing its bells.

Leaving Carcassonne, we started following the river Aude and, having crossed a small aqueduct, designed by the brilliant French military architect Vauban, soon arrived in the bustling canal village of Trèbes. The following morning after a very pleasant evening yarning with fellow boat-owners, we dropped down the three-lock flight into the vineyard. We had been told that from here stretching, virtually all the way, to Béziers was the greatest concentration of vineyards in the world. Apparently, not that very long ago, this region of France was renowned for the quantity of it's wine production but not the quality. However, several overseas producers have since installed themselves and planted some of the grape varieties that were, until then, unknown in the region. Today, "Minervois", "Corbières" and "St Chinian" are all well-known labels from this vast expanse of vineyards.

We could have stopped every kilometre or so

From Trèbes, the Midi twisted and turned as dictated by the course of the Aude. The locks were often staircases: two or three chambers where the bottom gate of one lock chamber is the top gate of the next. We passed La Redorte and moved on to Homps. Yet another charming canal village, Homps provides a very good, well-equipped port and an excellent selection of quay-side restaurants. We liked Homps. BÉATRIX was receiving many admiring looks from holiday makers on fibreglass charter boats. Later, at dinner, sat at the next table were two couples that had been particularly complimentary. They thought BÉATRIX was ours. Their second question was "where can you charter such a beautiful boat?" After dinner we invited them back for a "digestif". They had soon decided on BÉATRIX as their choice of boat for next years holiday!

There were several "caves" to be visited in and around Homps, including the vast "Cave de vieillissement" at Jouarres. But we had been recommended a particular canal-side domaine: "Bassanel". We tasted and bought some delicious red wine, including a velvety "Hauts du Bassanel", to be consumed in moderation, of course! We could have



"...fenders are very handy on the Canal du Midi..."

stopped at a different “domaine” every kilometre or so. My good pal, Stan, was all in favour. However, despite our desperate attempts to persuade the ladies that BÉATRIX might benefit from such extra ballast, our wives were not wavering. They responded with irrefutable feminine logic: “You always told me, darling, that Linssens were so stable; the amount of “ballast” you might need would be far too much to get in the car, anyway”. “We could drink the ballast” was met with a withering look and a reminder that “you promised to take me to that cemetery”. As I said, “we could have stopped”, but we didn’t. Apart from the odd plaintiff whimper and tremble of the lower lip from Stan each time “we didn’t”, we happily cruised on. Past Argens Minervois; an almost Italianate village, through the lock at Argens and on to the “Grand Bief” – the long pound. In fact the longest lock-free canal pound in France. From Argens, the next lock is at Béziers – 54 kilometres away. Riquet had found a contour that he could follow all the way to Béziers therefore avoiding the expense of constructing any locks over this distance.

The canal twists and turns, meandering through the vineyards and past a succession of delightful villages: Roubia, Paraza “B-b-but Château de Paraza” came the whimper from behind me. “Be brave, Stanley.” Immediately after Paraza, the meander becomes a veritable hairpin bend as the canal crosses the river Répudre by a canal bridge, a small aqueduct. This canal bridge was completed in 1676 and is the oldest ever built in France and, reputedly, the second oldest in the world. On arriving at Ventenac, we came across what appeared to be a grand church right beside the canal. We moored up. The “church” turned out to be the Château de Ventenac. “I’ve just had a religious experience”, said Stan as we sampled a fine selection of white, red and rosé wines. There was less whimpering as we cast off for the last few kilometres to Le Somail. This hamlet is probably the most photographed canal village in France. It is certainly very attractive with a couple of canal-side restaurants and a floating “Open All Hours”. One enterprising shopkeeper, seeing that the hamlet of Le Somail attracted so many boats, and yet did not even provide a “boulangerie”, brought a traditional barge into the port and very sympathetically converted it so as to provide the basic provisions required by the tourists.

Capestang

The next morning was our last complete day and we set off early. Our final destination was Capestang, “Béatrix’s” home port, but we wanted to go just beyond to one of Riquet’s incredible feats and “that cemetery”. We sailed on, past the “new” Canal de la Robine, a 19th Century arm down through Narbonne and on to the Med, past the “La

Clape” vineyards (Stan wasn’t so keen on a tasting, for some reason). This stretch of canal around Capestang is one of the most meandering. The small town of Capestang has a



“...Capestang...”

huge church. It is already huge but, like the Cathedral in Narbonne, which is even more huger (that means VERY big) it was never completed. The construction of these two Catholic churches followed on from the suppression of the Cathars and were designed on a scale to “strike fear”. So, the Huge Church at Capestang can be seen from a long way off, and certainly from the canal. At this point, the canal meanders wildly along the same contour that it “picked up” at Argens; the Huge Church wanders around all points off the bow and even the stern. We motored through Capestang, past the Domaine de Guéry (worthy of a whimper), through the delightful village of Poilhes and on to Malpas.

Malpas

Malpas itself merits a story: Colbert, Louis XIV’s finance minister, was concerned at the amount of money that was being spent on Riquet’s project and had one of his men keeping an eye on things. When the construction workers got to Malpas they met a rock outcrop that rose sharply out of plain below the canal level. The rise was so sharp that there was not the required space to continue following the contour. Convinced that this was an insurmountable barrier, and that consequently Riquet had failed, Colbert’s man set off for Paris to inform Colbert and Louis. By the time he returned from Paris with the news that Louis had turned off the supply of money, a tunnel had been blown through the rock - the construction of this tunnel and this waterway was one of the first recorded industrial uses of gunpowder. ↗

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ON COURSE... AND SURE!

However, the supply of money was not turned back on and Riquet funded the rest of the canal construction out of his own pocket. We moored just before the mouth of the tunnel and walked to the top of this rocky outcrop. There we found “the cemetery”. At the top of the hill through which Riquet blew his tunnel, is the “Oppidum d’Ensérune”. An Oppidum was a defendable hilltop settlement. The recent excavations at Ensérune have revealed some magnificent finds: hundreds of huge amphora buried in the ground – early refrigerators; numerous “cisterns” – large stone containers, like baths, for storing rain water along with a system of gutters for directing the water into the “baths”; and a vast burial site. All dating back to the time of Christ and the Roman occupation. Today this is a magnificent site well worthy of a visit. On the way back down to BÉATRIX and on the opposite side of the hill is another very unusual site: a vast round field that resembles an enormous dart-board. This is the Étang de Montady and the lines dividing the segments of the dart-board are the drainage ditches that transformed the marshy “étang” into very fertile farmland. These drainage ditches all join and then flow through another, much smaller, tunnel dug through Malpas. There is even a third tunnel: the main Béziers to Narbonne railway now also cuts through this outcrop. And to cap it all, the Via Domitia, the Roman road, runs over the top of all three tunnels. Felling dutifully cultured and steeped in history, we decided that for our

final nights meal, we would head back to Poilhes. We had a fabulous meal at a small restaurant called “Les Platanes”, on the terrace in the shade of, of course, a majestic old plane tree - a fitting celebratory end to our wonderful cruise down the “platane” lined Canal du Midi.

Tomorrow morning we were to return BÉATRIX, she had become our own BÉATRIX, our own Linssen for a short while. We were to return her to Capestang and to France Afloat, her “other” owners. She had looked after us wonderfully for this marvellous trip and we had been proud to look after her. Next year we would take one of her relatives for a trip in Burgundy.

The whimpering had already started.



The author Mike Gardner-Roberts

“BÉATRIX” is a Linssen Grand Sturdy 29.9 AC available for charter on the Canal du Midi through France Afloat. For details contact Mike or Steve on +33 386 81 67 87.

France Fluvial

Steve Adams / Mike Gardner-Roberts
La Maison Cantonnière
Quai Elie Amouroux
F-34310 Capestang, France
Tel. +33 (0)3 86 81 54 55
Fax. +33 (0)3 86 81 67 87
boats@franceafloat.com
www.franceafloat.com

