



Wine & Rembrant

The Howorths take a cruise along the Canal Lateral à La Garonne in the heart of the French countryside in search of fine food and art



the authors

The Howorths
Frances is a photographer and Michael is a qualified captain. Their voyages have taken them around the world.

the boat

Royal Magnifique
A large cruiser from charter company Le Boat, powered by a 60hp Nanni (marinised Mercedes Block)

The Lateral à La Garonne Canal cuts from the River Garonne at Bordeaux towards Toulouse to join the Canal du Midi and then the Mediterranean. En route it passes through some of the loveliest of French farmlands and past fertile plains that are the source of strawberries, apples, mushrooms, tomatoes, wild game and foie gras – products that have rightly earned it the name of France's pantry.

The canal passes through medieval villages via picturesque stone bridges, market squares and ancient churches. Along its banks, patisserie shops and boulangeries entice you inside with their aroma of freshly baked calories.

Cruising this canal is perfect for foodies – you'll often find restaurants just metres from the towpath serving dishes such as Daube de boeuf, Poule au pot and wild mushroom pie. Bordeaux wines are plentiful and the canal meanders right through the centre of Buzet, a centre of wine-making. For art lovers it is also home to a famous painting by arguably the greatest Dutch painter of all time, Rembrandt, and we set about finding it.

Boat base

We started our cruise from Montauban, a medieval trading town. We decided to use the town's Saturday farmers' market to our advantage by stocking up the boat. We tasted and bought our way around



St Antonin Noble Val from the opposite bank of the River Aveyron

the stalls, picking up cheeses, sausages, pâtés and all manner of vegetables and salads that would be useful on our cruise. In fact, so successful was our trip to the market that we only needed to pick up dry stock from the supermarket. In the town's narrow streets you will find several artisans, where you can pick up all sorts of mouth-watering delicacies, all at reasonable prices.

Unlocking the mystery

Montauban is connected to Montech on the Canal Lateral à La Garonne by the newly opened Canal Montech, a short 10km waterway that has a series of nine locks that are grouped close together shortly after leaving the base. The fully automated locks are controlled using an IR remote control device and we quickly got used to moving from one lock to another. Fortunately we had five crew on board so we could afford the luxury of one person cycling ahead on shore with the remote control.

Upon reaching Montech, we entered the Canal Lateral à La Garonne and turned 90° to starboard – a turn to port would take you along the canal all the

Beatrice Encausse, owner of Les Delices Gascon, a delicatessen and café selling locally made food



Our Le Boat Magnifique leaving Lock 24 Cacorcs en route to Moissac

CRUISING AQUITAINE



way to Toulouse and then on through the Canal du midi, all the way to the Med and the port of Marseille.

Montech is a typical canal-side town, with several bakers, butchers and other shops. It also has a small marina with shorepower and water but just before

the junction of the two canals, two river-side berths offer the same facilities with the added advantage of a canal-side picnic table and benches. If these are occupied, you can tie up between two trees and have a barbecue on the bank.

Joining the canal

As soon as you enter the new canal, you need to descend a series of five locks, each separated by a 400-600m stretch of waterway. Running parallel

alongside this system is an unusual contraction known as the Montech water slope. This inclined plain was built in 1974 when canal transport of freight was still flourishing, but it has little use today.

The canal was the brainchild of the engineer Vauban, who by then had already built the Canal du Midi. However, work didn't start until 1839, by which time Jean Baptiste de Baudre picked up the gauntlet. Construction moved quickly and by 1850 the canal was already linking

Toulouse with Agen. The canal was completed six years later and remained busy with commercial traffic until the mid-1970s.

From Montech we cruised 9km to Castel Sarasin, a picturesque little town known to lovers of

TRIVIA

When Pierre-Paul Riquet built the Canal du Midi from 1667-1681 he intended to continue the canal to the Atlantic





The tree-lined Canal de Montech is a tranquil and picturesque waterway

automobile trivia as it was the house where Lamoth Cadillac lived who went on to create a car building factory in Detroit in the US. Today a small museum remembers his legacy.

Leaving town we picked up the services of an itinerant lock-keeper, as boats are not permitted to stop in this section of the canal.

The approach to Moissac is across a stunning aqueduct, which makes the transit across the River Tarn far below. Two pretty locks, each guarded by arches of willow trees, drop the boat into Port Plaisance at Moissac a handy and well-equipped spot from which to explore this ancient town.

Moor in Moissac

Moissac is famous for its 11th century cloistered abbey and remains one of the finest examples of preserved medieval buildings in Europe. It was also given UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1998.

The cloisters were home to 100 Benedictine monks who ate and slept in collective cells. They worshipped in the adjacent church of St Pierre, a building distinguished by the painted interior, so fine and decorative that on first look it suggests the walls of the church have been wallpapered. There are also intricate carvings, many of which are biblical scenes, on each of

TRIVIA
Seven aqueducts allow the canal to cross the River Garonne and its tributaries



Wine price board at Domaine de Montels

the capitol to the 76 pillars supporting the cloisters. Once ornately painted, these were largely destroyed by vandals during the French revolution but are still well worth seeing.

It is on this stretch of the canal that the Tarn melds with the Garonne, a river that flows north to Bordeaux then joins with Dordogne to empty into the Atlantic on the western coast of France. The two waterways frequently run side-by-side together on passage with the lock joining the two at Moissac. This gives boats the ability to cruise 10km up and downstream from the town and allows the river to become a superb watersports destination during the summer months.

If plans to reopen the lock at Montauban ever get the go-ahead then it will be possible to make a circular trip using both the canal and the river.

Canal cruising

It is a three-hour trip from Moissac to Valence d'Argen, a little town with regular streets and spacious squares to make it a good example of a 'Bastide', or royal town, dating from the 13th Century.

A five-minute walk will bring you to the centre of town, although little of it can be seen from the canal. Turn up on a Tuesday and the market square will be packed with the weekly market, while on Saturdays it is the turn of the farmers'

market. In summer the town is alive with fairs and during August a historical pageant called Au Fil d'Eau in the form of a Son et Lumière takes place on the waterfront and involves over 400 actors. If you're planning on mooring canal-side then you will need to do your homework to ensure you find a spot away from busy roads and the railway.

Along the canal many towns and villages have facilities for motorboats, ranging from basic halts, with a wooden dock, to moorings offering water, electricity, bins, showers and laundry.

With this in mind, it is surprising that a city such as Agen has done so little to attract boaters – what facilities it does have are noisy, dusty and unpleasant. Given its historic importance and the fact that it is served by both the River Garonne and the canal, this is a great shame. Despite this, the city is so full of delights, that it's worth a stop even if you moor well out of town, as we did.

Arrival in Agen

Agen is famous for its prunes, or dried plums, a delicacy that was first brought to the area by soldiers returning from the Crusaders who had tasted them in Syria. The plum trees took to the



Philippe Romain, part owner of Domaine de Montels, showing us his vineyard



Intricate carvings on each of the pillars inside the cloister of St Pierre

countryside's rich soil and flourished to the point that something had to be done to preserve them for eating out of season and so the process of prune-making began. If you want to taste prunes prepared in the traditional way, seek out Monsieur Bossin.

Elsewhere, the quaint Jacobean church, with a single aspect belfry,

Favourite haven Moissac

The canal-side docks are clean, tidy and managed by an English couple: Ian Nobel and his wife Karen. They have done much to raise the standard of this port over the last three years, with numbers of boats using their services more than doubling since they took over. It has also become a favourite wintering hole, with almost all of the 440 metres of quayside being fully booked this year, and a waiting list has already been established for the release of bookings for next winter. Ian and Karen have also recently set up a WiFi internet connection for boat use and run the adjacent chandlery. They have established a strong community with motorboat users while also bonding with the local community.

Food & drink Time your visit to coincide with Karen's latest batch of red hot chunky chilli chutney, which she sells at €4 a jar. Le Pont Napoleon à Moissac is a five-minute walk from the port) and serves a range of dishes. Tel: 05 63 04 01 55 or 05 63 04 00 27 www.le-pont-napoleon.co, Moulin de Moissac, Tel: 05 63 32 88 88 www.lemoulindemoissac.com



Moissac motorboatsmonthly.co.uk

and a cathedral with spectacular stained-glass windows and beautifully painted walls, will be a hit with architecture lovers.

We entered Agen from the south east, causing us to pass through the city's somewhat ugly Bon-Encontre industrial zone. But the journey north-west of Agen is stunning and involves transiting Le Passage, a magnificent aqueduct 580 metres long, as it crosses over La Garonne. With 23 arches, each 20 metres wide, this is the longest aqueduct in France.

The aqueduct leads to a series of four locks, the transit of which takes 45 minutes, so you'll need to begin the process no later than 6pm as the lock-keepers finish work promptly at 7pm. It is forbidden to stop while making the transit between locks yet somewhat bizarrely, there is a delightful open-air bar and restaurant, Les Delices de l'Ecluse (05 53 95 58 16), enticingly situated at the first lock.

Blink, and you will miss the tiny hamlet of Columé on the port side of the canal some 6km clear of Agen. Its importance lies not only in the village itself but also in the Dutch barge called Julia Hoyt, home of celebrity chef, Kate Hill, who runs her cookery school from her nearby farmhouse. The barge will soon be up for sale.

After a splendid tour of Kate's farm, which provides the raw ingredients for her cookery courses, we set off again for Serignac-Sur-Garonne about hour away, which is a charming canal-side town where you should be able to stock up on all your food necessities.

Buzet

Wine buffs should be familiar with the name Buzet, which is one of the largest wine-producing cooperatives in France. Grapes have been grown here since the



Vegetables for sale in the market at Valence-d'Argen



Katie Hill in her 'kitchen garden' near Coloume

middle ages, but growers in Bordeaux have managed through means sometimes fair, sometimes foul, to hold back the region's growth and status as serious producers. In 1973, the region obtained the coveted AOC accreditation (which translates as 'controlled designation of origin') and the light fruity wine has been successful ever since.

Tours of the cooperative factory and the on-site wine shop where tastings are held can be arranged and there is always a tour at 3pm. But the off-hand treatment given to visitors does not mark this out as a must-do experience, but rather a suitable place for long-term cruisers to fill up

Our Le Boat Magnifique crossing the pont-canal d'Argen



Valence d'Argen Agen





The Magnifique on the Pont-canal sur la Baise over the River Baise. Access to the River Baise is possible at Buzet

10-litre wine containers from the petrol pump-style dispensers.

Buzet has two ports and provides lock access to the Rivers Lot and Baise. The town has several shops selling wine and local delicacies and there is a wide choice of restaurants.

Madame Yvonne Laffargue puts on a fine spread at her restaurant La Vigneron. Situated half-way up the main street on the left-hand side as you head away from the canal, she offers an amazing choice of fixed-price menus ranging from €12 up to €42. Our six-course feast featured foie gras presented in three different ways, with frogs legs and a succulent fillet of beef with wild mushrooms, all washed down with a bottle (or three) of Baron D'Ardeuil, which is produced by one of the members of the Buzet co-operative. A more intimate restaurant, can be found further into the centre of town at the Auberge du Goujon.



Approaching lock 37 Rosette at Agen

Snail's pace

From Buzet it is a one-day hop to Le Mas-d'Agenais, but it pays to take your time. Part of the enjoyment of canal cruising is being able to enjoy the lack of speed and the tranquillity it gives the traveller. But even if you wanted to make some headway the maximum speed limit on the canals is only 8kph (just over 4 knots) and anything faster can damage the banks of the canal.

You'll soon reach Damazam, a pretty fortified town that was for a long time during the 12th century under English rule. Several traces of occupation still exist, among them is the house and laundry now referred to as La Fontaine aux Angalis and several towers on the remaining ramparts. In the centre of town the market square is different from other French towns in that it is covered by the municipal offices.

For those who love French cigarettes, the town of Tonneines may be of interest. Called by some, 'the capital of the Gauloises' this town lies just 3km from the canal-side port of Villeton. In town it is possible to visit the ancient Royal Tobacco factory, where in the

museum there is an exhibition devoted to the River Garonne.

Another museum, this time in the tourist office building, has a wide variety of miniature vehicles on display. Two other museums can be found along the same stretch of water. At La Folotte a canal-side museum is dedicated to rocks and minerals, while another at Villeton is dedicated to farming and country trades.

Le Mas-d'Agenais marked the end of our journey but for many it is the starting point for cruises towards Bordeaux or along the rivers Baise, Garonne and Lot.

This quaint little town has a road bridge that crosses both the canal and the River Garonne in a single span. There are splendid little streets, magnificent road-side houses and an 11th century Romanesque church dedicated to Saint Vincent close to the covered market square. Inside this church we found the final part of our quest. Rembrandt painted a seven paintings depicting the crucifixion of Christ in the early seventeenth century, one of which hangs here at the end of our journey.

factfile

Charts, pilots & guides

Waterway Guides, published in France by Editions du Breil available on the internet, in good nautical bookshops or direct from Le Boat at time of booking.

Locks

Open from 9am-7pm each day and do not close for lunch. Except on the first leg of this trip, passage is upstream so the lock is empty when entering and full when leaving. For the most part the locks are automatic.

Getting there

- FlyBe flies from Southampton to Bergerac
- You can hire a car and drive from Bergerac to Montauban (136km)
- Homeward bound – catch a taxi from Le Mas-d'Agenais to Bergerac airport (66km).

Charter costs

Our trip with Le Boat took place in May. The boat cost £2580 for a week. This rises to £3595 per week in high season.

The only boat-based extra is fuel, charged at £9 per hour of engine time used and deducted from the fuel deposit paid at time of taking the boat. In 10 days we clocked up 26 hours of use.

A one-way supplement of £130 is charged and both bases have car parking facilities. Marinas charge very little – seldom more than €25 per night and generally include water and electricity, but many ports are free, as is the towpath.

For more information contact Le Boat
Tel: 0844 463 5577

Useful websites

www.tourisme-lotetgaronne.com
www.tourisme82.com

TAKE THE MED-WAY

Canal du des Deux Mers

Two waterways comprising of the Lateral à La Garonne canal and the Canal du Midi form what the French call the Canal des Deux Mers, which once provided a vital commercial link between two seas. This Atlantic-Mediterranean link is still one of the best ways of getting a motorboat to the Mediterranean today if it is able to enter at Bordeaux. The route provides motorboats with the shortest cut through France to the sunny south. The Midi is better known, but it is only one half of the story. It is the first part of the voyage that begins at Bordeaux along the Canal du Garonne that is equally important to motorboaters seeking Mediterranean sunshine as it links to the Canal du Midi. Together they cut out all of the Spanish and Portuguese coastlines along with the sometimes hazardous passage through the Straits of Gibraltar.



FINISH

29km

7
Buzet

22km

8
Le Mas d'Agenais