

Camargue uncorked

A charter holiday along the waterways of southern France, on the Rhône à Sète Canal, the Étang de Thau and the Canal du Midi, offered ample opportunity to sample the white horses, pink flamingoes and red wines of a colourful region... **REPORT BY MICHAEL HOWORTH & PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANCES HOWORTH**



Waterways buffs are not going to like me when I say that travelling the canals of the south of France is a cross between caravanning and walking in the countryside. Hopefully they will forgive me when they learn that I am more used to commanding yachts in excess of 50 metres long, with a crew of fifteen or so at my beck and call. Also, I can tell them that I have rarely enjoyed being afloat as much as I did on a 10-day charter holiday along the waterways of the Camargue and the Midi, in a boat of less than 15 metres.

We boarded our craft, one of Connoisseur Holidays

Afloat's Magnifique 8+2s, at the company's base in Beaucaire, only 13 miles from Nîmes airport. Well-informed and happy-to-please staff quickly and efficiently went through the ropes and asked if I had any boat-handling experience. Once I understood that there was only one propeller and that there was no need for a compass or a speed log, I was well away, and after a concerted effort by my crew (my wife Frances and mother-in-law Moo) to empty the shelves of the nearby Carrefour hypermarket, we set off on what was our very first canal experience.

The boat was surprisingly well equipped, with air

above View into Aigues-Mortes from Saint-Gilles, the gateway of the Camargue.

below As always in France, the selection of fresh, local food is just *parfait*. Witness those glorious oysters!



conditioning, two steering positions and a useful bow-thruster. My only significant observation is that it would have been nice to have a small generator or an inverter on board, for charging the batteries of computers and cameras carried by those stupid enough to work rather than just enjoy the cruising experience.

Our trip was a one-way journey from Beaucaire to Homps, along three waterways: the Canal du Rhône à Sète, meandering through the marshlands of the Camargue, famous for its bulls and white horses; the Étang de Thau, a large shallow salt lake; and finally the Canal du Midi, the 17th-century waterway linking the



the authors



FRANCES & MICHAEL HOWORTH

Frances and Michael Howorth are a freelance photojournalist team specialising in travel features on the superyacht and boutique cruise ship market. They have been travelling together for the last 25 years, initially working aboard cruise liners, then as crew aboard luxury yachts. Michael is a qualified captain, certificated to command large luxury yachts up to 3000 tons.

the boat



MAGNIFIQUE 8 + 2

One of the range of hire cruisers offered by Connoisseur Holidays Afloat from their several bases across Europe, the Magnifique has eight permanent berths and two from conversion of sofas – hence the 8+2. It was built in the UK by Porter & Haylett of Wroxham, Norfolk, and is powered by a single 60hp Nanni diesel.

the trip

DISTANCES Beaucaire to Aigues-Mortes 51km → Aigues-Mortes to Frontignan 41km → Frontignan to Marsellan 16km → Marsellan to Béziers 33km → Béziers to Le Somail 42km → Le Somail to Homps 20km. **Total 203km.**



Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Each of these waterways would offer spectacularly different scenery and experiences.

Our boat was clean, tidy, comfortable and well maintained. Quite how crowded she would be if she carried her full complement of 10, I dread to think, though several passing boats of similar size had crews getting on for that number. I can only imagine that they ate ashore a good deal and showered in the facilities provided at marinas.

Our first stop was Saint-Gilles, a town celebrated as the gateway to the Camargue. It was named after a nobleman who became a hermit and took refuge here in the 8th century, and its 12th-century abbey was built in his honour.

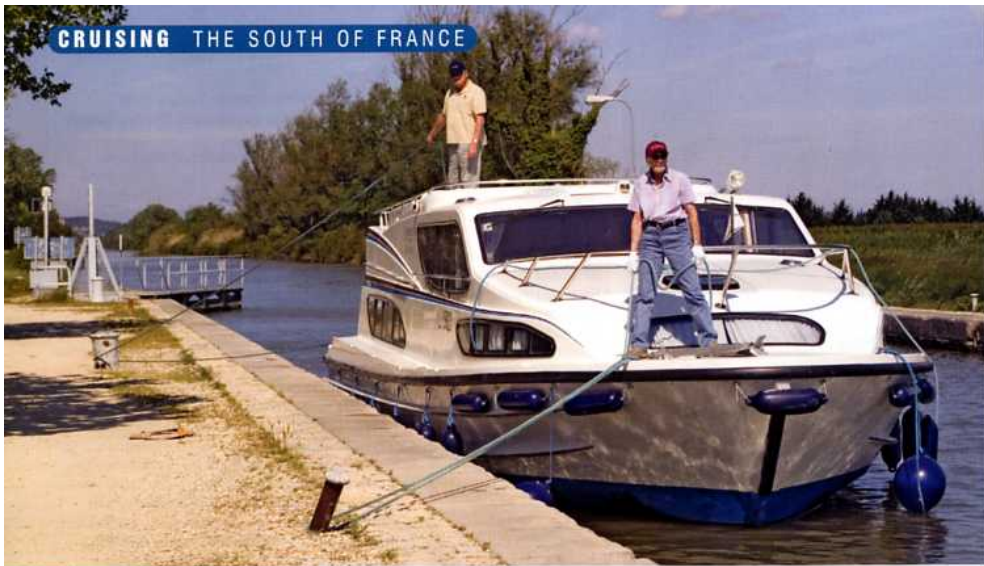
Moving on, we passed through low, flat wetlands; the banks of the canal stacked high with cut reeds drying in the sunshine. Fewer than 20 local men – known as 'les sagneurs de Camargue' – now hold the hereditary right to harvest these reeds, which they do by time-honoured methods, cutting and turning them all by hand.

Swallows and egrets dive-bombed the canal and turtles clung to tree roots. The marshes in this area have been turned into rice paddy fields, in a traditional checkerboard pattern. Fields of slightly more solid ground are the grazing homes to the Camargue bulls, whose dark grey horns sit above alert eyes, watching the canal boats as they cruise by. Cowboy-like horsemen, sitting on special saddles astride white stallions, charge about through shallow water as they round up the bulls and move them to pastures new. In the evenings the sky can turn almost pink, as flocks of flamingoes seek out their roosts.

On our third day we arrived in Aigues-Mortes, a mediaeval Crusader town whose ramparts are as robust today as they ever were. Henry James, writing 100 years ago, said the town was hardly alive, but was neatly embalmed. I doubt he would say the same today: 130,000 tourists flock to it every year. They come to do as we did, walking the near-mile of solid stone ramparts and eating at one of the many restaurants around the town square.

Beyond Aigues-Mortes, the scenery changes, the canal running between stone-wall banks with water on either side. It is here that the waterway runs

CRUISING THE SOUTH OF FRANCE



parallel with the sea and at one point, close to the Abbé de Maguelonne, we stopped and took our bicycles to the beach. We arrived in Frontignan just as the bridge made the last of its three daily openings, stopping for the night in the town made famous by making two million bottles of Muscat, the sweet wine, every year.

A short distance beyond Frontignan we left the Rhône à Sète and entered the Étang de Thau, a shallow lake famous for its farming of oysters. We visited the ports of Méze and Marseillan, spending a night in the latter. It is here that Nolly Prat, the vermouth, is made and the factory offers a fascinating tour during which guides explain the complex, time-consuming process behind the mixing and blending of the quintessential aperitif.

We feasted on local oysters that night, after discovering that a potato peeler is a poor substitute for a proper oyster knife! We also enjoyed 'tielle', or squid pie, a local speciality made with dough filled with baby octopus in a spicy tomato sauce – quite delicious.

It did not take long for us to cross the final stretch of lake and enter the Canal du Midi. The Romans first contemplated digging a canal from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, but it was an obscure tax collector in 17th-century Béziers who brought the concept to fruition.

Pierre-Paul Riquet pestered the court of Louis XIV until he received permission to construct what is still a very impressive feat of engineering. The Canal du Midi has over 300 locks along its 240km length and boasts Europe's first canal tunnel, at Malpas, and a sophisticated water supply network of reservoirs and feeder canals.

Within a few minutes of entering the Midi the scenery changed yet again. The sun shone through the branches of the huge leafy plane trees that line both sides of the waterway, creating everyone's idea of the picture-perfect rural canal scene. Within half an hour we reached the first lock, only the second in the six days we had so far been cruising. Half an hour or so later there was another one, and so the pattern began.

The lock at Agde is an unusual one, in that it is circular and has two levels at which a boat may exit, one set of gates leading to a branch canal that runs into the River Hérault, which runs down into the Mediterranean. Like all locks on this section of the canal, it is manned and (like all locks) it closes for lunch.

Most boat crews take advantage of the lock-keepers' midday break by selecting a suitably quiet spot along the towpath to stop for lunch themselves. This proved to

above About to drop into Nourriguier lock.



above A beautiful tree-lined section of the Canal du Midi.

below Camargue's most celebrated sight: white horses.



be a very pleasant way of spending an hour or so sitting under the sun umbrella on the upper deck, devouring a fresh, still-warm baguette with a rustic goat's cheese or delicious pâté, washed down with a chilled local rosé.

That evening we locked into Port Neuf, a large basin in the city of Béziers, the wine trading capital of the region. It's a hike into the town centre from here but worthwhile for the Poets' Gardens and the stunning views from the plaza beside the 13th-century cathedral.

Just yards after clearing the lock out of the city we crossed the splendid Aqueduc de l'Orb, a seven-arched structure topped by a series of smaller arches that carry the canal over the waters of the River Orb. A short distance beyond, we had to negotiate the daunting staircase of seven locks at Fonserannes.

The trick here is to stop and watch other boats passing through first. If you do not, the wording of the waterway pilot guide will put you off boating for ever. Trust me, seven locks moving boats up 83ft through a staircase of locks, in which they open gates two locks up ahead of you and let water cascade down to fill your chamber, is not quite the white-knuckle experience as it sounds. It does pay to have all hands on deck to handle ropes, with the stronger members of the crew on the foredeck. Another trick is to get the timing right, because the



above Moo keeps a tight hold as Ognon lock fills with water.



favourite haven: Aigues-Mortes

MEDIAEVAL SPLENDOUR

The spectacular fortified town of Aigues-Mortes, on the Rhône à Sète Canal, was built in the 13th century by King Louis IX as a Mediterranean port, but now it lies nearly four miles inland, thanks to the widespread silting up of the Rhône delta. It's a tourist trap, but also still a living, thriving town, with good shops and restaurants. Don't leave without taking a walk along its massive ramparts.

Berthing Secure to floating pontoons under the shadow of the ramparts just inside



above Ramparts in 'neatly embalmed' Aigues-Mortes.

the Canal du Roi, which leads down to the sea. **Les Enganettes.** Tel: +33 4 66 53 69 11.

Eating places There are many good restaurants in and around the town square. **Les Arcades.** Tel: +33 4 66 53 81 13.

Harbour office Beside Canal du Roi. Tel: +33 6 19 96 21 23. **Harbour office** Place Saint-Louis. Tel: +33 4 66 53 73 00.

favourite haven: Marseillan

VERMOUTH & OYSTERS

This pretty fishing port near the western end of the Étang de Thau can get crowded during summer months, but should not be missed. Main attractions are a tour of the Nolly Prat factory and eating freshly landed shellfish at one of the many harbourside restaurants.

Berthing Motor into the inner harbour and berth alongside the wall to starboard, near the green light.



above At the wheel, approaching magical Marseillan.

Eating places All beside the harbour. **La Table d'Emilie.**

Tel: +33 4 67 77 63 59. **Chez Philippe.**

Tel: +33 4 67 01 70 62. **Le Château du Fort.**

Tel: +33 4 67 77 31 67. **Harbour office** Beside the inner harbour.

Tel: +33 4 67 77 34 93. **Tourist office** Ave de la Méditerranée.

Tel: +33 4 67 21 82 43.

staircase is only operated in either direction for a two-hour period twice each day.

After a quiet night alongside the towpath and, in the morning, a quick trip into the nearest village for our daily baguette, we passed through Colombiers, motored across an aqueduct of the same name and entered Malpas Tunnel. Just under 200 yards long, the tunnel presents no difficulties, save that it is only wide enough for one-way traffic, so it is best to sound your horn to warn oncoming vessels.

Motoring through vineyards with vines growing down to the water's edge, it was hard not to think about how busy these fields would be come the harvests of September. There are ample opportunities to taste and buy and we succumbed to temptation close to the Aqueduc de Guéry. Here, Monsieur Tastavy welcomes boaters with the offer of a tour of his vineyards and the Domaine du Guéry winery, which has been in his family for over 400 years.

The name Tastavy means 'wine taster' and we guessed he might know a thing or two about grape juice. We were not disappointed; in good English he took the time to explain the wine-making process, proudly starting machinery, setting leather belts to turn cogs that cause massive presses to crush the fruit. He then posed for photographs besides the huge barrels in which his produce matures. It's a gloriously Heath Robinson

set-up, but it churns out 200,000 bottles of wine – red, white and rosé – a year. That evening we opened and enjoyed a well-chilled bottle of Monsieur Tastavy's rosé.

Next day we entered the canal's most picturesque stretch, snaking around the old hill-top town of Capestang, with its dazzling mediaeval churches and a small castle, topped by a distinctive tower. At La Robine, we passed the junction with the branch canal leading down to the city of Narbonne and eventually to Port la Nouvelle and the Mediterranean. We stopped for the night at Le Somail, which was one of the original staging ports in the days when the canal was a major passenger thoroughfare.

In those days, the trip took four days for the voyage from Agde to Toulouse. That might sound like a romantic way of travelling, but at each of the 25 double or triple locks, passengers had to disembark and change boats, carrying their own luggage up or down the steep steps beside the locks from one boat to the next. The Inn at Le Somail dates from those days, as does a quaint circular brick-built tower used to house and preserve ice throughout the summer.

Our last overnight stop was in the pretty little wine-producing town of Argens-Minervois, clustered around a 14th-century château that overlooks the canal and the River Aude. All too soon we were entering Connoisseur's base in Homs at the end of our wonderful holiday.

“The Domaine de Guéry vineyard is a gloriously Heath Robinson set-up, but it churns out 200,000 bottles of red, white and rosé every year”



above Another Camargue trademark: flamingoes.

factfile

GETTING THERE

The Howorths flew to Perpignan from Southampton with Flybe, at a cost of £100 return each. They hired a car to drive to Beaucaire, at a cost of €100 and travelled from Homs back to the airport by taxi, which cost €150. Nîmes and Montpellier, both much nearer Beaucaire, are also served by budget airlines.

CHARTER COSTS

In May, when the Howorths did their trip, a week's hire of a Magnifique 8+2 would have cost €2365. In late July and August it would have cost €3700 per week. The cost of fuel is charged at €6 per hour of engine time and deducted from the fuel deposit paid at the time of taking the boat. For their one-way cruise the Howorths had to pay a supplement of €100.

BERTHING COSTS

Marinas charge up to €25 per night, but most mooring places are free.

CHART GUIDES

'Guide Fluvial 7: Canal du Midi, Camargue Aquitaine' (Editions du Brel). Available from good nautical bookshops, on the internet or from Connoisseur when booking your boat.

PAPERWORK

Passports and travel insurance. No boating qualifications are necessary.

CONTACT

Connoisseur Holidays Afloat. Tel: 0870 774 9933. www.connoisseurafloat.com



above The café-lined harbour at Meze and a grape press at Domaine de Guéry. You couldn't get more French if you tried!

favourite haven: Le Somail

MIDI BUS STOP

An 18th-century staging post used during the peak years of the canal passenger trade, this attractive Canal du Midi village and port is home to several canal cruiser companies and has all the boating facilities one is likely to need. There's a fascinating antiquarian bookshop, but if you need extensive provisions, take a bike or a taxi to nearby Nazaire d'Aude.



above Another sublime spot on the Midi, at Le Somail.



Berthing Use the free public wharves if there's room.

Otherwise try the hire companies, but expect to pay for an overnight visit.



Eating places L'Auberge le Somaillou.

Tel: +33 4 68 46 19 41. La Porte Minervoise Tel: +33 68 46 29 65. L'Eau à la Bouche Tel: +33 68 46 00 09. (Please note that there is no harbour or tourist office in Marseillan.)