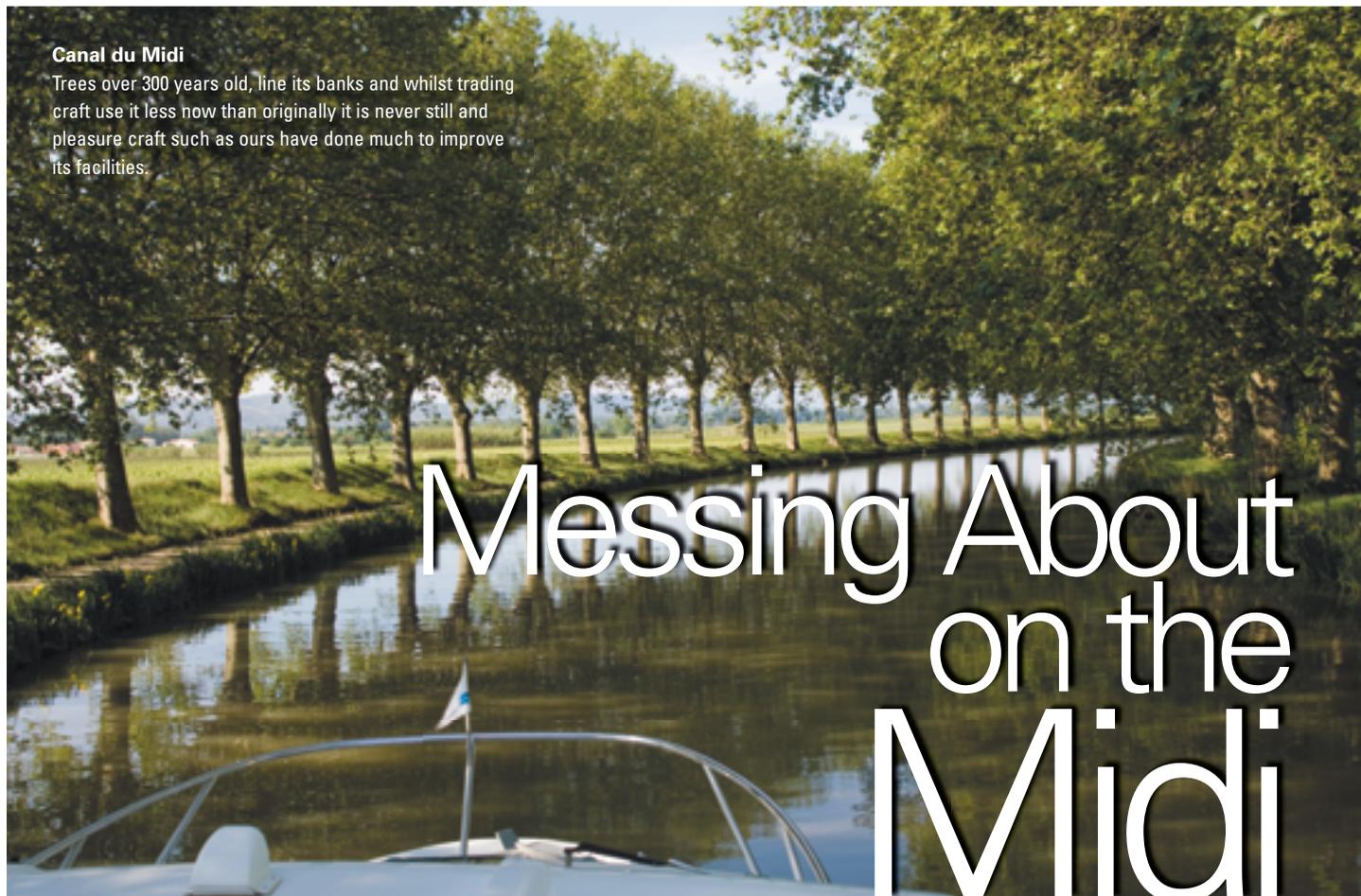


Canal du Midi

Trees over 300 years old, line its banks and whilst trading craft use it less now than originally it is never still and pleasure craft such as ours have done much to improve its facilities.



Messing About on the Midi

Cruising the canals of the South of France enjoying the local food and wine on a self catering holiday afloat offers flexibility, freedom and fun!

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHIED
BY FRANCES & MICHAEL HOWORTH

Cruising the waterways and canals of the south of France aboard a charter yacht is a cross between caravanning and walking in the countryside but with the added fun of being on board a yacht which to our minds at least is the only way to travel when on vacation. Our cruise along the Canal du Midi the historic 17th century waterway which links the Atlantic with the Mediterranean offering spectacular scenery and experiences as we meandered through the vineyards that cling to its banks. Cruising the canal aboard our chartered motor yacht was the most wonderful way of moving from one winery to another in an unhurried fashion that gave us all plenty of time to enjoy and taste the local wines.

We had chartered our craft through Connoisseur Afloat and had started our cruise from Marseillan at the southern entrance to the canal for a one-way journey to the company's base at Homps. The boat, a 42-foot long Magnifique, was an eight berth well equipped motor yacht with air conditioning, two steering positions and a useful bow thruster. If you have a mind to do so, you can carry ten persons aboard but eight is probably the ideal number. Our boat was clean tidy, comfortable and well maintained, her spacious sun deck is great for eating al fresco and she comes with all the equipment you might need including the all-important corkscrew and wine glasses!

Leaving Marseillan, we entered the Canal du Midi. The Romans had been the first to contemplate digging a canal from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic but it was an obscure tax collector from Béziers who brought the concept to fruition. Pierre-Paul Riquets persistently pestered the court of Louis XIV until he received permission to commence work constructing what is a now an impressive feat of engineering that spans 350 locks in its 150 mile length. 1200 men were employed for fifteen years starting in 1666 on a project that cost then 15 million gold pounds. Riquets died the year before it opened but his vision cannot possibly be forgotten by anyone lucky enough to travel along it. Trees over 300 years old, line its banks and whilst trading craft use it less now than originally it is never still and pleasure craft such as ours have done much to improve its facilities. Within minutes of entering the canal the scenery has changed yet again. The sun shines through the branches of huge leafy plane trees line the towpaths creating everyone's idea of the picture perfect rural canal scene. Within thirty minutes we have reached the first lock and only the second in our 6 day trip to date. Half an hour or so later there is another one, and so the pattern begins. The lock at Agde is indeed an unusual one, insomuch that it is both circular and has two levels at which a boat may exit. Like all locks on this section of the canal, it is manned by lock keepers and like all locks it closes for lunch. In fact it is fair to suggest the whole canal system shuts down for lunch because in typical French fashion everyone seems to select a suitable quiet spot along the tow path to stop and drive stakes into the soft earth onto which the mooring lines are made fast. Say what you like it is 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 goats cheese or delicious pâté washed down with a chilled local rosé wine. Agde was originally a prosperous Greek trading port and is one of the oldest towns in France. Its ancient quarters and old houses built of dark volcanic stone are well

worth seeing and there are guided tours of the 12th century cathedral of St Étienne. A lack of time prevented us from visiting the worthwhile museum, which has fine exhibits of traditional costumes, local artefacts and model boats.

The river Libron crosses the canal shortly after leaving Agde and the method by which it does so, is intriguing and rather interesting. Anywhere else an aqua duct would have been used to carry the canal over the river, but the surrounding countryside here is too low and the two cross each other at the same level. To avoid damage to the canal when the river floods, a very unusual structure has been built. Originally a simple barge-like devise with raised ends was used and sunk in the canal during times of flood. The floodwaters passed over the barge and continued on their way down river. The structure in place nowadays, dates from 1857 when the engineer Urbain Maguès built large gates at each end of the canal crossing which are raised in time of flood to stop mud and debris being deposited into the canal by the flooding river.

That evening we locked into Port Nuef the large wide basin offering ample free dockage spaces inside the city of Béziers the wine trading capital of the region. It's a hike into the town centre from here but worth doing so in order to view the Poets' Gardens and take in the stunning views from the plaza beside the 13th century cathedral of Saint Nazaire. The cathedral was built over a 300 year time span and is topped with a 160 foot high spire. One of its principle features is a 33 foot diameter rose window which is illuminated by the setting sun but timing was not on our side when it came to seeing it ourselves. Friday here sees a splendid flower market add a splash of color to this bustling town. We however took more pleasure in the canal itself rather than the cities it passed through and the next couple of miles were amongst the waterways star attractions.

First out of the bag comes just yards after clearing the lock out of the city. The Aqueduc de l'Orb is a seven arched bridge topped by a series of smaller arches that carries the canal over the waters of the river Orb below it. This splendid and exciting piece of engineering was completed in 1854 and as you pass along its 633 foot length driving a boat it is impossible not to marvel at the fact that way below you flows a river on which boats are sailing. It is not very long after that until one reaches the locks of Fontseranés. The trick here is to stop, take the camera 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 83 feet through what is called a staircase of locks, in which they open gates two locks up ahead of you and let water cascade deluging down to fill the basin is not quite as white water rafting as it sounds. The camera shots from the dock, as you watch others are essential, because going through can be a little damp, as well as hectic,



The Boat ▲

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More Information

Distances

Our one way trip from Marseillan to Homps was 205 km or 127 statute miles passing through 1 tunnel and 18 locks. The recommended time for this trip is 7 days. About 50% of all trips are one way and the other half tend to return to the base from where guests began their trip.

Factfile

Travel Connoisseur bases are conveniently located within a reasonable distance from an airport. Nimes Montpellier and Perpignan are all served by budget airlines operating out of the UK. Marseilles is served by Air France and British Airways. There are smaller airports at Béziers and Carcassonne. We hired a car to drive to Marseillan costing €100 and employed a taxi from Homps which took an hour and cost €150.

Charter Costs

Our trip took place in May when the cost of this boat was priced at €2365 for a week. It rises to €3700 per week at the height of the season. The only boat based extras is the cost of the fuel and this is charged at €6 per hour of engine time used and deducted from the fuel deposit paid at time of taking the boat. In seven days we clocked up 32 hours of use. A one way supplement of €100 is charged and both base car parking and hire of bicycles must be allowed for if required. Marinas charge very little seldom more than €25 per night and generally include water and electricity but truthfully many ports are free as is the towpath. Why pay if you do not need to?

Charts, Pilots & Guides

There is a guidebook on board each boat which truthfully is a little out of date still quoting for example, marina fees in Francs long after the euro became the currency of France. We used the much lauded multi lingual Midi Camargue Waterway Guide published in France by Éditions du Breil available on the internet, in better nautical bookshops or direct from Connoisseur at time of booking. My advise is to buy it early it is a perfect planning tool and invaluable if you want to get the most out of the holiday trip.

Paperwork

Very little is needed and what there is can will be handled by the base staff who know all the ropes and hand it all over at the time of the boat briefing. If using credit cards in France it is sometimes useful to carry a photo ID card

Weather

It was very pleasant in early may and whilst we confess we did not utilize the air conditioning we own up to firing up the webasto central heating on a couple of damp evenings. With the heat of the summer time will come crowds, more boats and longer passage times!

www.connoisseurafloat.com



and it does pay to have all hands to handle ropes with the stronger members of the crew on the foredeck. Another trick, is to get the timing right to suit your cruise, because the staircase only flows in either direction for a two hour period twice each day.

We motored on and moored beside the towpath that evening in complete contrast to last evening and enjoyed the tranquility that the quiet countryside can provide. A quick trip into the nearest village next morning for the baguette is all that is required to restore normality. We passed through Colombiers where a section of an old roman road has been uncovered in recent excavations and motored across an aqueduct of the same name just before we entered the Malpas tunnel, the most impressive of all engineering feats of the canal. Instead of skirting around the high ground, Riquet cut a 580 feet channel through the sandstone right under the hill of Ensérune on the crest of which there are the remains of a roman settlement dating from the 6th century. The tunnel presents no difficulty for navigation save that it is one way, and it is best to sound the whistle to let on coming traffic know you have begun a transit. We took the time to moor up and visited both the roman ruins with its adjacent museum and went on to view the visitors centre and local produce shop immediately above the tunnel. If you are short of time skip the latter.

Motoring through the vineyards with vines growing down to the waters edge it is hard not to think about how busy these fields will be come the harvests of September. There are ample opportunities to stop taste and buy and we succumbed to temptation close to the Guéry aqueduct where Monsieur Tastavy welcomes boaters with the offer of a tour of his vineyards and Domaine du Guéry winery that has been in his family for over 400 years. The name Tastavy means wine taster and we guessed he might know a thing

AD

“ We entered the canals most picturesque stretch snaking around the old hill top town of Capestang with its stunning medieval churches and small castle topped with a distinctive tower “



Specifications

Type	Magnifique 8+2
LOA	42 feet
Beam	13' 6"
Draught	3' 3"
Height above water.....	7 feet
Builders .	Porter & Haylett Ltd Wroxham England
Engine60 hp Nanni (marinized Mercedes Block)
Bowthruster	8 hp electric powered
Fuel Capacity90 gallons
Fuel Consumption.....	0.7 gallons p/h
Fresh water capacity265 gallons
Berths	8 fixed 2 converted from sofas
Speed	8 knots
Steering positions.....	2
Air conditioning.....	Forward and after sleeping cabins
Heating	Webasto throughout

Information

To charter this trip or any yacht you see in this issue of YV&C, please contact any of the recommended charter brokers listed on page 8

or two about grape juice. We were not disappointed; in good English he took the time to explain the process, proudly starting machinery; setting leather belts to turn cogs which cause massive presses to crush the fruit and then posing for photographs besides huge barrels in which his produce matures. It's a gloriously wonderful, old-fashioned factory and truly a family business in which they use only grapes grown on family land. He makes all three colors of wine and tells us that he makes around 200,000 bottles of it each year. Passing canal trade customers account for 18% of sales, if you take into account those who reorder year after year having first carried away a bottle or two by canal cruiser. He senses we enjoy the odd glass of vino and produces a bottle of sweet Muscat wine made by his aunt who lives not so very far away. It was delicious and so it is that a rather well bottle-laden crew that clanks its way back to the boat anxious to see if the wine travels. That night we opened a well chilled bottle of Rosé and discovered it had traveled rather well.

We entered the canals most picturesque stretch snaking around the old hill top town of Capestang with its stunning medieval churches and small castle topped with a distinctive tower and motored on to Le Somail. Just before we arrived there we passed the junction of the canal de la Robine which if we had time and taken it would have led us to the city of Narbonne and even eventually to Port la Nouvelle on the shores of the Mediterranean. This exciting side trip there and back can easily be undertaken in two or three days. Le Somail was one of the original staging ports in the days when the canal was a major passenger thoroughfare. In those days the trip cost six pounds and took four days for the voyage from Agde to Toulouse and least that sounds wonderfully romantic perhaps I should

point out that at each of the twenty five double or triple locks, passengers had to disembark, change boats and hand carry their own luggage up or down the steep steps to their next craft. 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 final stopping point was the pretty little wine producing town of Argens-Minervois so typical of the Minervoise region clustered around its 14th century château overlooking the canal and the Aude River. We pass many pretty houseboats permanently moored to the canal side, proof that the canal certainly does extend a grasp on those who travel her waters and we feel similar pangs of regret that Homps our destination port has crept up so quickly upon us. ☞

About the Authors.

Frances and Michael Howorth are a freelance photo-journalist team who specialize in travel features on the ultra large yacht and boutique cruise ship market. They are regular contributors to many boating magazines and have been traveling together for the last twenty five years initially working aboard cruise liners then as crew aboard luxury private and charter yachts. Their voyages of discovery have taken them to Africa, North and South America, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, India and plenty of islands in between with such variety as to include Tristan de Cunha, St Helena and the Maldiv Islands. Michael is a member of the British Guild of Travel Writers and is a qualified Captain certificated to command large luxury yachts up to 3000 tons. Photographs taken by Frances have featured on the covers of travel magazines and in the pages of the yachting press as well as other quality periodicals. The couple have written several books mostly about yachts, yachting and survival at sea. michael@thehoworths.com