A photograph of a white motorboat on a narrow canal. A woman in a pink sweater and white pants stands on the deck, holding a blue rope. A man in a white shirt and cap is at the helm. The canal is lined with dense green trees, and the water reflects the boat and the surrounding foliage.

Messing about ^{on} the Midi

For flexibility, freedom and fun, a self-catering holiday afloat is hard to beat, as FRANCES and MICHAEL HOWORTH discovered when they cruised the canals and sampled the wines of the South of France



Cruising the waterways and canals of the south of France 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, offered spectacular scenery as we meandered through the vineyards clinging to its banks. Cruising the canal aboard our chartered motor yacht was a great way of moving from one winery to another in an unhurried fashion – giving us plenty of time to try the local wines.

We started our journey from Marseillan, at the southern entrance to the canal, for a one-way journey to Homps. The boat, a 42-foot long, eight-berth *Magnifique* was well-equipped, with air conditioning and a spacious sun deck – perfect for alfresco dining. She also had the all-important wine lovers' equipment – a 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 now an impressive feat of engineering that spans 350 locks on its 150-mile length. Starting in 1666, some 1,200 men toiled for 15 years on a project that cost 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.

Several 300-year-old trees line its banks and while fewer trading craft use it today, it

is never still and facilities have been improved for the ever-growing number of pleasure craft, such as ours, using the route. Within minutes of entering the canal the scenery has changed yet again. The sun shining through the branches of huge leafy plane trees lining the towpaths create the picture-perfect rural canal scene.

Long lunch break

Within 30 minutes we have reached the first lock and half an hour or so later there is another one – and so the pattern begins. The lock at Agde is like all locks on this section of the canal, manned by lock keepers and closed for lunch. In fact, the whole canal system seems to shut down for lunch while, in typical French fashion, everyone selects a suitably quiet spot along the tow path and chills out. Passing an hour or so sitting under the sun umbrella on the upper deck devouring a fresh, warm baguette with a rustic goat's cheese or delicious pâté washed down with a chilled local rosé wine is hard to beat.

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 Saint-Étienne.

The river Libron crosses the canal shortly after leaving Agde in an intriguing way. Usually an aqueduct carries 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, in 1857 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 Neuf, the large wide basin offering ample free docking inside the city of Béziers, the wine trading capital of the region. It's a hike into the town centre from here but worth it in order to view the Poets' Gardens and take in the stunning views from the plaza beside the 13th-century cathedral of Saint-Nazaire, which was built over 300 years and is topped with a 160ft spire. Its 33ft-diameter rose window is illuminated when the sun sets.

Rising 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. This splendid and exciting piece of engineering was completed in 1854 and, as you pass along its 633ft-length, you can't help but 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 Fonseranes – a series of seven locks in a staircase which moves your boat up 83ft. ▶



After an evening moored on a tranquil towpath enjoying the countryside, we started the next day with a trip into the nearest village for the essential breakfast baguette. 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 580ft 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.


Stop and try one

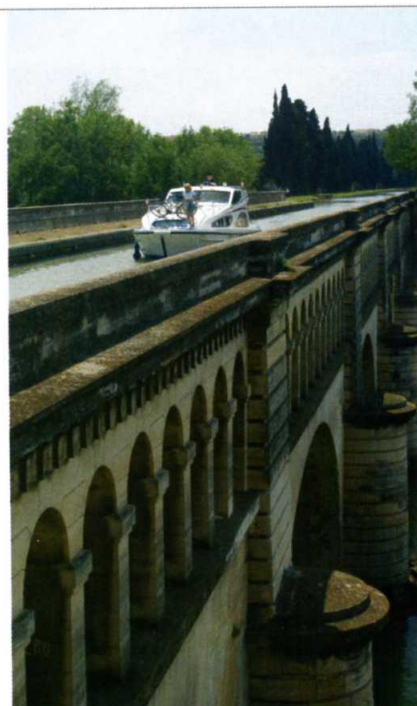
Motoring through the vineyards, there are ample opportunities to stop, taste and buy and we succumbed to temptation close to the Guéry aqueduct, where Monsieur Tastavy welcomes boaters with the offer of a tour of his vineyards and Domaine du Guéry winery that has been in his family for more than 400 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 process, proudly starting machinery; setting leather belts to turn cogs which caused 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 around 200,000 bottles of wine – in all three colours – each year. Passing canal trade accounts for 18 per cent of sales.

We entered the canal's most picturesque stretch, snaking around the old hilltop 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'd had the time to explore, would have led us to the city of Narbonne and eventually to Port-la-Nouvelle on the shores of the Mediterranean. The exciting detour 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 £6 and it took four days to travel from Agde to Toulouse. However, in case that sounds wonderfully romantic, I should point out that at each of the 25 double or triple locks, passengers had to disembark, change boats and carry their own luggage up or down the steep steps to their next craft.

Our final stopping point was the pretty little wine-producing town of Argens-Minervois – so typical of the Minervois region, clustered around its 14th-century château overlooking the canal and the River Aude. We passed many pretty houseboats permanently moored to the canal side, proof that the canal certainly does have a hold on those who travel her waters. We felt some pangs of regret that Homps, our destination port, had crept up so quickly. 



Distances

The one-way trip from Marseillan to Homps is 205km or 127 statute miles and passes through one tunnel and 18 locks. The recommended time for this trip is seven days. About 50 per cent of all trips are one way and the other half tend to return to the base from where guests began their trip.

FACTFILE

The holiday

Frances and Michael Howarth hired a Connoisseur boat. Their trip took place in May and the boat cost €2,365 for a week. This rises to €3,700 per week at the height of the season. The only extra is the cost of the fuel, 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, 32 hours of use were clocked up. A one-way supplement of €100 is charged and both base car parking and hire of bicycles must be allowed for, if required. Marinas seldom charge more than €25 per night and generally include water and electricity. Many ports are free, as is the towpath.

Travel

Connoisseur bases are located within a reasonable distance from an airport. Nîmes, Montpellier and Perpignan are all served by budget airlines operating out of the UK. British Airways, easyjet, Ryanair and bmi baby all fly to Marseille. Frances and Michael hired

a car to drive to Marseillan, costing €100, and employed a taxi from Homps – which took an hour and cost €150.

Charts, pilots & guides

Frances and Michael used the much-lauded multi-lingual *Midi Camargue Waterway Guide*, published in France by Éditions du Breil and available on the internet, in nautical bookshops or direct from Connoisseur at time of booking. It's an invaluable tool if you want to get the most out of your trip.

Paperwork

Very little is needed and what there is can be handled by the base staff, who 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

Contact

Connoisseur, The Port House, Port Solent, Portsmouth, Hampshire, PO6 4TH.
Tel: 0870 774 9933
www.connoisseurfloat.com