

Story & photos
By Diane Selkirk

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Almost every time we drove our 15-metre canal boat into one of the small oval locks on France's Canal du Midi, we drew a crowd. It could be our audience was made up of engineering fans here to see the ancient technology in action or mariners down to admire the lines of our vessel. But chances are, that along with watching our charter boat go up or down like a big bathtub toy, the crowd was hoping for drama. This is because despite a morning of training from Le Boat, and their assurance that anyone can drive the canal boats, not everyone immediately gets the hang of entering the stone-walled chambers and riding the receding water four, or more, metres down or up the basin. This is partly because unlike sailing charters, travel on the inland waterways doesn't require the skipper to have formal qualifications. Instead, charter companies like Le Boat provide an orientation to the canal as well as some hands on training.

After that, it's *learn as you go*.



Chartering on France's **CANAL DU MIDI**

Crusing for cuisine & crusader history



Our lock partner follows us into the last chamber of a multi-lock section on the canal du midi



FOR OUR MULTIGENERATIONAL group of seven friends and family we expected this process to be easy. After all, everyone but my daughter's girlfriend Anna has boated extensively—and my husband Evan, daughter Maia and I have even taken our own boat through the Panama Canal. Instead—when we first set out, there was some yelling and the occasional solid (though well-fendered) bump. But it was when we got ourselves wedged sideways that I realized we needed a fresh start. So we pulled over to the side of the sycamore-tree-lined canal to regroup. Over a yummy lunch of olives, cheese, bread and

a crisp local rosé; we talked through the process and agreed that everyone needed a clear job. Then with a gentle push off the bank, we headed back into the waterway. As we approached the next locks, our new-found confidence showed.

For a single (automated) lock, Evan would drive the boat up to the side of the canal and Maia and Anna would step onto the banks and push the button to open the gate. When the lock light turned green Evan would drive into the basin while our friends Mark and Val passed the bow and stern lines to the girls. Once we were secure, Maia would push the



CHARTERING
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AN INTRIGUING HISTORY

The story of Canal du Midi goes back to at least 1516. This is when Leonardo da Vinci first surveyed the route for the French King, who was looking for an inland passage from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean that would allow merchants to skip the long, pirate-ridden sea voyage around Spain and Portugal and through the Strait of Gibraltar. The problem

was da Vinci couldn't engineer a method for keeping water in a canal that ran downhill in both directions. It wasn't until 1666, when Pierre-Paul, Baron Riquet de Bonrepos realized diverting a river and building a dam at the highest point could keep the waterway full. Under King Louis XIV, work on the canal began in 1667. Over 14 years, more than 12,000 workers built a massive 700-metre long and 30-metre high dam and the 240-kilometre long canal. Utilizing 63 locks, 130 bridges and 60 small and large aqueducts, the technical solutions required to build Canal du Midi are said to have helped usher in the Industrial Revolution.

As time went on, the laden cargo barges that were once towed by horses and mules were gradually replaced by trucks and trains and the barges were converted into engine-powered pleasure boats. In recent years, fleets of modern charter boats entered the canal system—offering full galleys and comfortable staterooms for groups from two to

12. While transiting the entire Canal du Midi could take a modern boat several weeks, our group only had seven days for our trip. So I asked the experts at Le Boat for an itinerary that would be relaxing—while giving us access to a mix of medieval villages, wineries and maybe a castle or two. Their suggestion was to take the boat from Castelnaudary to Trèbes, a distance of just over 50 kilometres. At first this seemed like an under-ambitious plan. But when we only managed to travel 15 kilometres on our first day, we knew their advice was right.

COUNTRYSIDE COMFORT

As a sailor, the space aboard our canal boat felt quite roomy. When we boarded at the Le Boat base in Castelnaudary we discovered our vessel had four identical state rooms with en suites, a full kitchen and an upper deck with a second dining area, complete with panoramic views. We decided to take advantage of the region's excellent fresh food and do most of our meals aboard. This meant we'd have an excuse to explore all the farmers' markets found along our route and also gave us the option of spending our nights tied up to the side of the canal in the French countryside—rather than in towns.

After settling into our boat and bringing aboard the groceries we ordered, it was time to untie our dock lines and join the

Above: Many of the locks are automated—and Maia starts the cycle when we're ready. Left: Our vessel entering the lock—Maia and Frank are ready to catch lines

button to start the lock cycle. Before we dropped too far into the chamber, they'd step back aboard.

There are also several locations where the locks are grouped, creating a ladder up or down the canal with sets of two, three or more connected basins. In these places it's the lock keepers who would manage the lock cycle while our shore crew stayed on land and kept hold of our lines as we moved forward. But once the process was complete the gates would open and we'd reenter the canal, much the way boats have for hundreds of years.



leisurely procession of boats making their way along the canal. A few hours later (after that initial bumpy start) we were entering and exiting locks with ease.

On our second day, a light breeze blew across farm fields that stretched from the waterway toward a distant village where a stone steeple rose up through the trees. If it weren't for power lines, the occasional car and the thrum of our own engine—the scene could have been from any moment in the canal's rich history. And when we tied up the boat to spikes which Val had hammered into the canal side—so we could follow an old foot path into the circular village of Bram—the sense of timelessness grew deeper.

In town, as Mark and Frank hunted for olives, bread, cheese (and the best wines to accompany them) Val and I dove into the town's old buildings and learned that this section of the canal has archeological history that dates back to the 2nd century BCE, when it was the crossroads of two Roman roads. But it was during the Cathar Crusades that things apparently became really dramatic.

We learned this later that day when my stepdad Frank, along with Maia and Anna, went in search of a new corkscrew in the village of Villesèquelande (our corkscrew broke dramatically from what we assume was a defect, rather than excessive use). Arriving after all the businesses had closed;



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Above: Evan crouches to fit under one of the canal's low bridges

Left: The sycamore trees lining the canal were planted to stop the canal banks from eroding.

they didn't find a corkscrew but instead encountered a medieval enthusiast named Gilles Alessandri who charmed them into delaying our next day's departure so we could visit his private museum. Our guided tour of Musée de la Chevalerie immersed us in tales of battles, heroic knights and sacked castles as well as the gruesome story of a time when 100 mutilated residents from Bram were marched to Châteaux de Lastours to announce the crusades had come.

We also found a corkscrew.

SLOW TRAVEL ON STILL WATERS

The next few days found us enjoying morning coffee on the

upper deck as the countryside eased by. As ocean sailors—the still water of the canal was a bit of a revelation. At times it felt like we could go all day—but then a cute village would appear and it seemed like a good time to stop for lunch. By the time we reached the busy port of Carcassonne, 15-kilometre days seemed almost ambitious.

After spending a full day exploring the castle and walled city of Carcassonne, we spent our final day on the water; squeezing under low bridges, watching cyclists ride the tow path and soaking up the tranquil beauty of the countryside. Mid-afternoon, we pulled into the pretty village of Trèbes. After sipping yet another local wine and munching on a different type of olive I went to watch the boats transit the nearby lock. At one point a charter boat bumped the side and someone began to yell—for a moment I thought that's what I found so captivating. But then, the heavy metal gates slowly closed, and the sounds of turbulent water filled the air. It turns out, it is the 350-year-old engineering that's so mesmerizing. And once the lock completed its cycle and the gates re-opened I watched the canal boat as it continued on its way, around a bend and out of sight. ▶

When You Go

Canal du Midi, France from US\$479 for three nights.

Le Boat offers vessels of various sizes for a three night minimum suitable for groups from two to 12 people. leboat.com.