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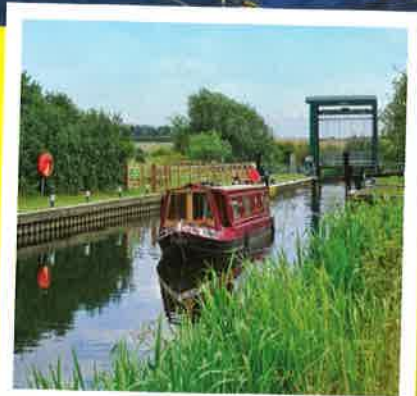
**Pawls for thought**  
Lock gear discussed

**THIS MONTH**

**WATERWAY PROFILE**

**River Nene**

- History ● Cruising
- Pubs ● Attractions



**EXPLORE**

**Canal du Midi**  
Hire-boating in  
southern France

**HISTORY**

**Blackburn past & present**







Nicols' base at Le Somail.

# Cruising the Canal du Midi

When I took over as editor of *WW* in 2012, the office I inherited had two large maps adorning its walls. One, a straightforward route-planner of the UK's navigable canals and rivers, was familiar enough. The other, showing the waterways of the European mainland, was rather less so. In fact, I was completely ignorant of a fair number of its meandering blue lines, and I found this intimidating. After all, I was now responsible for a publication with the word 'World' in its title.

Of course, I soon learned I could rely on a fantastic team of international contributors to provide the magazine's overseas content. But three years into the job, and still with this European map hanging over me – quite literally – I decided I must extend my knowledge. As such, I managed to persuade my wife, Becki, that hire-boating abroad would be the ideal way to spend our summer holiday this year. Perhaps I played it safe in suggesting southern France's Canal du Midi, but I had been told so much about it, it seemed almost like a rite of passage.

Famed for its beauty and pioneering 17th-century engineering, the canal runs for 150 miles from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. A trip on its southernmost section – said to be its finest – would serve as an interesting point of comparison with UK canals. The promise of breathtaking scenery, hot weather and fine cuisine were secondary in my thoughts as I packed my sunhat and shorts – this was purely a research trip.

## Preparation

Having booked a week with well-known hire-boat operators Nicols, we flew out with Ryanair to the shack-like Béziers Airport in early June, from where we took a €90 taxi to the company's base at the picture-postcard port of Le Somail.

Arriving 50 minutes later, we were given a warm welcome by site manager Tonie Levilly, an English lady who has spent

France's best-known canal stretches for 150 miles from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. **Bobby Cowling** set out from a hire base in the wine-making Minervois region

over 20 years in France. After signing the necessary paperwork and running through a few basics, we were shown to our boat.

Named after the canal's Mediterranean port, *Agde* is a four-plus-two-berth river cruiser, with a large galley, two outside dining positions, and two cabins, each with an en suite wet room/toilet. Perfect for a large family or two couples, for just Becki and me it was luxury indeed. The feature we were most impressed by, however, was the boat's two steering positions. One, inside the cabin, has its own windscreen wiper (which we were confidently told we wouldn't require), while the other was centrally mounted on the boat's roof.

We had the opportunity to experience the novelty of this helmsman's position on a short test cruise of the canal. Very

different from a tiller, we soon got the hang of the steering wheel, and we were instant fans of the commanding seating position, particularly as it would allow us to sit side-by-side on our journey.

Back at the Nicols base that evening, we had time to enjoy a glass of rosé from the complimentary bottle left in our fridge, before heading to the nearby L'O à la Bouche restaurant. Our table had been kindly booked by Tonie, and we enjoyed a fabulous alfresco meal overlooking the 17th-century bridge and stone buildings of this historic inland port.

## Relaxing start

Looking to stock up with supplies the following morning, we discovered the

village's only shop to be a large boat moored just down from *Agde*, which we entered via a wooden gangplank. Well stocked and neatly arranged, we bought everything from baguettes and wine to bin liners and washing up liquid.

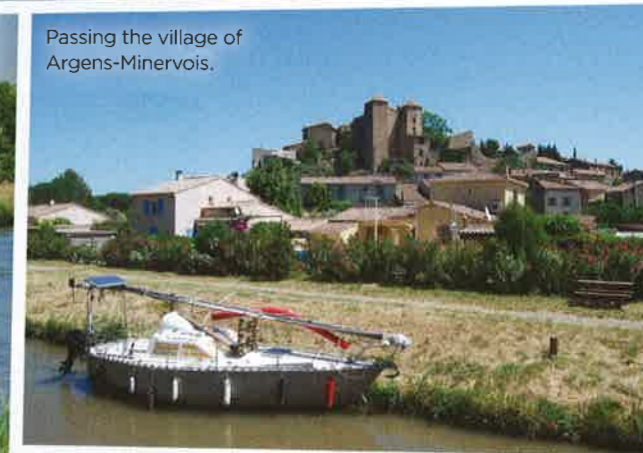
All set to go, we now faced a dilemma: do we head east towards the Mediterranean, or west towards Toulouse? In spite of the immense lure of the sea, a friend had strongly advised us to go the other way. "The scenery is lovely, Carcassonne just has to be seen and the *cassoulet* is delicious."

So we waved goodbye to Le Somail and set off west. Already deep in the countryside, and with no locks for miles, it was just the relaxing start to our trip we needed. Drifting along the wide waterway we looked out on

Moored outside the Château de Ventenac.



Passing the village of Argens-Minervois.



Mature plane trees are a signature feature of the Canal du Midi.



a spectacular landscape of vineyards, open fields, remote villages and distant wind farms. Even the roads that occasionally touched the canalsides had their own charm, with motorists beeping a greeting and us waving back with childish delight.

Too early to stop, we passed the alluring towns of Ventenac-en-Minervois, Paraza and Roubia. After a couple of hours cruising, we arrived at Argens Lock just after 12.30pm, where we enjoyed a lunch of bread and cheese on the dining table at the front of the boat.

## French locks

We had timed it almost perfectly. All the locks on the canal are operated by a lock-keeper or *éclusier*, in the service of the *Voies*

*navigables de France* (the French navigation authority), who are sticklers for their hour-long lunch-break. As such, we had to wait until 1.30pm before continuing our journey.

With Becki having claimed boat-handling superiority, it was left to me to climb the lock ladder and hold the boat in place with fore and aft lines around bollards. Once *Agde* was secure in the oval chamber, the lock-keeper pressed a few buttons on a gadget that looked like a giant, portable joystick, the gates closed, the paddles opened and up we went.

After passing the stunning village of Argens-Minervois, the rather imposing double-chambered Pechlaurier Lock came next. Here, a young female *éclusier* was having to work hard to pack four boats into the chamber. There are no ground paddles at the locks, so once the gate



## HISTORY

Running from the southern coast of France to Toulouse, and linking to the Bay of Biscay, the Canal du Midi is considered an extraordinary feat of 17th-century engineering.

Its concept dates back to Roman times, but it wasn't until the mid-1600s that a serious proposal was made by wealthy salt tax collector Pierre-Paul Riquet. His great idea was to overcome the problem of feeding the canal with water during hot summer months by creating a dam and a huge artificial reservoir. The project was approved by King Louis XIV, who was keen to overcome the increasing cost and danger of transporting cargo around southern Spain, where pirates were common.

Work began in January 1667, but progress was slow. The high cost of construction depleted Riquet's personal fortune and his sponsors, including Louis XIV, lost interest. In May 1681 the *Canal Royal de Languedoc*, as it was then named, finally opened; just months later Riquet died, leaving massive debts. His dream of reaching the Atlantic only came two centuries later, when his waterway was linked to the *Canal du Garonne*.

Renamed the Canal du Midi (or *Canal de las Doas Mars*, meaning 'canal of the two seas') during the French Revolution, by 1856 it was carrying 111,000 tonnes of cargo and a million passengers a year. But, just like its UK counterparts, traffic began to dry up when the railways arrived. After a period of decline, the canal enjoyed a revival in the early 1990s as a stunning leisure boating route.



Portrait of Pierre-Paul Riquet.



Boats heading through Carcassonne Lock.



Lunch on board.



A trip-boat heads out from Le Somail.

paddles were raised, a torrent of white water rushed into the chamber, forcing me and the other crews to hold tightly to our boats' ropes.

Well into the evening and with the sun still blazing hot, we decided to moor for the night at Homps. Very much a focal point of this section of canal, the village is an ancient port where barrels of locally produced wine were once loaded onto barges, or *péniches*, to be taken to the large ports of Bordeaux, Toulouse and Sète.

We had a choice of two canalside venues that night and opted for La Péniche restaurant – its name winning us over – where we enjoyed a first-class meal in its beautiful rear garden. The *soupe de poisson* here is divine – a regional speciality, it's far tastier than you could ever imagine fish soup to be.

### Uphill challenge

Monday, our second day on the canal, proved our most laborious, and ended in minor disaster.

It started smoothly enough, casting off from Homps after buying fresh baguettes from the supermarket/petrol station on the outskirts of the

village. As the canal climbed through randomly spaced single, double and triple chamber locks, we found ourselves glimpsing green hills through the trees on the south side of the canal.

The mature plane trees, planted both to provide shade and strengthen the canal banks, are a trademark feature of the Canal du Midi. However, in the last few years thousands have been cut down and burnt, having contracted a canker stain plague that's believed to have been introduced to the region during World War II by the infected sycamore ammunition boxes of American troops. Throughout our journey it was sad to see white 'X's marking condemned trees and the stumps of those already felled. We took heart, though, from the newly planted saplings lining other sections.

Having performed a fair amount of lock work, we were flagging as we approached Marseillette, described in our guidebook as "a town on the southern limits of the Minervois wine-growing region". A town, no less – after so many hamlets and villages, this would surely be a great spot to moor for the night.

From the canal, Marseillette's most imposing



The medieval city of Carcassonne.

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Boating through Trèbes; The Argent-Double spillway at La Redorte; Evening at Homps.



feature is its cemetery, and this should have been ample warning not to stop here. But we did and, after several hours' relaxation, headed into town at around 7.30pm looking for something to eat. It was completely dead, the bar with its shutters down and its one shop long since closed. Nothing for it, then, than to head back to the boat and knock together a meal from some leftovers. If only we'd read our guidebook properly, we would have noticed a death of knife-and-fork symbols against its name.

### Pushing on

Early the next morning, with the *pâtisserie* now open, we gorged ourselves on coffee and brioche before doing what we should have done the previous afternoon and pushing on to Trèbes.

On this section the canal becomes a little more secretive, hiding from view behind thick undergrowth and the occasional cutting, and seeming to narrow in places too. Encountering few other boats, we had this stretch almost to ourselves. All that could

be heard was birdsong and the gentle hum of *Agde's* engine as we cruised north-west, and I was soon wondering how much – or little – this landscape had changed since the working bargemen transported wheat and wine along here all those centuries ago.

Lulled into a sleepy, sun-drenched state, Trèbes Lock came as something of a shock. Three boats joined us on the trip up its three chambers – all white river cruisers much like our own, but with crews from Germany, Holland and Spain. Elsewhere on the canal we encountered many Australians and a fair number of Americans too.

Trèbes is another picturesque village with the canal right at its heart, and it was with some regret that we headed past its lovely canalside restaurants and underneath its elegant road bridge, and on to Carcassonne.

Now comfortable with *Agde*, we made swift progress that afternoon, and by early evening found ourselves entering the north-eastern outskirts of the city. Watched by a large crowd, we passed through the final lock of our outbound

journey, arriving in the Port de Carcassonne directly opposite the large railway station. It costs €20 to moor overnight here, but we soon discovered it to be worth every cent.

### A medieval citadel

The basin is located in the centre of the 'new town', a fairly pleasant, though rather unremarkable area. Venturing southwards, however, we stumbled down a back street and chanced upon one of the most remarkable views I have ever seen. There, looking like something from a Disney film, was a perfect medieval walled city, with an ancient footbridge in the foreground crossing a wide river.

The 15-minute, uphill walk was well worth the effort to explore its fairytale drawbridges, cobbled streets, 14th-century cathedral and towers. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the city was painstakingly restored in the 19th century, and is said to be France's second-most visited tourist spot after the Eiffel Tower.

So we had made it to 'La Cité', and what better place to sample the famous *cassoulet* than in one of the restaurants inside its



The canal at Toulouse during its cargo-carrying days.





Heading east from Pechlaurier Lock.

fortified walls. This southern France dish is essentially a rich, slow-cooked casserole, containing meat and white beans (*haricots blancs*), and, yes, it is truly delicious.

### Return Journey

Heading down the locks proved considerably easier than going up them. On the whole, we found the *éclusiers* to be a friendly lot, though not inclined to get involved in the hands-on aspects of getting your boat through. Also, they don't speak English (which is fair enough), though our sub-secondary school level French seemed to suffice.

All the locks are accompanied by charming cottages, which often have a small stall selling cold drinks, ice-creams, wine, sunhats and the odd souvenir. At l'Augille Lock, further interest is added by way of a small sculpture park, featuring an array of animal and human characters constructed from bits of recycled metal. Every so often, these creatures burst into mechanical life, before becoming suddenly still again. With such entertainment, it was difficult to keep focused on the job at hand.

On our last full day on the canal, we stopped at around midday to explore Argens-Minervois – a beautiful village with its houses clustered around a 14th-century château that overlooks both the canal and the Aude River. We scarcely saw a soul as we wandered around its rambling, sun-baked streets, though we were watched by a good number of cats from various shaded spots.

We moored for the night at the village of Ventenac-en-Minervois, right in front of Château de Ventenac – an incredible spot.



Boating into Carcassonne.



Boats leaving Trèbes Lock.

The building was constructed in the 18th century on the foundations of a medieval fortress and in 1938 was taken over by local winegrowers, who formed a *cave co-operative* to make and sell wines using grapes from the vineyards around the village. The co-operative has won prizes for its rich reds and (unusually for the region) its characterful whites, all of which can be purchased on the ground floor of the building. Above this is the wine loft, offering visitors an insight to the wine-making process for a small fee.

That evening we dined in yet another atmospheric garden restaurant, La Grillade du Château. Tucking into a delicious meal of *poulet* and *pommes frites*, I was a little perturbed to see live chickens scurrying from table to table, in the manner of begging dogs.

As we had to return the boat by 9am, we were up bright and early the next morning to savour our final hours aboard *Agde*. We had enjoyed a wonderful week – a true escape – that had increased our appetite for overseas boating. It was with heavy hearts that we waved goodbye to Le Somail as the taxi took us back to the airport, but we had already vowed to return to the canal – this time to explore it all the way to the Med.

## >> ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

### COSTS

We travelled on board a luxury two-cabin, four-berth Nicols Quattro cruiser. Hire prices for the Quattro start from €890 for a two-night break or €1,781 for a one-week trip.

Nicols offers river and canal holidays on board a range of self-drive cruisers suitable for parties of between two and 12 people, with no previous boating experience required. Boat hire prices start from €350 for a two-night short break or €699 for a one-week trip.

In addition to the south of France, Nicols offers boating holidays from 18 different bases in popular regions such as Burgundy, Alsace, Franche-Comte, the Loire Valley, Brittany and Camargue, plus bases in Germany and Portugal.

For more information visit [www.boat-renting-nicols.co.uk](http://www.boat-renting-nicols.co.uk) or contact the English-speaking team on 02392 401320 or [nicols@nicols.com](mailto:nicols@nicols.com).