

# BEST LAID PLANS



## Clive Edwards enjoyed an eventful cruise along France's Canal du Midi with his wife and friends, plus two Westies and a Cockapoo...

MY wife, Lois, and I had previously enjoyed a very enjoyable cruise on the beautiful Canal du Midi from Le Somail to Agde on board a cruiser hired from Nicols Boats, and so we decided to do a similar holiday with our Lifeboat Station colleagues Malcolm and Jill (and our Westies and Stanley the Cockapoo).

Our original passage plan was to travel from Port Lauragais south-east to Carcassonne, but a late change meant we were starting from Le Somail. Our new plan was to cruise north-west towards Carcassonne, which we realised was likely to take in a rather prettier and more interesting stretch of the canal enabling us to visit the very attractive and strategically once very important port of Homps.

We spent the first night of our week's cruise on our Confort 1350 moored at the very attractive village of Le Somail. After loading all our gear we took advantage of the opportunity to get in some practice manoeuvring the 13.5m long boat fitted with a bow-thruster, which none of us had experienced using before.

With such a large cruiser operating on a canal, which in places is no wider than the length of the boat, the bow-thruster proved to be invaluable, particularly as in early October, although the weather was warm, there was often a brisk wind. On a couple of days it approached almost gale force, which called for very careful steering, especially through the several narrow bridges.

Le Somail, with its old hump-back bridge and quintessentially Languedocienne old stone buildings is arguably one of the most attractive villages along the canal, and in the 18th century was one of the staging posts for the passenger barges that plied the canal on the four-day trip between Agde and Toulouse; in those days passengers had to change boats every time they reached a double or triple lock and carry their baggage up the steeply sloping towpath past the lock – no less than 25 during the four-day trip.

So, on a bright and sunny, albeit rather breezy, Sunday morning we left our mooring at Le Somail and headed west along a very pretty lock-free 10km stretch of the canal to Paraza, a village where Pierre Paul Riquet, the designer of the Canal du Midi, lived at the chateau during its construction.



The friends' GC1350 moored at Homps



Lois and Jill take time out to relax on board



Homps is an ancient commercial port. Image: Pecold/Shutterstock

MAIN IMAGE: The Canal du Midi at Le Somail. Image: Paul Atkinson/Shutterstock  
INSET: Clive and Lois enjoying their time at Homps

### LOTS OF LOCKS

Passing through a couple of quite low and narrow bridges we encountered our first lock at Argens-Minervois, a lovely village typical of the Minervois area.

As we were travelling west we were effectively going up-hill, so boats enter the lock when the water is at its lowest level, secure to the lock wall and wait for the lock to fill - this procedure requires having someone on shore to take your mooring ropes, run them loosely round a bollard and pass the end back to someone on board – so at least one of the crew needs to be dropped ashore ahead of the lock and either take the bow rope ashore with them and then walk alongside the boat while it enters the lock, or for a member of the crew to throw the mooring ropes up to the crew member waiting at the top of the lock wall.

Given that all four of us are past retirement age, and that the boat we now had was designed to accommodate a larger crew, 'locking' was something of a challenge, but we managed all the dozen or so locks we went through without too much drama.

After passing through more locks, including double ones at Pechlaurier and Ognon, we arrived at the very attractive small town of Homps, which is an ancient commercial port where barrels of Minervois and Corbieres wines destined for Bordeaux were loaded on to barges.

We stayed for two nights, but we were still aiming to reach Trebes on the outskirts of Carcassonne so we pressed on through several more locks to the port of La Redorte, which turned out to be quite a large town almost completely encircled by the canal, and apparently entirely devoted to wine making.

### STORM THREATENS

By now the wind had increased to about Force 5, the sky looked threatening and the forecast was warning of thunderstorms, so we decided to spend the night on what was a very comfortable mooring.

In fact the storm passed us by and we spent a comfortable night, but by the morning the wind had increased still further to about Force 6, so we decided that we would give up on the idea of getting to Trebes and Carcassonne and instead spent an enjoyable morning exploring the town before having lunch.

Lunch over we turned the boat round and started to head out of the port through

the quite narrow road bridge that crosses the canal immediately before a sharp right-hand bend. We had just come through the bridge when we were confronted by two hire cruisers coming in the opposite direction almost side by side and thus leaving no space for traffic like us coming the other way.

One of the cruisers immediately swung round shouting that their steering had broken and crashed into our port side before bouncing off. It was obvious that these two hire cruisers were travelling together and that there was in fact nothing broken about their steering and it was simply a question of them not keeping a proper look-out and slowing down for the bridge, so that when they encountered a gust of wind they were unable to control their boat.

### CARRY ON CRUISING

They simply carried on without stopping, albeit with one of them now with a somewhat damaged bow. We got the name of their hire company and their registration numbers so we immediately called Nicols Boats.

Their response was brilliant and, having re-assured them that apart from my cut arm when our boat was pushed into the bushes we were unhurt and the boat was only damaged above the water-line, we were advised to carry on. They would get back to us about the damage to the boat the following day.

In fact they did better than that because the base manager drove out to Homps where we had decided to spend the night. Having first taken a look at my cut arm he examined the damage to the boat, which appeared to be confined to a split about four inches long and an eighth of an inch wide and we agreed to make a temporary repair with Duct Tape in case of the forecast rain getting into Malcolm and Jill's cabin.

The manager said the necessary repair could be done as part of their routine maintenance so we should just carry on and enjoy the rest of our cruise. We were very impressed with the way that Nicols dealt with the situation and with their concern for our well-being.

Having turned back at La Redorte and abandoned our plan of getting to Trebes we now had time on our hands, and the next morning visited the local Cave a Vins to sample and buy some of the local Minervois and Corbieres wines. We then set off back towards Le Somail.

### MOORING FUN

Having eventually got through the lock at Pechlaurier we now had just one more lock ahead of us before the lock-free section all the way to the Nicols base at Le Somail, but having now got a full day in hand we decided to go past Le Somail as far as we could before dark with the idea of getting to the attractive canal-port town of Capestang.

That seemed like a good idea at the time, but passing Paraza, Le Somail and the junction with the Canal de La Robine and eventually arriving at Argeliers the wind had increased to a good Force 6, so trying to find somewhere secure to moor alongside the canal bank was interesting. Even at full throttle we were only inching forward and after turning around, even with the engine going full astern, it was virtually impossible to stop.

Ordinarily, of course, we would have moored head to the wind but the only possible place we could moor safely was on the wrong side of the canal for our door and gang-plank so we had no alternative but to moor up downwind which made for an interesting five minutes!

The following day the wind had dropped and we motored to Capestang for lunch before making our way back to Le Somail to moor up at the base ready for cleaning and handing the boat back on the Saturday morning.

We are about to contact Nicols again about this year's cruise, possibly on the Canal du Midi but on a different section, or maybe on one of the many other navigable French inland waterways...