

SLOW TRAVEL AND LAZY LUXURY IN THE LOCKS

There are few finer ways to enjoy the sensations of Southern France than from the deck of your own private yacht, and no finer waterway on which to experience the French countryside than the historic Canal du Midi.

BY JAMIE ROSS

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THE HEAVY, ANCIENT DOORS swing inward with a squeak and a thud, and three large vessels drift into the small, egg-shaped lock. We are last in, finessing our 48 foot Le Boat yacht gently, like a final puzzle piece. I am not at the wheel here, having turned over my white captain's hat to my more adept son-in-law. I handle the stern line where, with a skill learned in my cowboying youth, I toss a loop over an upper bollard to hold our boat in place as the lock water drains like a massive bath tub.

We have perfected our locking technique as we travelled north to south along the historic Canal du Midi, encountering some 44 locks on our route, all engineering marvels, along with a fiendishly complicated system of aqueducts, dams, tunnels, spillways, and low arched stone bridges, all of which require you to stay alert and keep your head down.

The Canal du Midi dates to the mid-17th Century when King Louis XIV dreamed of an Atlantic-to-Mediterranean canal as a safer and cheaper way to transport goods. The concern for architectural aesthetics and man-made landscapes that inspired its designer, Pierre-Paul Riquet, made it both a technical feat and a work of art. France's longest and oldest canal officially opened in 1681 and became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996. Now, approaching 350 years in age,

and with trains and trucks doing the heavy lifting in commercial cargo, the canal has transformed into a pleasure boater's paradise.

My extended family is my crew. We take turns driving and handling the ropes, waving at passing boats, testing our French on the ever-present lock gallery, and working on our tans while lounging on the bow. (The standers-by seemed to increase whenever my daughters do this). Each lock is unique; some are automated, and others are run by a lock-master. Sometimes the lock operator yells instructions at the boaters. Not fully understanding them, we learn to smile, nod vigorously, and give a jaunty thumbs-up.

Calm, cultivated, and serene, the waterway forces travellers to slow down to its own relaxing pace. We gradually descend its waters on a journey through the elegant beauty of Southern France, past beguiling villages, medieval churches, castles, riverside shops, sun-drenched lavender fields, and expansive vineyards. There are country markets to browse, wineries for tasting, and handsome historic towns to wander.

Avenues of regal Cypress and Plane trees hedge the canal, planted in the 1830's for shade, and because their thick and tangled root systems helped stabilize the waterway's banks. We cruise under their green

1 The writer and his nattily-attired crew.

2 The Canal du Midi and surrounding countryside.



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PHOTOS: JAMIE ROSS



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PHOTO COURTESY OF LE BOAT



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3 Carcassonne's stunning medieval citadel.

4 Canal mooring and a fantastic first-night sunset.

5 Wine tasting at the Chateau Paraza.

6 The remarkable Antiquarian Book Shop.

7 A peaceful moorage under plane trees.

canopy, mooring at the water's edge at cafes and brasseries, to while away the afternoon with a fresh baguette, cheese, foie gras, a plate of oysters, and a pichet of fine local wine — I find the black grapes of the Minervois full of charm.

While several weeks are needed to traverse the canal's entire 240-kilometre length, it is possible to do shorter sections. Our week-long adventure starts in the small city of Castelnaudary, a market town famous for its Cassoulet, a white bean, pork, and duck stew, and ends in Homps, an ancient commercial port where wine barrels were loaded for transport to Bordeaux.

We spend a day in the delightful city of Carcassonne, visiting its medieval citadel, soaking up the cobblestone quaintness of its old-town alleys, and taking in the nightlife of its vibrant city centre. At Paraza we enjoy a wine tasting at its famous chateau. We

travel beyond Homps to Le Somail, where I drop into a bookshop installed in an old wine cellar, Le Trouve Tout du Livre, which boasts 50,000 books and hundreds of first editions.

Sometimes at night we moor in a marina or above a lock in one of the small villages. Other times, we bring the boat into the bank on a peaceful stretch of the river, hammer in some steel posts and tie off. Often, we dine on deck, on delicious cuts of meat from the village butcher, grilled on the barbecue, with fresh produce from the markets, cheese, bread, and pastries from the boulangerie, and Minervois and Corbières wines from the wineries.

One night after the boat was secured, we strolled along the towpath towards Trèbes and a charming restaurant we had passed, the Michelin endorsed Moulin Restaurant, perched in a pretty location above a triple flight of locks. The three-course meal was

among the best we have had. Afterwards, we use our flashlights to return to the boat, before switching them off to see a spectacular display of stars.

Fifty-five years of experience has allowed Le Boat to perfect the business of luxury rental yachts, while giving visitors access to Europe's most spectacular waterways. Canals which were once the continent's lifeblood, now offer a unique way to discover a country. There is no worry about finding accommodation; our cruiser is like a floating villa, great for a family vacation. The smartly-designed vessel comes with four berths with double beds, ensuite bathrooms with showers, a fully-equipped galley, and a dining area.

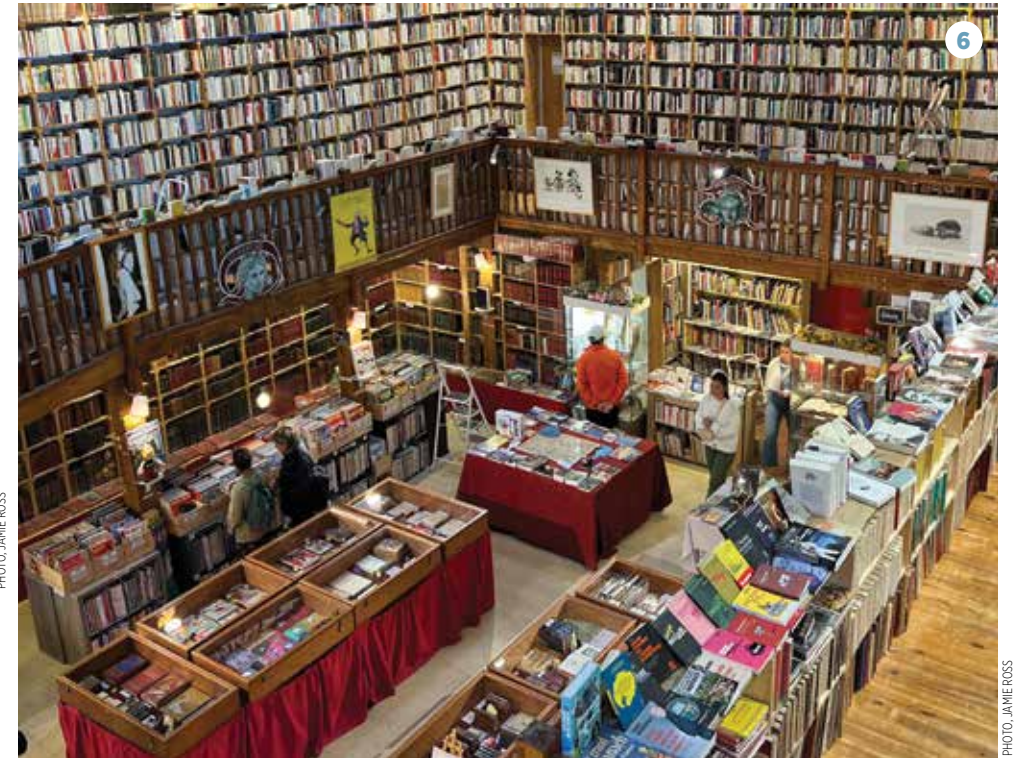
The upper deck has a barbecue, table, and wrap-around seating. Bridge controls can be switched from upper deck to cabin in case of inclement weather. The large yacht is surprisingly easy to operate, with



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bow-thrusters and an ingenious wrap-around bumper system, and the boat's speed is capped at 8 km an hour to control rambunctious skippers such as my son. No experience or boating license is required, just an orientation at departure.

We find the pace of our journey peaceful and relaxing, this in spite of having the whole family aboard. There is a steady spattering of locks to keep boaters busy, but otherwise there is little to interfere with the quiet enjoyment of the countryside. The Le Boat cruisers are also surprisingly affordable for a family or multi-generational adventure, allowing visitors an intimate and meaningful way to explore a region's landscape, culture, and culinary charms.

Boater's Logbook:
For information on the Canal Du Midi or Le Boat's other destinations and itineraries, visit www.leboat.ca or see your travel advisor. ■