



AllWays Traveller

Canal du Midi, France

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An intimate experience at a casual pace in Southern France

The Canal du Midi is a 240 km (150 mi) long canal in Southern France that runs from the city of Toulouse down to the Mediterranean port of Sète.

Opened in 1681, it served originally as a shortcut between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, avoiding the long sea voyage around hostile Spain.

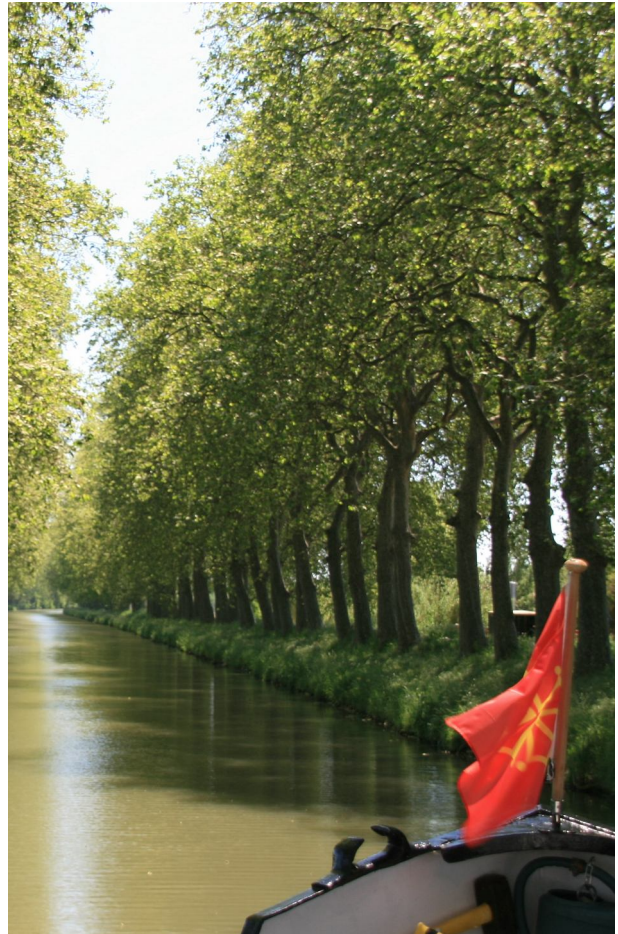
Today it offers a relaxing floating break that takes in the medieval towns of Minerve, Narbonne, Carcassonne.

If small group cruising on first name terms with the captain and crew and wonderfully prepared lunches and dinners and locally sourced wines and cheese appeals – well so will this type of break.

Carolann Nathan takes you there.

Ashley Gibbins

The International Travel Writers Alliance
www.itwalliance.com

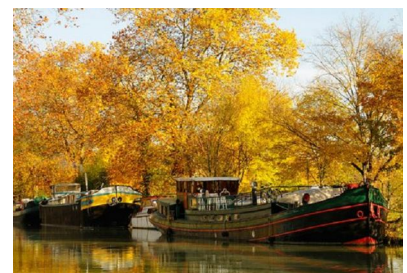


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The Canal du Midi

The Canal du Midi commenced being built in 1667 because of the incredible imagination of Pierre Paul Riquet who truly believed it could be done and did it.

It was completed in 1681 and not only shortened the long transport route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea but helped avoid the pirates of the Gibraltar Strait.



A personal perspective

A very special part of France

by Carolan Nathan

On my last birthday I was lucky enough to start a wonderful 6 day adventure aboard the spacious and brightly decorated luxury hotel barge, Anjodi, along the Canal du Midi in the Languedoc, a very special part of southern France.

We were picked up by our captain, Rupert, in the heart of Montpellier and transported to Marseillan, an ancient fishing village, to board her.

All aboard

There we were greeted with glasses of champagne and canapés, and introduced to each other and the crew who turned out to be the most super, helpful and creative folk we could have ever wished for.

We quickly unpacked in the roomy staterooms, and then went up to the lounge where Rozy, our young and enthusiastic housekeeper told us about the journey aboard our floating hotel.

As for getting around off boat, Christophe, the tour guide chauffeured us in a comfortable minibus.

Christophe would drive between the mooring stops so he was able to take us on daily visits to the nearby medieval towns of Minerve, Narbonne, Carcassonne to mention a few.

We also caught him early in the morning driving off to the nearest bakery to bring back delicious fresh croissants and breads for our breakfast!

Marseillan and Pezenas

The first morning in Marseillan we visited the Noilly Pratt Winery where Vermouth has been made since 1853.

The step-by-step process was explained most diligently and it was a very interesting and enlightening experience especially tasting the different types of vermouths.

We were then driven to Pezenas, made famous by its association with French playwright Moliere.

Christophe drove up into the hills where we had a birds eye view of the oyster beds strung out like jewels.

This was in preparation, perhaps, for the marvellous lunch of succulent pink prawns, parsleyed mussels, cheese baked and plain oysters in the half-shell, and freshly tossed salad.

Local cheese and wine

Rupert would open a rose and a white wine each lunch time, always choices from different local wineries.

And Rozy would bring in two cheeses for us to sample, be they cow, sheep or goat milk, she would go into minute detail.

The facts

Anjodi : a one time grain carrier

Built in 1929 in Holland, Anjodi started her life carrying grain between Amsterdam and Paris and probably saw many of the happenings as World War 11 raged through those areas.

Standing up to all that, this brave little barge was converted into a luxury floating hotel in 1982 and through many refits and upgrades has become the charming floating hotel she is today.

Her gleaming wood and brightly polished brass tell of many years of loving care and the refitted kitchen affords ample room for chef de cuisine, Marie Touchet to create superb food.

The cabins

The four spacious and comfortable ensuite cabins are named Romarin, Lavande, Thym and Basilic.

In the gaily decorated lounge, there is a fully stocked bar and the polished wood dining table seats up to 9 people.

Two spacious and comfy sofas on either side are perfect to relax on, read and enjoy drinks or coffee.

Steps lead up to the deck with its heated sunken Jacuzzi although it was too cold early April to dare sit in that.

Crossing from Med towards Spain

However, we all enjoyed sitting on the reclining chairs as we slowly crossed from the Mediterranean Sea inland towards Spain.

This took us through the Black Mountains and the Pyrenees through many lochs.

On either side of this pleasant, winding canal are plane, poplar and cypress trees.

Delicious cuisine

Each evening we would be treated to delicious cuisine created by Marie.

Once again Rupert would talk about and pour white and red wines from nearby estates and Rozy would offer two different cheeses.

Coffee and chocolate followed these amazing repasts and then, if we could, we would stroll along the banks of the canal or take a bicycle ride.

There are many fascinating cities to visit along the Canal du Midi especially as it is the part of the world where the Cathars lived and were massacred by Holy Roman Church in the 12th century.

Cruising to Beziers

The second day we cruised to Beziers where many churches and basilicas built between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries lift their towering cupolas into the sky.

Wednesday saw Anjodi crossing the aqueduct over the River Orb, where we descended the 7-lock flight at Fonserannes before reaching the world's oldest canal tunnel at Malpas.

Christophe shuttled us into the mini-bus and drove us to Minerve, the ancient capital of Minervois.

This city was besieged by Simon de Montfort in 1215 and the Cathar fort of which only a lone tower stands as a sentinel overlooking the steep hills and deep limestone gorges where Cathar men, women and children bravely jumped into the fires built by the opposing forces.

Home of the Visigoth monarchs

On Thursday, we visited Narbonne, once a Roman capital where dwelled the Visigoth monarchs.

An indoor market, Les Halles, offered selections of fresh fish from the Mediterranean, meats and poultry, cheeses both locally and from farther afield and breads and pastries to make your mouth water.

The medieval city of Carcassonne

The fifth day we were taken to the medieval city of Carcassonne which even today is the most complete fortified city in the world.

Perched high on a hill, the battlements are a model of medieval military architecture. Here the Cathars made their last stand before surrendering and being burnt piecemeal.

For you history buffs, these brave and spiritual people went willingly to their deaths knowing that only the body died, their souls went home to a greater Being.

That night we sat down to the Captain's Farewell Dinner and were entertained right royally by all. Christophe and Rupert did the honours and Marie and Rozy created and served sublime food for us to enjoy.

The next morning, we regretfully piled into the mini-bus to be driven back to the airport or Montpellier TVG station to return to our mundane lives.

But inside each one of us we carry forever the magic of barging aboard Anjodi through some of the loveliest areas of France.

Cuisine created on board by Marie

Lunches:

Regional salad, cold meats, local fishes, regional cheeses and wines.

Dinners:

A gastronomic adventure of regional cuisine, cheeses and wines including :

- Pastry shell filled with red onion, goat's cheese and apple.
- Sliced cubes of squash, green and purple salad leaves with dressing.
- Thinly sliced prosciutto, saucisson and finely rolled ham.
- Boiled potatoes speckled with parsley. Baked Camembert cheese.
- Dessert of whipped cream with Lindt vanilla filled chocolate.

And ...

- Fillet of beef with peppercorn sauce
- mash of potatoe, tomatoe provencal, fagot of French beans.
- Chocolate fondante with custard.

Cheeses

Picpoul de Pinet; Comte, La Voulte Gaspauts; Etorki; Bleu d'Auvergne and Camembert/Cabe au Piment d'Espelotte.

Wines

Domaine de Gourgazard, Minervois la Livinière; Chateau des Nouvelles, Fitou; Chateau les Voute-Gaspares, Corbières; Toques et Clochers, Limoux; Chateau Mire L'Etang Rosé; Domaine de Barribiou and Muscat de Minervois.

More information :
www.gobarging.com

The International Travel Writers Alliance



AllWays

www.allwaystraveller.com

AllWays is the consumer travel service from the International Travel Writers Alliance.

The International Travel Writers Alliance

www.itwalliance.com

The International Travel Writers Alliance represents travel writers, editors, broadcasters and photographers worldwide

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Born and raised in England, Carolan has travelled extensively throughout Europe, North America and the UK since 1985 as a freelance international food, wine and travel writer and radio personality.

One of her great loves is the beauty of nature, lakes and rivers, forests and farmlands and the culture, food and wines of these areas.