

## There's nothing Midi about this cruise

*In a time of self-catering Malcolm Bassett-Smith goes one better – self-indulgence. We join him on Rosa, a Dutch barge in French waters.*

We British love nothing more than messing about on the water; paddling, swimming, surfing, sailing, canoeing, we love it all. But all those options have one thing in common – all are difficult to achieve with a glass of wine in your hand, which is the option I chose, bring on the Rosa. The Rosa came to fame when Rick Stein did his series of cooking on a barge hotel along France's Canal du Midi. It was a few years ago, but the thought still attracts seekers of fine food, fine wine, temperate sunny days and sloth. I am no Rick Stein and I had zero intention of handing a frying pan for a week, but the rest of the ingredients suited me perfectly.

A short easyJet flight into Toulouse saw me waiting at the Hotel Pullman for my transfer to Agen, an old and pretty roman town an hour away. Nadia, my tour manager, looked the ticket, nautical, jaunty, yet wholly professional. She drove two fellow guests (an Oz couple) and myself in complete comfort, pointing out what landmarks there were on route and giving immediate answers to any last minute niggling questions.

We met up with Rosa in a quiet section of the canal, she looked splendid in a sleepy kind of way and the genuine welcome by the crew was matched only by Rosa's splendour. Champagne in hand, something blue and crystalline is dropped into my glass, it's Toulouse Violet. 2012 is the French perfume industry's year of the violet and



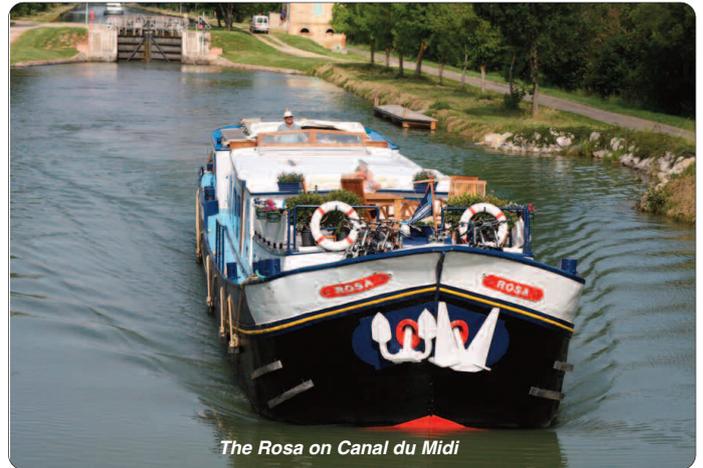
Canal du Midi

to celebrate its local significance we have a hint of it to turn our drink the subtlest shade of pale blue.

The chef, Jean-Luc, teases us with appetisers and a hint of things to come. No food finds its way back to the kitchen over the next six days, this guy knows his stuff. Tom, the pilot, with his Yorkshire version of English goes through the safety procedures and route, Dominique the owner says little but makes it clear we are family for the remainder of the week and I offer up my glass for a topper of champagne.

Cruises on the Rosa come with a well balanced itinerary of excursions. On the first morning we go to a farm which makes Armagnac (brandy). It's a chance to see how relatively untouched this semi-rural part of France remains. Then onto Nerac, home of the film – Chocolat. I have been to Nerac before and I love it. It is as traditional as you will find anywhere in France, it is warm and welcoming, it is ancient and romantic, it is where you want to spend the rest of your life (if only you could get the locals to speak English all the time). Nerac was home to Henry IV (the French variety) and the centre of many coups during the battle for Protestantism over Catholicism.

During the afternoon we cruise along the canal, breaking the back of the distance to be covered and in the evening experience more of Jean-Luc's wizardry in the kitchen. The option exists to walk along the towpath, or cycle whilst the barge makes her way along. I do a bit of both and impress all by not ending up in the water.



The Rosa on Canal du Midi

We visit more ancient villages, see and smell and taste rural France, it's a world away from shrink-wrapped, pre-packaged vacation breaks because here if there is something we want to change (other than the destination) we can do it.

We know the food is fresh and local, as we have the opportunity to go to the market and help purchase the raw ingredients for the day. There are new cheeses to be tried, smoked meats by the cart load, even fresh pasta is made before our very eyes.

Every meal comes with a different selection of wines and all of it is good and much of it local. Breakfast is continental (we could have asked for cooked alternative, but honestly didn't feel the need to), lunch three course with three wines, dinner four course with four wines and coffee/liquors. Throughout the cruise I am amazed that there is no reference to Rick Stein. Whilst grateful to the publicity he brought to the Rosa, Dominique, the owner, is clear that they are providing a Rosa experience and not a Rick Stein experience, this way there is no illusion or reason for disappointment.



Lounge on board

We are meant to be heading onto the River Tarn, but the result of heavy rain has meant the river is running fast and high which could create an element of risk not needed to complete our experience, so we stay on the Canal du Midi instead. Before we know it our six days has come to an end, it's time to leave the towels on the bathroom floor and close the cabin door for the final time. We have chickened, ducked, porked, beefed, fished, cheesed, fruited and wined with the best of them and the experience has been one well worth taking and one to be remembered for many years to come.

The simple conclusion has to be "why spoil yourself when there are others queuing to do it for you"? Thank you Dominique, Nadia, Eva, Tom and Jean-Luc, you looked after me well.

*Malcolm Bassett-Smith*

### FACTFILE

- Information and booking for the Rosa can be found at [www.gobarging.com](http://www.gobarging.com)
- Prices are based on equivalent land-based hotels on an all inclusive basis
- easyJet operate regular low cost flights in and out of Toulouse from many UK regional airports
- The Hotel Pullman, Toulouse is used as a collection and dropping off point for guests to the Rosa
- An amazing value for money lunch in Toulouse is to be found at La Taverne Bavaoise on Boulevard de Strasbourg. Three course plat de jour with wine for 11.90 Euros
- Airport shuttle buses 5 Euros per person each way