

Going Straight, *The Sunday Times*, 15 March 1998

It is an odd thing to do, when you think about it, crossing land in a boat. Sailing down a river is one thing; you get in upstream and the current carries you to the sea. That accords with nature. Logs do it, and tufts of grass. But to travel on water in a ditch cut by man, in defiance of gravity, in defiance of the landscape, that is a most unnatural way of getting about.

Yet in that unnaturalness lies the pleasure. For, as anyone knows who has followed a canal bank through a city, that artificial section gives you a unique view of things. What is normally central in life, such as buses and motorways, becomes almost entirely peripheral, I glimpsed, if at all, from an oblique angle; and what is normally so peripheral as to be practically invisible becomes absorbingly central: the specialized landscape and activities of waterways, with their strange perspective that both confines and draws you in, with their locks and lock keepers, towpaths and boat traffic.

If you do not like being completely idle, few holidays can provide more effective means of driving workaday cares from your head than cruising along a canal. There are endless boatish chores to be undertaken: someone at the wheel all the time, a lock coming up, someone to be landed, lines to be passed, decks to be swabbed, ropes to be coiled.

There are new skills to acquire. Not very demanding, perhaps – but sufficient for mastery to give some satisfaction. And there is the journey itself. You started somewhere; you have somewhere to get to. There is distance to be covered.

THE CANAL DU MIDI was dug in the mid-17th century to connect the Mediterranean with the Atlantic and is one of the great engineering achievements of all time. Never upgraded for modern commercial traffic, its machinery has fallen into a gently elegiac desuetude that makes it perfect for a dreamy dawdle. The eastern half crosses the lagoons and salt marshes of Mediterranean Languedoc – hot country. I did the western half – 118km, almost half the total 240km – crossing the vineyards of the Corbières, through Carcassonne and almost to the outskirts of Toulouse.

My trip was one-way, because I wanted to see as much of the country as possible. Most journeys, however, are out and back from the same base. It is possible, though more expensive, to have one made to measure. I sailed in a *Pénichette*, a functional, well-designed craft that looks like a cut-down version of a proper working barge, with a wheel-house set well aft and a long cargo hold housing the sleeping berths stretching forward.

I flew into Toulouse on a sunny May morning. The Canal du Midi begins here and its traverse of the city is the only really urban stretch in the whole of its journey to the Mediterranean.

My brother joined me as crew and we took the train east towards Lézignan and our starting point, a mere 48km from the Mediterranean. To the south, the Pyrenees still shone with snow. Whitewashed farms stood out among clumps of pine and cypress, and the first buds were coming on the vines.

It was midday when we got off the train. A few paces from the station, an unpromising doorway bore the sign *Chez Dédé*. We groped our way in darkness down a corridor and found ourselves in a back room where seven or eight workmen were finishing lunch.

"Are we too late?"

"It's never too late, gentlemen," said the *patron* and, without more ado, set before us a litre of near-black wine and a basket of bread.

Replete, we lugged our baggage into the village to get our provisions and dumped ourselves at the first café. A waiter with the slow and concentrated manner of the practised drunk called a taxi for us. "He'll be here right away."

It was an hour before he came. We drank another *marc*. If not exactly the land of *manana*, we were getting close. We drove across vineyards, gnarled and elderly, and enlivened with blazes of yellow broom, to the *Locaboat* base at Argens. After a brief spin with the engineer to check our competence, we were off. A cross-wind was pushing against the bank and I let my brother take the wheel. But it is not difficult, as I soon discovered.

We chugged gently along, scarcely faster than walking. Two lines of plane trees strode uninterrupted beside us, their foliage arching over us and their roots forming, at water's edge, a low tangled vault, where water rats and moorhens scooted and hid and yellow flags grew. Little disturbed the watery quiet.

Eventfulness was locks. They came in singles, doubles, even quads, at intervals anywhere between one and five kilometres. One of us would land to catch the mooring lines while the other manoeuvred slowly through the gates into the narrow, boat-shaped lock. There you waited while the spew and surge of smelly water lifted you – we were going uphill most of the way – to the level of the quay and the lock-keeper's cottage, with its yucca and cherry tree and white-candled chestnut, and you glided once more into the quiet green tunnel reaching ahead.

Locks were society, too. Often, you spent a day or half a day in witting or unwitting convoy with the same two or three others. You jostled in the locks and crossed your lines and, if I you liked each other, you could picnic on the bank or even moor together at night.

At night, if we did not feel like cooking, we went to one of the restaurants marked on our navigation guide. At Pezens, we misjudged the distance to *Le Réverbère* (00 33 4 68 24 92 53) and had to walk two or three miles in the dark. Careless with wine, I stepped sideways out of the glare of an oncoming car and dropped like a stone into a ditch full of cold gritty water and sprained my ankle. At the unassuming-looking *Muscadelle* in Marseillette, we ate the best I tripe I have ever tasted, a *marquise au chocolat* and a *flan caramel* whose symphony of sweet sent little currents of pleasure down every limb. "*Faits maison* – home cooking," said the *patronne*.

In the mornings we woke to the gurgling song of nightingales. We bought our provisions from the rudimentary village shops in little ports whose vanished bustle lives only in a name, a *quai des Négociants* or *Café de la Marine*, where, long ago, before the roads were passable, the bargees drank and told of far-off places and stole perhaps a local heart or two with the glamour of their otherness.

On sunny days we basked and opened all our windows to let in the sounds and smells of the country. When it rained, which unseasonably it did, our world was entirely watery, and we sluiced the decks to wash away our muddy footprints and the plastered leaves. And then the sun appeared again, dusting the water with plane blossom, and dappled shadows slid once more across our bow. In Carcassonne we had magical views of the turreted old city, as fabulous as anything Disney could imagine. We did not stop, but you can; the canal has a mooring basin right by the railway station, although the lock-keeper warned against leaving the boat unattended too long in the middle of town.

The only other place of any size we passed was Castelnaudary, with a basin as pretty as a Greek island harbour. It proclaims itself the "world capital" of cassoulet. We tied up in the basin and set out for the *Hôtel de France*. We were not disappointed.

Next day, we reached the canal's highest point, the 194-metre Col de Naurouze, where a feeder canal brings top-up water from the Montagne Noire. Here we were joined by friends, who picnicked with us on the boat, then took us home to drink by log fires and eat the *foie gras* and *confits* that they make on their farm.

We handed in the boat at Négra with some reluctance. It was painful withdrawing from this quiet green world where purpose was a gentle chug from dawn to dark. Would we have done anything differently? Rented the bikes they offered us at the beginning.

Tim Salmon travelled as a guest of French Country Cruises