

# Wine, & water & sun

A boating holiday allowed **Ed Stocker** and his family to enjoy the pleasures of the Lot Valley on the river and on land



“**Y**ou’re not on the Canal du Midi now... this is *real* navigation.” Instructor Alex shook his head with schoolmasterly solemnity as he looked up from a winding map of the River Lot, denting my confidence at being able to steer our holiday boat.

Perhaps I had been a little too gung-ho in my approach, but Alex was there to point out the areas of shallow water, potential hull-cracking hazards and when to sound the horn to warn other boats on a blind approach. The locks posed another potential problem; on the stretch of the River Lot that we were navigating, all except one had to be manually operated by the crews – there was no relying on lock-keepers to do all the work.

Images of gliding down arguably south-west France’s most spectacular riverway, glass of wine in hand, were rapidly being replaced by a rather more unnerving picture. The entire boating trip had been something of a risk: reunite a family spread across cities and continents for a first holiday in 15 years; then add two divorced parents sharing a compact but comfortable vessel and a newly married sister (my brother-in-law being on hand to help with the heavy duties).

## Dramatic scenery

But you couldn’t really go wrong with the following itinerary: spend a week navigating the gentle curves of the water, admiring the vineyards and the dramatic rocky scenery, visiting the beautiful medieval villages and sampling the fantastic cuisine. That’s enough to keep any family happy.

Our journey began just downriver from Cahors, capital of the Lot *département*, at Douelle where we had picked up the keys to the compact 50-foot *Salsa* and had a quick lesson in manoeuvring the boat. As we would soon learn, the bow thrusters were a useful piece of kit. For the wine enthusiasts in the party (which was the majority) we couldn’t have picked a better spot. Douelle nestles in the Cahors winemaking region, granted *appellation d’origine contrôlée* status ▶

**LEFT:** The holiday boat *Salsa* sails down the River Lot  
**ABOVE:** A fisherman crosses the lock at Mercuès

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: ED STOCKER





**ABOVE,**  
**CLOCKWISE FROM**  
**TOP: The family**  
**spaniel enjoys**  
**a view from the**  
**boat; The village**  
**of Vers; Buying**  
**cheese at Cahors**  
**market**

in 1971 and renowned for its robust reds crafted with the malbec grape. Argentina has brought the variety New World fame, but the tradition began here in the Lot, and we promised ourselves plenty of *dégustations* along the way.

The first stop was Cahors itself, but first there were three locks to negotiate. Despite the initial panic, we quickly went to our workstations. My brother-in-law showed calmness under pressure when it came to manoeuvring the boat into the lock (thank you, bow thrusters), so the task went to him; my mother and sister, good at keeping the ropes in order, helped to secure *Salsa*; my father and I tied the ropes on to cleats and then proceeded to the lock gates, which made a satisfyingly creaking noise as we began to turn the wheels to shut the gates. The water gushed noisily into the lock while my sister's four-year-old chocolate-brown spaniel kept watch over the scene.

The approach to Cahors was picture-postcard material as the three stone towers of the 14th-century Pont Valentré cast their reflection on the River Lot. A little further on, the 12th-century Cathédrale Saint-Étienne, with its stunning stained-glass windows and intricate cloisters, competed for our attention. The town is a bustling centre with a mixture of Gallic and Roman influences. The grandiose buildings in the main square and the elegant wooden beamed houses with little shutters are testament to Cahors' heyday as the area's financial centre, until the waterway's influence waned as other forms of transport began to dominate.

We toasted our arrival in Cahors with dinner at the Auberge du Vieux Cahors, tucked away in the narrow streets of the old town. Although the menu is ample and varied, you may invite a look of disdain from the *maître d'* if you fail to order at least one duck-based dish. Nowhere in France is quite so obsessed with the fowl as the south-west – gizzards and all. Trying to block out any guilty feelings about animal welfare, I tucked into a velvety slice of foie gras, the start of a memorable meal.

The gastronomic theme continued the next day; Cahors hosts a market every Wednesday and Saturday, and we had planned our trip to coincide with the midweek event, arriving early so as not to miss the best produce. The market was already in full swing and we were seduced by an accomplished saleswoman into buying a huge amount of a flavoursome hard cheese flavoured with crushed walnuts. Our basket quickly filled with everything from ripe tomatoes in greens, yellows and reds, to herb-covered salami and wine.

## Impressive sight

The Lot was at its late-summer best during our trip and there were few other boats on the river. The mornings and evenings could be fresh, but the sun was soon high in the often-cloudless sky and burning off the dew – an impressive sight as wispy water vapour began to lift from the river. The scenery beside the water was stunning, with the leaves beginning to turn orange. The river was crystal-clear

and just as we thought the scene couldn't get any more bucolic, a kingfisher fluttered past on cue.

Our leisurely cruise continued and as more locks passed by we began to feel like old hands (my father, in particular, bounded around enthusiastically when it came to operating the mechanical side). Everyone was enjoying the different pace and rhythm of a boating holiday; from mooring up to go for a stroll in the countryside to grilling duck sausages on the gas-fired barbecue strapped to the side of the boat.

At the base in Douelle, we had been told that the highlight of the trip would be about another hour and a half upriver at Saint-Cirq-Lapopie, a *Plus Beau Village* perched 100 metres above the river on a rocky outcrop. We moored just beyond the main pontoon and had the requisite cheese, bread, salad and wine lunch before crossing a bridge and taking a looping footpath into the hamlet, a gentle uphill jaunt past the cornfields.

The village is a huddle of immaculate stone houses with distinctive red-tiled roofs peering down on the river and the rolling forest. The population only just tops 200, but Saint-Cirq already attracts 400,000 visitors a year, a figure that is likely to rise after it won a TV poll last year as *l'Hexagone's* favourite village. However, in mid-September, we avoided the crowds and could admire the medieval church and the glorious setting in peace.

Saint-Cirq was to be the furthest point on the trip – the River Lot becomes unnavigable a little further up at Larnagol – but our boating expedition was far from

over. The first stop on our return downriver was near Bouziès, famous for the Château des Anglais, an impressive medieval castle carved into the rockface, which was a refuge for medieval English invaders during the Hundred Years' War.

We then headed inland to the caves of Pech-Merle, where in 1922 two teenage friends stumbled upon some of the world's finest prehistoric paintings, dating from 25,000 years ago. We used the bikes provided on the boats to cycle the four kilometres to the village of Cabrerets, from where it was a one-kilometre walk to the caves. My sister insisted that the dog was coming with us, which meant a frightening ride on a main road with an over-excited spaniel tied to the handlebars.

With my brother-in-law waiting outside to keep custody of the dog, the rest of us joined a tour of the dimly lit caves where lighting is strictly controlled to stop the paintings from deteriorating. Our guide pointed out the images of handprints, cows and bison painted in browns and blacks on the walls – a remarkable insight into our ancestors' way of life.

Having returned to the boat, we paused for a night at a natural mooring next to a weir (a chance to really ►

**ABOVE,**  
**CLOCKWISE FROM**  
**TOP: *Salsa* nears**  
**the Ganil lock; The**  
**Château d'Anglais**  
**is hewn out of**  
**the rockface;**  
**A picturesque**  
**mooring at**  
**Laroque-des-Arcs**

**Just as we thought the scene couldn't get any more bucolic, a kingfisher fluttered past on cue**





**ABOVE:** Parnac vigneron Bernard Bouyssou puts on an impromptu wine-tasting

get away from it all) before spending our final day on the river in the wine-rich *terroir* beyond our base at Douelle. We couldn't let our trip end without a visit to a vineyard, after all.

Motoring along at the boat's maximum speed of 8km/h, which can be maintained quite easily on this stretch of the River Lot due to the lack of locks, we passed stretches of vineyards as well as the Château de Cayx – summer residence of the Danish royal family. Our destination was the village of Caix, where we ate

duck and couscous while being serenaded by a singer who did a fine Georges Brassens impression, much to the delight of a throng of car enthusiasts, in town for a rally, as their prized possessions glinted nearby.

Not far from the royal castle is Parnac, which has a dizzying number of vineyards for a village of its size. We disembarked from the boat and hopped on our bikes to explore the estates, picking up many of the local dog population along the way like some bizarre Pied Pipers of the Lot.

Parnac seemed to be suffering a collective hangover (it turned out to be the morning after the *Festi Vendanges*, held to celebrate the year's first grape harvest). An exception to the lethargic air was Bernard Bouyssou, owner and winemaker at Château de l'Armandière, who happily broke off from his lunch with friends to give us a tasting of his delicious reds and rosés.

Laden with boxes of wine we returned to Douelle for our last night and a farewell meal of duck, goats' cheese and other regional staples at L'Auberge du Vieux Douelle. Talk was of impending diets, returning northwards and holiday highlights. I was content to sit in silence for a moment and weigh up the collective of ruddy boaters in front of me. We'd done it – a family holiday and no family feud. 🍷

## FRANCOFILE

All aboard for a meander along the River Lot

### GETTING THERE

**By rail:** Ed and his family booked their travel from London to Cahors through Rail Europe. Fares start at £97 per person, standard class return. Tel: 0844 848 4064 [www.raileurope.co.uk](http://www.raileurope.co.uk) For more information, see our holiday planner on page 89.

### BOAT RENTAL

Travel on the River Lot was provided by boating holiday company Le Boat. *Salsa* can sleep up to ten people; the boat has two double cabins, two twin/double convertible cabins and two bathrooms, along with a large saloon and upper sundeck. A week's trip on the River Lot on board *Salsa* costs from

£1,820, which includes towels and linen, a boat handling demonstration and technical support, but excludes travel to and from Douelle. Tel: 0844 463 3577 [www.leboat.co.uk](http://www.leboat.co.uk)

### WHERE TO EAT

#### Auberge du Vieux Douelle

Place de l'Ormeau 46140 Douelle Tel: (Fr) 5 65 20 02 03 Restaurant in a 15th-century house across the bridge from Le Boat's base. In the stone-walled, wood-beamed interior, waiters do a roaring trade in duck-based dishes and malbec wine. Save space for the Rocamadour goats' cheese in-between courses. Set menus €20-€30.

#### Auberge du Vieux Cahors

144 Rue Saint-Urcisse 46000 Cahors Tel: (Fr) 5 65 35 06 05 <http://aubcahors.free.fr> The extensive menu is classic French but with a modern twist. Try the two types of foie gras, or have the duck-based *salade quercynoise*. Set menus €18-€40.

#### La Truite Dorée

Rue de la Barre 46090 Vers Tel: (Fr) 5 65 31 41 51 [www.latruitedoree.fr](http://www.latruitedoree.fr) One of the most popular hotel-restaurants on this part of the River Lot, again featuring south-western staples, but there is also a decent vegetarian option. Set menus €19-€40.

### WHERE TO VISIT

#### Cahors market

This foodie haven can be found in the Place Jean-Jacques Chapou every Wednesday and Saturday. Get there in the morning for the best of the produce and feast your eyes on the covered stalls selling top regional produce – from fruit and vegetables to salami and meat.

#### Pech-Merle

46330 Cabrerets [www.pechmerle.com](http://www.pechmerle.com) Stunning prehistoric cave paintings a short cycle ride from the river. The tour is in French with an English booklet. Open daily from 31 March to 11 November 2013; see website for winter openings. Tickets €10, five to 14s €6.



**TOURIST INFORMATION**  
**Cahors tourist office**  
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 53 20 65  
[www.tourisme-cahors.fr](http://www.tourisme-cahors.fr)

**Saint-Cirq-Lapopie tourist office**  
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 31 31 31  
[www.saint-cirqlapopie.com](http://www.saint-cirqlapopie.com)

**Lot tourist board**  
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 35 07 09  
[www.tourisme-lot.com](http://www.tourisme-lot.com)