Cruise control

A barge holiday in Languedoc-Roussillon is the perfect antidote to quick-fix trips. **Ed Stocker** experiences life in the slow lane as he chugs down the cool, calm Canal du Midi

I don't think I've ever waved with such reckless abandon in all my life. Plodding along the Canal du Midi towards the Camargue, fellow canal boaters seem eager to communicate. At first their cheery greetings are returned with a jerky, slightly embarrassed arm extension, but by the end of a leisurely week cruising the Languedoc backwaters, pausing to wander ancient towns and feast on local delicacies, I am converted. Suddenly I'm waving at everything and everyone in my wake, hapless motorists and cyclists included. The waving, it transpires, is part of an unspoken boating code – a waterway etiquette that entails discussing with fellow cruisers the height of the water at the next lock and the mooring facilities along the way. And this code, it seems, encourages travel at the most tranquil of speeds (accompanying glass of rosé optional).

There's something soul cleansing about life in the slow lane. Cruising gently down the canal with the sounds of birds and water washing over one like a New Age relaxation tape feels like the perfect antidote to the high-speed pace of daily life. Our home for the week is surely the king of the water – almost 40 feet of boating bravado. This isn't some practical, uncomfortable vessel; we're doing the canal in style, and this means on-deck dining table, pine-finish kitchen and electric amenities. My partner and I may be canal novices (more of this later), but with a healthy amount of rubber strapped to the hull as standard – just in case we have the odd bump or scrape along the way – we're ready. How far away from quick-fix holidays this all feels. For this, of course, is the alternative to that madness: a conscious decision to savour one's surroundings, to be the tortoise and not the hare.

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With this modus operandi clearly worked out, we'd set out from England for France. Forget the plane; it's all about the train. Shooting down the spine of France on the TGV, the flat expanses of the north stretch for miles outside the windows – a smudged palette of greens and yellows – as the train works its way towards the Mediterranean. The oppressive, northern European sky seems to lift as we continue our descent, as though breathing a drawn-out sigh of relief. Colours become more vibrant as the blue of the sky takes on a deeper hue. South of Valence, the countryside changes dramatically, brimming with neatly planted rows of vines and olive bushes stretching towards the horizon.

Spectacular views

We pick up our boat in the ancient hamlet of Capestang, nestled on the banks of the Canal du Midi in the Hérault *département*. It's here that views from the canal – stretching from Toulouse in the west to the Étang de Thau in the east – are at their most spectacular. It's the stuff of picture postcards as the waterway winds through undulating fields and rocky hillocks that jut up dramatically around the boat. Tall *platane* (plane) trees line the canal like an aquatic boulevard and every evening, as the sun begins its reluctant descent, rays of translucent light glint through the branches.

The man-made canal is a remarkable feat of engineering. Béziers resident Pierre-Paul Riquet never saw his plans completed, dying in 1680, just a year before the canal was filled with water. Today, Riquet is revered around these parts and there's hardly a town or village along the canal that hasn't named a building, street or square after him. In his hometown a massive statue stands proudly in the *centre ville* – his image cast in iron for all eternity – just off the Allées Paul Riquet. This is where France's outdoor types throng, from hearty boaters, to joggers and cyclists speeding down paths running beside the canal. In fact, with a strict waterway speed limit of eight kilometres an hour, be prepared to be overtaken by a biker or two dressed in full Tour de France regalia.

Heading east from Capestang, we are shaken from our state of catharsis by the first *écluse* (lock). Before leaving, we'd been given a commendable demonstration about how to loop ropes at the front and back of the boat around cleats at the sides of the lock. Doing it for real is altogether different. In fact, there isn't just one lock to deal with, for we've arrived at Les Neuf Écluses de Fonserannes, a staircase of consecutive locks stretching for more than 300 metres. It soon becomes apparent that for two novices, negotiating the locks will be no easy task – essentially the more crew, the less work each person has to do. However, the staircase is a serious local attraction and there are plenty of tourists hanging about, although mostly it seems to take photos of us frantically running around the boat. Luckily a friendly group of Swiss motorbikers – also boating enthusiasts – are on hand to help us with our ropes.

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Lock, stock and lunch

We, of course, improve as we continue along the canal. In this part of Languedoc, the *écluses* are still operated by keepers and approaching each new lock is a window into this most ancient of professions. Lock keepers get a pretty, pastel-coloured house beside the water as part of the job, and this being France, they shut up shop for an hour over lunch and head indoors to eat. Wander past one of these houses at 12.30pm and you'll hear the scraping of cutlery and the sound of muted conversation drifting from a shuttered window.

Stretching either side of our boat are fields packed with vines. Grapes define the dusty, sun-beaten soil of Languedoc and more bottles are produced here than the combined output of Chile and South Africa. In the past, these wines were renowned for a rustic coarseness – cheap table wine – but the region has experienced a recent resurgence, with New World growers moving into the market and producers experimenting with grape varieties and blends. As we float along, makeshift *dégustation* signs advertise tastings at local châteaux.

It's not long before we're tempted and we moor up next to the Domaine Guéry near Polihès and follow the arrows. Wandering down the path towards the cream-coloured house, a lethargic dog ambles up to meet us before the winegrower's wife, Madame Tastavy, arrives to show us round the 400-year-old vineyard. She has that thick, friendly drawl that can only be southern France. Proudly tracing back the generations of wine growers on her husband's side, she explains how the surname Tastavy originally comes from the phrase '*tester le vin*'. The estate produces a white, red and rosé, and we taste all three. These are *vins de pays d'oc* and they've got a robust, crisp taste and romantic sounding names: the white is named 'Fleur de Nuit' because the grapes are picked at night to preserve flavour. A little lightheaded, and weighed down with bottles, we head back to the boat.

Continuing our watery route feels like taking a step back in time, as we encounter towns that have changed little in centuries. Near Capestang we visit Oppidum, an ancient settlement dating back to 800BC set high on a hillside looking out over vineyards and corn fields. Languedoc is a land that has been crossed by many civilisations, from Romans and Moors to the English and Spanish. The influence of these latter two can still be felt in Béziers, where we leave the boat for the night and explore the tightly packed back streets of the old town. Béziers is a rugby-mad town and also celebrates a massive Spanish-style *corrida* at the height of summer. It's a pretty place with a North African vibe, dominated by the impressive 13th century Cathédrale St-Nazaire that reaches for the heavens from the edge of a hilltop overlooking the River Orb. ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Capestang; The canal; Wine tasting is a lovely way to spend an afternoon; Pont Vieux in Béziers

The town of Agde is similarly picturesque. Like all the settlements in these parts, it's defined by its church; the castle-like, fortified Cathédrale St-Étienne dating from the 12th century. Crossing over a bridge into the old town, red Languedoc-Roussillon flags flutter in the wind and cafés and restaurants stretch alongside the river. The town dates back 2,500 years to the Phoenicians and there are old Greek ramparts near the river. Rather bizarrely, in the midst of all this beauty stands a statue of the Virgin Mary, lit up at night in garish colours that flash intermittently, as though willing the town's non-believers to find God.

> The town has a vibrant energy and we fall in love with it immediately. *Sétois* are some of the friendliest people we've met

Nearing the Étang de Thau, the countryside turns marshy and flat as the villages dwindle. For several hours we encounter no people, only the occasional horse, stork and flamingo. The Camargue is often referred to as 'Little Argentina' and for a moment it feels as if we're in the wetlands of South America. These are the final throes of the Canal du Midi before the banks widen into the vast, saltwater lake of the Étang. Floating out into the middle, there's an overwhelming sense of openness as we look out on other motorboats and sailing dinghies, mere specks in the distance.

The Étang is a major cultivator of oysters, producing 20,000 tonnes a year. As we cross the lake we pass wooden oyster racks and the oysters are still farmed using a 19th century technique. While the shellfish normally thrive at sea because they need moving water, the Étang recreates these conditions thanks to the constant winds that blow across it. Locals call the region *le pays du vent* (windy country) and gusts can whip up quite suddenly on the calmest of days. As we chug along, weatherworn, bare-chested fishermen are going out to the racks to check on their produce. For lunch we head inland to the port of Marseillan for a quayside gastronomic treat of local mussels followed by squid rings in a zingy, garlic-intense sauce. Marseillan is a sleepy place with coloured houses lining the harbour. It's still very much a working port with labourers fixing boats and welding metal as we eat. In the past the town was an important stopping-off point for wine merchants and today the village still bears the mark of the trade: this is the home of French vermouth – a fortified wine flavoured with aromatic herbs. Next to our restaurant is huge *cave à vins* and its wooden shelves are packed with unusual bottles from all over the region. Prettier still is Mèze, smaller and less packed with visitors than its better-known cousin Marseillan. In the village we stumble upon a lively food market where they're selling everything from herb-coated goat's cheese to fresh bread and shell-fish. It's a bustling scene and the entire village seems to be out and about doing their weekly shop.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A dog-day afternoon in Marseillan; View of Agde; An oyster farm; Marseillan; Market time LEFT: Sunlight filters through the trees

Our final stop of the week is Sète, by far the largest town we've visited. Approaching from the lake is spectacular as the town rises dramatically from a rocky mound that leads out to the Mediterranean Sea. The town isn't pretty in any conventional sense, but it has a vibrant energy and we fall in love with it immediately. *Sétois* are some of the friendliest people we've met and when we stop to ask an elderly man for directions, he gives us detailed instructions before coming back twice to give additional information. Travelling up to the highest ▶

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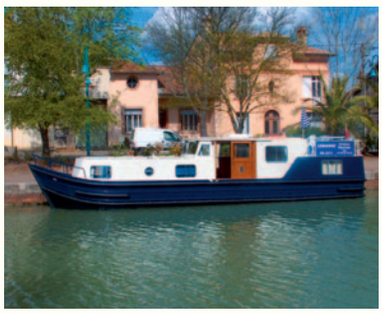
FRANCOFILE

HOW TO GET THERE

Ed travelled from London to Paris on the Eurostar and onwards with SNCF. Prices from London to Béziers (the nearest stop to Capestang) start at £102 in standard class. All prices are per person and subject to availability. For bookings, visit www.raileurope.co.uk or call (UK) 0844 848 4064. Also visit the Rail Europe Travel Centre, 1 Regent St, London SW1.



HOW TO BOOK

Ed's boat was booked through France Afloat. Boats from Capestang on the Canal du Midi start at £555 per week. A EuroClassic 129 for a week starts from £1,140 for a couple. For more information call (UK) 0870 011 0538 or visit www.franceafloat.com

TOURIST BOARDS

UK

Maison de la Région Languedoc-Roussillon
6 Cavendish Square
London W1G 0PD
Tel: (UK) 020 7079 3344
www.sunfrance.com

FRANCE

Hérault département
Tel: (Fr) 8 25 34 00 34
www.herault-tourisme.com

Capestang/Poilhès/Montels
5 Boulevard Pasteur (Capestang)
Tel: (Fr) 4 67 93 34 23
www.capestango-t.com

Béziers
29 Avenue Saint-Saëns
Tel: (Fr) 4 67 76 84 00
www.beziers-tourisme.fr

Sète
60 Grand Rue Mario Roustan
Tel: (Fr) 4 67 74 71 71

ABOVE: The canal at Sète, which was the final destination on the journey from Capestang

point in town – Mont-Saint-Clair – our bus driver spends five minutes explaining the neighbourhood and bus times before we get out to admire the views of the distant mountains and oyster racks on the Étang de Thau. Returning to town on foot, we stop off in a little café for a snack of *tielle*, a cold tomato and squid pie that's a local speciality. The dish was brought over by Naples fishermen who settled in the town and it was cooked by anxious wives for their husbands before they headed out to sea.

Last port of call

Sète is great for people watching. It's 11am in the Place Léon Blum and everyone seems to know each other. There's a lot of hand-shaking and kissing going on in the busy cafés where people are already sipping chilled white wine and pastis. For lunch we visit the quayside where a ramshackle assortment of pleasure boats, cruisers and fishing dinghies clog the sides of the commercial port. We decide to shun the tourist traps and go down to the furthest end of the port where, fittingly, we enjoy our finest meal of the trip. Les Demoiselles Dupuy doesn't do the usual cheap, set menu deals; instead the freshest cuts of Mediterranean fish are cooked up straight off the haulers. It's run by former fishermen and a man in a blue and white striped top sells seafood from beside the tables. My tuna steak, only hours old when it arrives, tastes like nothing I've had before and is served with a punchy olive tapenade.

Over this fantastic lunch, and aided by several glasses of wine, I reflect on the week: the boat, the canal, the people, the food, the drink, the sun. I feel an enormous sense of achievement having held my own against the canal pros. I wouldn't even change the minor mishaps along the way, like the lock keepers' decision to strike when we were in Agde, meaning we never made it to Aigues-Mortes (what French experience would be complete without a spot of civic action after all?). I've discovered Languedoc in an active and novel way and, with my waterway waving honed to a fine art, I may just have caught the boating bug.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ED STOCKER; FOTOLIA.CO.UK