



Sunset near  
Castelnaudary.



The inclined plane at Montech.

# Syndicate on the Midi

Angela Marks finds shared ownership is a practical way to explore the delightful French canals

After six wonderful years on a Dutch-style barge on the Canal du Nivernais in Burgundy, we were getting itchy feet and were keen to explore some other parts of the network.

While staying with some narrowboat friends in France, we were shown an advertisement for syndicate-owned boats in France. The two boats, *Bon Viseur* and *Bon Viseur II*, are based in Burgundy at St. Jean-de-Losne or on the Canal du Midi. Unusually, they are made from a wood and epoxy composite, so can be readily craned out and transported from region to region. High summer in the south is too hot and low season in the north is too cold, so the move to the Midi for autumn and spring effectively extends the useful cruising season.

We purchased two fixed weeks' shares, eager to begin exploration of the Canal du Midi. It is possible to reach the south of France by air, or by train in just one day. Both modes of transport have suited us better than the long drive from Calais.

It was mid-April when we arrived at Castelnaudary station and rolled our bags towards the large lagoon, originally constructed to act as a reservoir for the staircase locks to the east. After finding the boat, we made a quick expedition to the town to buy supplies – and it was certainly pleasant to relax with a plate of local cassoulet and a glass of wine.

On setting off the next morning, the magic of this remarkable canal began to sink in with views of the snow-capped Pyrenees to the south. The canal is bordered by manicured plane trees which seem to march across country for mile after mile. These were originally planted to provide shade in this hot, arid area.

This ambitious canal was completed in 1681, well before the canal age in Britain. Riquet's genius was in understanding the need to capture sufficient water supplies from streams in the distant mountains, and to bring water to a reservoir on the summit level by means of rigoles, or feeder streams. A monument to Riquet was constructed at Naurouze, where the remains of an octagonal reservoir can be visited.

The locks on the Canal du Midi are barrel shaped, because it was believed that rectangular locks would not remain rigid. They are strongly built in dressed stone, and all are manned by a lock-keeper. Many of the double staircase locks have been singled to make one deep lock. The lock-keepers are often equipped with radio controls which are used to activate the paddle gear and the gates. At one triple staircase lock, the *éclusier* stands at an upstairs window of his cottage and controls the operation from this point by radio.

The locks to the east of the summit level are prefixed as Mediterranean locks, while

those on the west are prefixed as Atlantic locks. After Naurouze, the canal begins its long descent to Toulouse, still bordered by the regimented plane trees. In the early springtime, their scaly bark stands out in the morning mists. The towpaths are wide and normally tarred, making cycling ahead of the boat a pleasant option. Cherry blossom may overhang and there are orchids to be found in the grassy borders.

As Toulouse is approached, the canal is populated by many residential boats and a main road swings across to join it. The canal strides through the very centre of the city – one lock lies directly outside the main railway station. The junction with the Canal Latéral à la Garonne is made in a basin, where a 270 degree turn is recommended to get under the exit bridge! On glancing back, the basin wall is decorated with white marble bas-relief between the entrances of the two canals.

Leaving Toulouse, the 'Latéral' is characterised by long, straight pounds. At first, the canal is accompanied by a busy railway line, but eventually it reaches open country and a more wandering course.

Several of the locks have been automated. On approaching the lock, you grasp and rotate a pole suspended over the water. Then, as if by magic, red and green lights show that the lock is being prepared. When the gates open the green light invites you to



*Bon Viveur II* in the April mist.

A pleasant lunch on the flying deck.



The Ricquet memorial at Narouze.

*Bon Viveur II*.

The lock flight at Foncérannes, Béziers.



The Libron crossing.

enter; when the boat is in position inside the lock chamber, a crew member pushes a 'go' button. The rest is fully automatic – provided the crew member has remembered to get back on board!

Good mooring is available at Montech, and it is worth stopping here to explore not only the restaurant but also the remarkable pente d'eau (WW August). This is a concrete trough incline, where a linked pair of diesel locomotives push boats up or down in a 'wedge' of water. While it is not available to leisure boats, there is an evening restaurant trip boat on which the public may ride (at a price...).

After the spectacular aqueduct over the Tarn the charming town of Moissac has excellent moorings, where fuel and gas are available. The 11th century abbey, adorned with meticulous wall painting is a treasure not to be missed.

The following year, our cruise began at Agde, near the eastern end of the Canal du Midi. Shortly after leaving the small marina, the canal crosses the River Libron on the level. Here Riquet devised a method of crossing the river which could be utilised in times of flood: two caissons with a boat's length between them, with each caisson able to pass the river's floodwater across it through side doors (WW June 2009). The low-lying land to the west was attractive in the late afternoon sun, as it glistened on

the pools of still water and the hides of the horses which grazed there.

Perhaps the most impressive feature of the waterway is the great seven-rise staircase at Fonsérannes, which lead to le grand bief (the long pound). Just as at Foxton, the public congregate at this spot to view the boats as they are worked through the locks. When going uphill, the intermediate gates are not closed until the locks fill in turn, so that the water can be seen cascading over the cills from the top.

A gentle meander follows past manicured vineyards and tidy farms. At Port la Robine, a branch canal leads away southwards to Narbonne and Port-la-Nouvelle on the Mediterranean, but this time we continued westwards towards Carcassonne. This famous ancient citadel was an important medieval city as it controlled the strategic gap between the Massif Central and the Pyrenees. A network of narrow streets makes this a fascinating place to explore and a walk around the ramparts of the citadel offers panoramic views of the whole area. Mooring is available adjacent to the railway station or in the wide basin above the lock.

The syndicate arrangement of boating in France has suited us well and has proved to be much more economical than hiring in France. An AGM is held each year, at which owners can meet and discuss issues such as the winter maintenance schedule. Major

items are contracted out to local marine engineers and boatyards, but some tasks are done by owners who enjoy "marine DIY", and that can save on costs. The system also allows for one-way cruises and for exchanges between the canals in the Midi region and in Burgundy. Through this opportunity, we have learned to savour the joys of boating in France.

### *Find out more*

These boats are run by independent syndicates. More information can be obtained from [BonBV2a@goosemail.com](mailto:BonBV2a@goosemail.com) or [alanbacon@btconnect.com](mailto:alanbacon@btconnect.com). *Bon Viveur II* is 50ft long and 13ft wide, and can accommodate six to eight persons. There is an en suite double bedroom aft, and a roomy wheelhouse which can also be used for dining or sleeping. The main saloon includes a convertible settee and kitchen facilities and in the forward area there is a shower and toilet, as well as another double bedroom. Over the aft accommodation is a flying bridge area for those *al fresco* meals and an upper steering position.

Other syndicates are operated by French Barging (0782 732 1030, [www.french-barging.com](http://www.french-barging.com)), BCBM Boat Share (01270 628076, [www.bcbm.co.uk](http://www.bcbm.co.uk)), and private owners (see [www.boatshare.co.uk/abroad](http://www.boatshare.co.uk/abroad) for a partial list). Bearing in mind recent failures of shared ownership companies, prospective owners are recommended to make their own checks before investing.