



BOATING ON THE **CANAL** **DU MIDI**

Le Boat Barge Tours

“There’s nothing—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as messing about in boats,” said Rat to Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*, and he was on the money.

Barging is a marvellous way to holiday, the epitome of the slow life. Picture the scene as you ease along the broad waterways of the lush Languedoc region in southern France, the Canal du Midi. It’s late summer; a whiff of fermented grapes is in the air, and leaves are starting to turn. The scenery is gorgeous – an assemblage of antiquated castles, farmsteads, waterside cafés and rolling vineyards, something unique at every turn.

The idea to build a navigable canal linking the Atlantic and Mediterranean was first bandied about by the likes of Charlemagne. Leonardo da Vinci was commissioned in 1516 to survey a possible route, but it was Pierre-Paul Riquet from Béziers who eventually conquered the logistical challenges. It took from 1667 to 1681 to complete its 240 kilometres and 65 locks, making it the world’s oldest commercial waterway and a spectacular feat of engineering. Our journey took us through prime wine





country with almost 700,000 hectares under vine.

START A JOURNEY

My journey to the Canal du Midi began with three friends from Cape Town. We took the train from Paris, a glorious way to go, and four hours later pulled into Carcassonne on the River Aude. It's the most famous of France's few remaining 'walled cities', with three kilometres of defensive ramparts that encircle the perfectly intact old Carcassonne – La Cité – a UNESCO World Heritage Site that channels a Disneyesque castle at first glance. A stunning cross-section of Roman, medieval, and gothic architecture, it harks back to the fifth century, and to wander the ancient, cobbled lanes beneath the towering ramparts is a delight. During summer, the citadel buzzes with amphitheatre concerts. The Festival de Carcassonne takes place here annually, with the next

one coming up in July 2022, fortuitously in the middle of boating season.

We began at the Le Boat base in Trèbes, a ten-minute cab ride from Carcassonne. After the mandatory boating 101 delivered by the base manager (who clearly displays absolute faith in novice crews), we puttered off towards the first of eighteen locks populating our particular route that culminated at Narbonne on the coast, just fifteen kilometres from the Med. On a trip like this, travelling with the right group of friends is key. They need to be up for teamwork and get along well, because firstly the boats are quite compact inside and. Secondly, while the fun factor is ever-present, some moments require absolute concentration – such as when navigating through the locks, or easing into a parking spot. That requires a joint effort with all hands on deck, literally. At those times, you'll need to



Misty morning on the Canal du Midi (Photo by Allison Foat)



Narbonne gate
at the citadel of Carcassonne
(Photo by Allison Foat)

hold on the chardonnay and focus, to avoid any mishaps.

TIME TO LET GO

Boating is slow travel at its best. With a mere 53 kilometres to cover in seven days, the pace is unhurried, time is irrelevant, and spontaneity is the order of the day. A cycle path parallel to the canal is useful for the early morning croissant run and for exploring nearby villages and vineyards. Le Boat maps are also highly detailed, clearly denoting where to find those famous French fresh produce markets, do wine tastings, and visit historical buildings. At the end of each day, we'd moor beneath the plane trees that line the way, some of which were planted in the 1830s. One particularly exquisite memory was sailing off at dawn through a veil of diaphanous mist hovering just above the water. There was absolute quiet, the boat engine barely audible, and as the sun rose, the light pierced the vapour that gradually dissipated in the warmth

of its rays, a sublime moment.

Some locks like Puichéric offer something unique, with little delis selling craft beer, cheese, well-priced wine, and delicious local fare. At Aiguille, lock keeper Joël Barthès has made quite a name for himself over the past thirty years with his quirky sculpture installation on the bank, all fashioned from upcycled iron and wood found in the forest. From Homps, one of the Le Boat bases, we cycled to Olonzac, lured there by the weekly market (open Tuesday mornings only). It's an atmospheric, bustling community space, known for artisanal delicacies like homemade pistachio nougat, sunflower honey and cloudy olive oil.

A unique way to explore off-deck is in a classic convertible Citroën 2CV – for hire at a canal town called Paraza in the beautiful Minervois region. From there, it's a 20-kilometre drive to Minerve, a hamlet located on a rocky outcrop above a deep canyon. Dripping in middle age siege drama, it surprises with its own Michelin



information

Le Boat South Africa

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Booking is open for the 2022 boating season.

From Paris

Rail Europe (www.worldtravel.co.za)

France Tourism

info.za@atout-france.fr

When to go

May to early October

Take Along

Sunblock, mosquito repellent, hat, non-slip deck shoes & gardening gloves for rope handling.

star restaurant, Relais Chantovent, a must for travelling foodies.

The old harbour of Le Somail warrants a longer stay. It has loads to see, such as the famous grocery barge and the Le Trouve Tout du Livre bookshop, stocked with more than 50,000 books from rare editions to paperbacks. Between Le Somail and Argeliers is the Embranchement de la Nouvelle – the junction where boaters can opt to leave the Canal du Midi, and sail in a southerly direction towards the Mediterranean, along the Canal de la Robine. Narbonne is a spectacular city and a stunning finale to the trip. There's a lot to see too; from the vast Les Halles indoor market, to the Archbishop's Palace, and the gothic Cathédrale St-Just. The proximity to Spain, and the fact that it lies within a region that was once part of Catalonia, means the Spanish influence (in the architecture, language, culture, and cuisine) is very prevalent throughout Narbonne.

For South Africans feeling the pinch of the Rand against the Euro, hiring a boat on the Canal du Midi offers the opportunity to pool resources and enjoy a stint of recreational boating through one of the most glorious parts of France, if not the world. ⑩

Exploring by bicycle (Photo by Justin Fox)



by **allison foat** /
photography by **allison foat, justin fox, le boat**