



TRANQUIL: The tree-lined banks of the Canal du Garonne make you forget about the rest of the world.

On the slow boat of life

Richard Moore spends a week exploring the canals in the southwest of France. Here is the first of three articles on his life-changing experience.

IT MAY have been the most perfect week of our lives, spending it under deep blue skies, in very un-European heat, exploring small French medieval villages and towns, meeting friendly people and sampling some of the most amazing food ever offered.

There were no cars, buses or trains involved and the distance travelled across seven days was 110km. Considering we had flown more than 18,000km in two days to get there it was glacial movement but oh-so utterly relaxing, eye-opening and enjoyable.

By now, you'll be shaking the paper, saying: "Well, tell us where?" and it is only fair the secret is shared.

We were on a canal boat in the southwest of France tootling along the Canal du Garonne and Canal du Baise at a sedate maximum speed of 8km/h.

Our boat, the Aiguillon, was a 10m vessel known as a penichette, complete with two cabins, two bathrooms, a living area and kitchen. It was our home on the still waters of the canals and a very comfortable one at that.

Now, neither of us are sailors and after a brief explanation of

how everything worked we were left entirely to our own devices — free to explore a beautiful part of Aquitaine. Our only limitations were having to be back at the Agen base in a week and to remember the canal locks close at 7 o'clock.

The locks are water lifts that raise or lower your boat depending upon whether you are going up or down river.

They really are the only slightly stressful part of the journey (you often have crowds of critical onlookers).

While the penichettes are marvellous, they do steer like drunken bricks . . . so you need to be thinking in advance.

Our first overnight stay was at the canal junction port of Buzet, where the Garonne and Baise waterways join.

It was a sedate five-hour run from Agen that allowed us to get a feel for the boat, the canals and the locks — which we managed reasonably easily.

The slow speeds on the canals are to protect their banks from the force of bow waves and while being self-regulated, most people seem to keep within the limits.

Travelling at 6-8km/h is a blessing as it gives you time to savour your journey through some exquisite countryside. As you pass large brick farm buildings surrounded by deep green crops and fields of sunflowers or lavender, you do



PERFECT SPOT: The Aiguillon (right) sits at the dock in the gorgeous town of Nerac.

question your lifestyle back home. A temporary life on the canal will change you permanently by altering the way you look at things.

At small waterside villages you moor your boat and then wander into a small village or town that has been there for 800 years. They are often walled and their buildings show their age. But they are gorgeous, loved and lived in. In New Zealand or Australia buildings in such condition would be trashy, on the canals they are quaint.

As is the French lifestyle. Things do get done, but in French time. It is one of the many things we learned during our journey — life is to be lived, not dictated by the pressure of the clock.

And life is also about food, friends and family. The meals we had were truly delightful. The local specialty was duck, cooked so beautifully it was perfection on a plate. And the local produce was impossible to ignore. Unbelievably fresh, with an

aroma that said it was not cool-stored for weeks before reaching you odourless and tasteless.

Then there are the churches. Every town and village had a stone eglise that not only offered you respite from the summer heat, but gave you a chance to sit down and admire the centuries-old work of skilled masons, carvers and glass workers.

In France you don't learn history, you live in it. Looking back on our journey it was hard to believe that we were only on the Aiguillon for seven days, because our adventures on our "petit bateau" will live with us forever.

It was a glorious week in which we didn't travel far, or fast, and that made it such a wonderful experience. It gave us time to absorb the delights of a small part of Aquitaine and there are plenty of those. Au revoir, Aquitaine, we will be returning.

■ Richard Moore booked his canal boat holiday through Eurolynx Travel in Auckland.



TIGHT SQUEEZE: The narrow arches under bridges make for some very precise steering.

In the second of three articles, **Richard Moore** continues his canal journey through France

WE BEGAN our journey along the Canal du Garonne in a cautious fashion, having discovered that our 10-metre penichette steers like the Titanic.

But after a few bumps and naughty words, the Aiguillon began behaving and we pottered along the picturesque, tree-lined canal at 8km/h.

It is a very peaceful way to journey and perfectly suits the Aquitaine region. Along the canal are wonderful medieval towns and villages that just beg to be explored. We didn't need accommodation, for the Aiguillon had two cabins, two bathrooms and a nice interior living area, but the lure of regional French cuisine was too great to bother with the kitchen.

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It was a sedate five-hour run from Agen that allowed us to get a feel for the boat, the canals and the locks — which we managed reasonably easily. In Buzet we discovered a restaurant that serves up food to die for.

The owner of L'Auberge du Goujon qui Frenille is Arnaud Chevallier, a chef who loves the local produce and wine and enjoys telling patrons about the food they are about to delight in. He wanders from table to table with his blackboard introducing you to the menu and just



History and heavenly food

chatting about life. In France time really doesn't count, particularly in the south.

My duck had me in raptures and then I was struck almost dumb by the fabulous roquefort cheese we had for dessert. All I can remember mumbling is, "Oh my God, I've gone to heaven" over and over again. I only stopped to savour a glass of the superb local Armagnac.

Early the next morning we continued up the Garonne to the walled town of Damazan.

One of the beauties of canal travel is that you arrive at a place not knowing what you are going to find or, indeed, Damazan used to be English — as indeed did most of Aquitaine — in the 14th and 15th centuries and its walls kept enemy French troops at bay.

That was until Joan of Arc

turned the Hundred Years' War on its head. Her military successes and eventual martyrdom mean every church we visited had a statue of St Joan.

To get to the town proper from the canal you walk up through pretty gardens dominated by a tower-like dovecote, very popular in the region, to the stone walls and then enter a place where today's world mixes with medieval.

Cars are parked beside buildings that are hundreds of years old and modern signs sit incongruously on structures that would look old in a *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie.

Most of the walls are light grey or brown, with bright colours of red, green, yellow and light blue added to the streetscape by large painted

wooden shutters. The thoroughfares are narrow with one side offering shade from the sun as the heat begins to build.

Later in the day, with the temperature hitting the 40C mark, the cooling darkness of old churches are places of sanctuary — as in days of old.

Along with churches — and St Joan — each town has a war memorial dedicated to sons lost during various conflicts.

On a nicer note, each village also has terrific eateries — it being impossible to find a bad meal in France — and you can relax over marvellous local dishes with a glass of wine or, as we did, a lunchtime bottle of sparkling water just taking in the atmosphere of a nation that loves to live well.

Our destination for the day was the little village of Caumont sur Garonne. Tying up at about 6pm meant everything in Caumont was closed, but we had enough supplies in our fridge to have a good dinner after exploring its streets.

On the way into Caumont we came across an extraordinary sight — a baguette vending machine. And for those who forget to buy their fruit and veges, a mobile stall arrives on the riverbank at dinner time.

The offerings are fabulous. It is hard to describe the fresh produce in France other than to say it smells beautiful, unlike the sterile supermarket food we so

often find elsewhere, and tastes fabulous.

Sitting on the flying bridge of our boat eating cold pizza from lunch, fresh salad and fruit, while quaffing a superb rose wine we found it hard to think of anywhere we'd rather be. Finishing off the evening with Armagnac brandy saw the end to a near-perfect day.

We are woken early by a small van speeding down the road next to our berth beeping its horn madly. It is the baguette van — oh yes — which also contains a selection of buttery croissants. What service. . .

With a cup of tea and a pastry inside of us, it was "port thrusters please, Mr Sulu" as we turned our craft around and set off back down the canal to the must-see town of Mas d'Agenais.

It was a short walk from where we moored our floating home to the very pretty little brick-walled town that dates back to Gallo-Roman times.

The church in Mas d'Agenais is St Vincent's, a Romanesque design dating back to the 11th Century.

Many people visit the church to see Rembrandt's *Christ on a Cross*, but I was more taken by a stunning statue of Jean d'Arc that shows the young warrior in full plate armour.

The church is very atmospheric with small high windows offering dramatic lighting, while larger stained glass throws wonderful colours on to the altar.

And it is so cool.

Another amazing place is the village's hall. It is effectively a barn without walls and dates back several hundred years, attested to by its exposed beams and supports.

Under the protection of the tiled roof, fruit and seafood sellers go about their trade and a woman makes savoury crepes for lunch.

A group of old folk from a rest home sits at one of the tables and is brought food and drink from the nearby cafe. It is lovely to watch as they are treated like special guests.

After a really good lunch we made our way back to the Aiguillon to head back to Buzet and a rendezvous with the Canal du Baise and its much talked about town of Nerac.

But more on that next week.

■ **Richard Moore** booked his **Locaboat** canal holiday through **Eurolynx Travel** in Auckland — eurolynx.co.nz.



COLOURS: Brightly painted shutters stand out in Damazan.

WATER LIFT: A lock on the Canal du Garonne.

Lock in date to visit Aquitaine

Richard Moore bids adieu to an unforgettable canal journey

WHEN asking people about what we should see while on the canals, the name Nerac kept coming up.

So, looking at our canals guide book (a must for the journey), we worked out it would take us a couple of days to sedately meander down to that town.

Firstly, we needed to transition from the Canal du Garonne to the Canal du Baise and that involved a five-metre drop in water level. To achieve that there is a double-step lock at Buzet.

That offered few fears as by this stage we were pretty handy with our lock drills. I had become rather adept at holding steady the 10-metre Aiguillon in the lock with just the motor and so we rarely used rope lines at all.

The Baise is very different to the Garonne with less man-made protection of the banks and so the speed is 6 knots rather than 8 knots to limit the damage bow waves cause. It is also narrower and more natural-looking.

When on the canals you need to plan ahead so you can clear all of the locks between yourself and your destination.

Fortunately, the distances are not too far but you don't want to be stuck in a lock when the automatic cut off at 7pm arrives. That would be both annoying and very embarrassing.

While I reckon the Garonne is more picturesque along the canal, the little towns on the Baise are simply wonderful.

We fell in love with Vianne, a delightful place of about 1200 people that is famed for glass-blowing and has been in existence for almost 800 years.

Vianne is a bastide, which means a royal stronghold, and its walls would have been tough to breach. There are four gates to the old part of town and in the middle of it is a fabulous square that — in days gone by — had its own halle. Unfortunately, it burned down a long time ago and



END OF THE ROAD: The picturesque viaduct canal at Agen was accompanied with a hint of sadness as our wonderful journey through Aquitaine was about to finish.

has never been replaced.

On a balmy summer night we ate in the square. Not only was the food excellent, but the people were just so friendly. Vianne so captured our hearts we may well end up living there.

The next morning we headed to the boulangerie and feasted on exquisite baking before heading to the church of St Christopher that stands by one of the town's gates.

It is a lovely building and has the cutest stone gargoyles decorating its interior. In its heyday the church would have been fantastic to see, as the faded paint on its columns hinted at.

A couple of hours down the river was Nerac, which fellow travellers on the canal had spoken about with awe. They said it was the prettiest place in the area and so off we tootled at a breakneck 6 km/h.

We were not misled.

Nerac is stunning and is filled with some truly gorgeous medieval buildings. It is dominated by the tall spire of the Cathedral of Notre Dame overlooking the town's old quarter. We wandered around the

area with our mouths open at the wonderfully preserved — yet still operational — structures.

Across the canal is the Chateau de Nerac, home to Henry of Navarre who became Henry IV. Henry was one of the great kings of France, although his 21-year reign ended under an assassin's blade.

The chateau is only a remaining wing of the original building as the rest was destroyed by a mob during the French Revolution, but it does show what an impressive place the entire palace would have been.

St Nicholas church is near the chateau. It is large and was built just prior to the revolution in a neo-classical style. Inside, the building is astounding. Huge stained glass windows lighten the solid feel of the church and bring an extraordinary amount of light to the altar area. Giant paintings dominate the ceiling.

Saturdays in Nerac are market days and you must take the time to have a wander around. You can pick up some really good clothing and other items but for us the highlight was the food section.

OMG. Just fabulous. The fruit

is fresh beyond belief and the vegetables call out to be taken and served up. Then came the dried hams, and the olives and the cheeses! Did I mention the artisan breads? Thought not. Well, they are fabulous too. In fact, absolutely everything on show I would have tried to eat.

I had to be dragged away. So, when planning a trip to Nerac, have at least one Saturday in there.

Our return trip included a second night in Vianne where they were having the annual village International Food Festival in the square. It was a fun community evening of food, wine and laughter.

Next morning we were first through the lock at Vianne.

It was a sad moment.

Farewell Vianne, au revoir Canal du Baise, hello the Garonne and a passing wave to Arnaud the restaurateur at Buzet.

The remaining 11km of our wonderful cruising week went far too quickly and as we crossed the picturesque viaduct to enter Agen



GATEWAY: One of the entrances to the walled town of Vianne.



ATMOSPHERE: There is history around every corner in Nerac.

our hearts were heavy. We still had one night left on board and enjoyed a meal at the Agen train station made famous by Rick Stein in his *French Odyssey*.

Our own odyssey was over but the adventure on our "petit bateau" will live with us forever.

It was a glorious week in which we didn't travel far, or fast, and that made it such a wonderful experience. It gave us time to absorb the delights of Aquitaine and there are plenty of those.

Au revoir Aquitaine, nous reviendrons.

■ Richard Moore booked his Locaboat canal holiday through Eurolynx Travel in Auckland. eurolynx.co.nz.