

Paradise Found



Steve leapt ashore at the first lock not long after leaving Joigny. We had rehearsed our lock tactics and had it sussed! Yeah right! The gates were still closed and I had the big Penichette 1500 slightly crossed up. A little premature and probably too fast, but with a touch on the bowthuster we were back on track and ready to enter the lock.





THE PENICHETTE 1500FB IS A BIG BOAT AND IDEAL FOR FOUR COUPLES.



WE DID ALL OUR DRIVING AND SPENT MOST OF THE DAY ON THE FLYBRIDGE.



ONE OF THE PRETTIER LOCKS ON THE NIVERNAIS CANAL.



ONE OF THE FEW DOUBLE LOCKS WE ENCOUNTERED, WHICH HAS A RISE/FALL OF MORE THAN 6M.

A little bouncing off the solid stonewalls and learning by trial and error as to just how far you need to go in when there is another boat or two in with you is simple. Go in until you almost nudge the boat in front (or the lock) and back off a few metres. With our two 'lines men' Hec on the bow and Jim at the stern we had the bollards lassoed (after more than one attempt!) and waited in anticipation as the lockmaster closed the gates behind us.

The surge of the incoming water pushed the boat around and the lines strained to hold us from going fore and aft. Moments later the convulsions subsided and the boats were gently lifted the 2m to 3m to the next level. Steve offered his 'experienced' help (he'd read the Locaboat manual on locks on the flight from Auckland!) to open the gates. About 15 minutes later we were on our way and cruising peacefully along at 8 km/h now quite confident that the second lock would be a breeze.

"One down, 66 to go", said Steve.

We had started our week-long cruise with Locaboat from its head office at Joigny, 150km

SE of Paris. The plan was to follow one of its one-way trips from Joigny to Corbigny by way of the Canal du Nivernais. Originally conceived by Henri IV, the canal was finally built between 1783 and 1842, and boasts some of the most glorious scenery on the French waterways. It has an interesting history that follows you as you cruise at an extremely sedate and relaxing pace.

The idea of the canal was to link the Loire and the Seine alongside the Yonne River and for many years the project remained little more than an idea until the need to supply Paris with firewood added urgency to the scheme.

By the end of the 18th century the floating of timber from the Morvan region of Burgundy had become quite developed but it proved unequal to the task of meeting the increasing demands of the capital. Alternative routes were chosen and work on what was to become the Nivernais Canal got underway in 1784. Over the next few decades the commercial traffic on the canal rose and fell and by the early 1900s was only used by a scant few local companies.

The need to provide the citizens of Paris with firewood that had given birth to the canal had long since disappeared and the Nivernais Canal looked doomed to decay and be forgotten.

That was until the 1970s when it received a new lease of life when tourists attracted by its unusual conception and excellent workmanship as well as by the beautiful countryside began to see the canal as a means of escaping the stress and strains of modern living. Today the canal is generally acknowledged to be one of the most beautiful to be found anywhere in Europe and is used commercially by a number of recreational canal barging companies.

The canal represents a man-made construction that is steadily reverting to the natural state. The land crossed by the canal has been tamed and the landscape reshaped. There are constant reminders of this fact in the shape of the bridges, locks and lock-keepers' houses, and in the trees lining the canal.

Everywhere there are signs of the ambitious nature of the project, planned down to the smallest detail: water conduits, locks, pools,



THE TEAM PREPARE TO REBOARD THE BOAT AFTER AN EXTENSIVE BIKE RIDE ALONGSIDE THE CANAL.



YOU CAN STOP VIRTUALLY ANYWHERE.

etc provide proof that the canal today still functions as a veritable network.

Locaboat Luxury

One of Europe's largest canal barge operators is Locaboat Holidays, which for nearly 30 years has been designing, building and updating the famous Penichette range of boats. With more than 400 Penichettes (the often used generic name for canal and river boats) now cruising the waterways of Europe, there is a wide range of models from which to choose to suit your particular requirements.

As I had my wife and three other couples along for the trip, we needed a big boat and wanted something open so we could enjoy the hot French summer. The company offers three models: the Classic, with a traditional closed-in central helm, the Aft-Deck with its spacious cockpit and the Flying Bridge, the latest and most luxurious design with great indoor and outdoor living spaces.

Our choice was for a Flying Bridge and with four couples we went straight for the four-cabin, four-ensuite, Penichette 1500FB. This is the biggest of the Flying Bridge models at 14.93m overall. The slightly smaller 1400FB is also a good four-cabin option, although one cabin is restricted with two single berths and the smaller 1180FB is a new model in the range that is suited to three couples.

For those with a bent for the technical aspects, the 1500FB is an all-fibreglass boat, built in Brittany by Locaboat Plaisance. It is 14.93m x 3.90m, has a draft of 0.85m and a displacement of 13500kg. With a 548-litre fuel tank, feeding a 37kW, four-cylinder Nanni diesel, the 1500FB returns an average fuel consumption of just 4.8 litres per hour. After seven days and 146km our fuel bill was \$NZ400.

Barging with Penichette in France gave us the opportunity to explore many different regions of France, from the Midi and Camargue in the South to Lorraine Alsace in the North. On the brochure they all looked great, but after some discussion with the 'team' as well as friends who had already experienced the delights of

canal barging in Europe, we chose the one-week, one-way Joigny to Corbigny cruise. You have the choice of out-and-back or one-way cruises from one week to the great circle cruise over three weeks.

Our journey was to start at the small village of Joigny and end 146km, 67 locks and seven days later at Corbigny. This region, we were informed, was steeped in historical and cultural heritage where religious monuments, chateaux and historic towns follow each other in quick succession. They were not wrong. From the minute we left the Locaboat marina at Joigny, the holy site of French gastronomy, and entered our first lock we knew we were going to enjoy what lay ahead. Nestled under the vineyards of the Cote St Jacques, Joigny is a great starting point and leads into the wide open and gentle winding valley of the Yonne. You pass Villeneuve-sur-Yonne, founded in the 12th century by Louis VII as a royal residence and to Sens, with its 16th century half-timbered houses and the cathedral of St Etienne.

The first night was spent at the Joigny Locaboat marina, which gave the crew the chance to provision for the trip. While Locaboat will happily do that for you, we decided to do the shopping ourselves and it was the right choice. Wandering around a French supermarket was not unlike those back home and a lot of fun was had trying to work out what we needed for the journey. While the boat had an extra large fridge there was no freezer, so meat was kept to a minimum. This gave us the opportunity to eat out!

Day One was a 30km cruise to Auxerre, a town that owes its prosperity over the years to the vineyards of Chablis and the Auxerrois. This romantic city is regarded as one of France's most attractive towns and after a very interesting first day we tied up at Port de plaisance, the town marina. We had been spoiled at our first few locks that put us into the Nivernais Canal, as they were large and mostly automatic. You didn't really need to get off the boat. However, soon after we found the real 'working' locks for which France is so well

known. Here you are expected to assist the lock keepers open and close the gates of the manual locks – and it's fun. It's all very much part of the French canal system experience and that's what makes the trip so enjoyable.

While our first lock was daunting, by the end of the day and 11 locks later we were seasoned experts!

Locaboat's people provide you with a suggested itinerary for the trip and we found if we stuck roughly to their plan then we made enough distance each day to cover the week and finish as scheduled. Actual running times varied from 3 hours to 6 hours a day and they proved perfect, with our destinations reached early afternoon or sooner. This allowed us time to explore the ancient towns, check out the local vineyards or head off on the bikes to explore the countryside.

Day Two was the biggie for locks, with 16 over a 29km stretch. At Bailly, we visited the very famous cellar of the Caves de Bailly. Here is produced Cremant de Bourgogne which is compared with some Champagnes. Once past the vineyards of Vincelottes, the landscape after Crevant changed from green pastures to fields of sunflowers.

Steve our "lock bitch" worked hard all day and certainly deserved his camembert and glass of Chablis as we all relaxed on the upper deck of the boat, moored at the small village of Mailly La Ville, while the sun set gently behind the rolling hills. That evening, we checked out some of the local cuisine at a small restaurant in the village and found the bakery to get our supply of baguettes in the morning. If there is one thing the French do really well it is baking baguettes.

Above the Yonne Valley perched upon a chalky cliff is Mailly le Chateau with magnificent views from terraces of the castle. It's well worth the walk up the steep path to the castle.

Day Three was the shortest distance of only 14km and 4 locks, which we got out of the way before lunch. On the way we passed Le Saussois. A chalk rock face that towers 50m above the river bank of the river Yonne. It is



STONE BRIDGES NEAR CORBIGNY.



ONE OF THE FEW REMAINING WOODEN LIFT-UP BRIDGES IN FRANCE.

a favourite place for would-be mountaineers to train. Locks in France open from 9.00 am to 12 noon and from 1.00pm to 6.00pm, so if you arrive outside these times you have to wait. We were one lock short of making Chatel Censor by the 12 noon cut-off. No problem, a couple of steel pitons in the bank and we stopped for lunch. That's the great thing about barging in France – you can stop and moor up just about

anywhere and it doesn't cost you anything. For the afternoon and overnight we had the luxury of mooring in a small marina beside the village. Again the bikes were unloaded off the foredeck and it was time to explore. Chatel Censor is another 15th century village dominated by an ancient church and surrounded by 17th and 18th century buildings. And of course the very necessary bakery for our daily

six-pack of baguettes, just a short bike ride from the marina. Day Four, from Chatel Censor to Clamecy covered 18km and 10 locks plus one lift-up bridge. By now we were experts at the locks. The deckies, Hec and Jim were lassoing the bollards with more accuracy and Steve had just about sorted out all the right French words to have a conversation with the lock-keepers.



SOME OF THE LOCKS WOULD ONLY JUST TAKE TWO LARGE BOATS.



LATE AFTERNOON AROUND CREVANT.

Although I wasn't sure at first, and being a devoted petrol head, I actually warmed to skippering the boat at the slow pace that was forced upon us and as the hours slipped by you could not help but relax and enjoy the ever changing countryside.

Clamecy, once the capital of log floating, still retains the imposing quays from where immense rafts of firewood destined to heat the houses of Paris left on their journey down the river. Today the only logs you see are along the shoreline, but for now it's all about mooring up in the town basin and enjoying the old world charm of another beautiful French town. It's a great town in the summer and very popular with tourists and while there is a reasonably large marina, spaces can be very hard to find at the height of the season.

We checked out another local restaurant where andouillette (chitterling sausage) and Les Trois Oeufs En Meurette (three boiled eggs in mushrooms and red wine) were specialties. Lovers of good food will really enjoy this area of France, where every meal can be a whole new food experience.

Day Five saw us again cover around 18km and 11 locks, to the very small village of Monceaux Le Comte. The schedule had us going only to Tannay, but we had spoken to a fellow bargee who informed us of a great restaurant there, three more locks and two more lift-up bridges past Tannay. Unfortunately, when we arrived and tried to make a booking they were fully booked. As it happened we found another quaint local eatery around the corner and like all the other village restaurants it too proved a gastronomic delight.

Before arriving at lock #34 at Dirol, we had

to open one of the rare surviving wooden drawbridges in France.

We spent the night moored alongside the river and although we missed Tannay we were able to sample some of the local dry white wine from the region.

Day Six The last day on the river was a 17km journey from Monceaux Le Comte to our final destination at the Locaboat base at Corbigny, some 10 locks further down the river. We passed the small market town of Chitry Les Mines which owes its name to silver lodes that were worked in the Renaissance time. The scenery changes from fields of sunflowers and paddocks of Charolais cattle, to forests, lofty medieval homes, castles and churches. Along the final few kilometres a series of low stone bridges added a surreal touch in the late afternoon sun, a perfect end to an awesome journey.

Corbigny is a few kilometres away from the Locaboat base on the river, so the final night was spent aboard, reminiscing on the past week and feeling a little low as we knew the following day it was back to Paris and the long flight home to New Zealand.

Observations

The Penichette boats are extremely easy to drive even for a novice. Their low speed and a bow thruster means you can't really get into too much trouble and they come well equipped with massive rubber fenders and beltings. Great for hitting the side of tight locks!

The 1500FB proved ideal for four couples and if you are hiring a boat then try and get one that offers an individual cabin for each couple. Also Kiwis and Aussies will like the flybridge version

that means you can drive the boat outside and not be confined to an internal helm. We spend most of the time on the flybridge and in fact I never once drove the boat from the inside helm.

Don't be afraid of the locks, as they are surprisingly easy once you have been through a few, and the lock keepers don't mind help.

Whilst you may think there is nothing immediately striking about a slow-moving water system spread over 180km, think again. There is a romantic, nostalgic atmosphere which makes the Nivernais Canal a very special place and it is unquestionably one of the finest barging trips you can do in France, if not Europe. I'll certainly be back to barge the next stage of the canal as I feel I have some unfinished business I need to complete.

PNY