

Canal Barging

「REVISITED」

BARRY THOMPSON GOES BACK TO FRANCE TO SAVOUR THE DELIGHTS OF CANAL BARGING AGAIN AND FOUND QUITE A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE THAN HIS FIRST VISIT TEN YEARS AGO.



BARRY THOMPSON FLEW ON

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The team, Helen Briant, Claire Archer, Sherry Hare, Soraja Thompson, myself, Jim Hare, Steve Briant and Ross Archer.



Proudly flying the Kiwi pennant.



The Locaboat Penichette FB1500 proved the perfect boat for four couples.

Ten years ago a group of eight of us from Auckland went to France for our first canal experience. A week-long trip on the Canal du Nivernais, south-west of Paris proved to be a tempting taster and at the end of the week, we all decided to go back and do it again.

While it took a lot longer than we anticipated to get back, it was worth the wait. This time we decided to go for two weeks and tackle the most impressive of all the French canal systems in the Ardennes and Alsace Lorraine. Starting at Lutzelbourg, a small village 35 mins by train from Strasbourg, the two-week trip was to take us into Luxembourg and Germany and would see us cover 454 km, comprising 78 locks, two tunnels and a boat lift. Well as it turned out that wasn't quite what happened!

BOATING PROTOCOL – YEAH RIGHT

After a morning loading up with wine, beer and enough food to last 4-5 days we headed off from Lutzelbourg to tackle our first three locks on the way to the Arzwiller lift. Unlike our last trip the locks were fully automated, so all we had to do was arrive and wait for the light to turn green to enter the lock. A quick pull down on the blue bar and that was enough to signal the gates to close and the lock to fill. Quick and efficient and also very easy.

Lock one and two were seamless but after getting passed on the way to lock three by a boat that was obviously exceeding the 4-knot speed limit, we got shut out of lock three by the

arrogant Germans on the boat ahead. Protocol on the canals calls for anyone in a lock to allow space and even wait for another boat if they are close. Not so the Germans! Needless to say, there were some words spoken and after having to then wait for another 30 mins, we finally cleared the last lock and headed to the base of the lift where we intended to spend the night.

Drizzling rain meant our planned bbq didn't happen, so we spent the rest of the evening playing cards and cracking into the first of our wine and champagne. Good first day but I need to master the bow thruster as I managed to switch it the wrong way at a few critical moments when coming into the lock. Had one moment with a slight nudge at the start of the lock but no damage, (that came later) apart from my pride.

Tomorrow we take in the incredible Arzwiller Lift and then go through two tunnels before we reach the village of Hesse.

ENGINEERING MASTERPIECE

The Arzwiller is another masterpiece of French engineering they call an incline plane, which takes your boat up 45m and eliminates 17 locks over 3.6km, a journey that could take up to 10 hours due to canal traffic and difficulties with waiting between locks.

While the Arzwiller lift could have taken three boats of our size, we were on our own. The views are spectacular and the ride up was smooth and entirely different to anything I have done before. Got to



On this part of the French canal system the locks are all automated and most of the lock keepers houses deserted.

be one of the highlights of the trip. The Arzwiller tunnel which follows soon after the lift was another exciting experience with 2306m in a straight line in an eerie blackness as you head towards the light at the end of the tunnel. A few orange lights help to guide you and while it's not easy to see the edge of the tunnel, the substantial rubber beltings around the barge certainly came in handy. Next came the Niderviller tunnel that is only 475m and then a pleasant cruise through the countryside with no locks to slow us down. We decided to stop at the

small village of Hesse for fresh baguettes and lunch. There is nothing as good as a french baguette...soft inside with a crisp shell. To die for! After a very French lunch of bread, cheese and ham plus a glass or two of Rose, we headed towards our next big run of 12 locks, starting with the imposing Rechicourt lock. This impressive lock replaces six old locks and is a towering 16m high, the biggest in France. Some of our team opted to walk down to the base rather than experience the considerable drop. Whether going upstream or downstream,

the lock takes about 30 mins and apart from the height of the lock is not much different to all the other locks on our trip. We did have a moment of panic when it was our turn to enter and the engine wouldn't start. Panic! As the guys towed the boat into the lock by hand, I finally managed to get the little Nanni diesel to fire. We never turned it off till we got through all the rest of the locks and stopped at Lagarde for the night. Moment of panic number two came when Ross happened to look over the side to see we were trailing half of our port side belting. I had come in a



A ruined castle looks imposingly over the Locaboat base at Lutzelbourg



The 2306m Arzwiller and the 475m Niderviller tunnels were an interesting experience.



You can stop virtually anywhere on the canals and there are bike/walking tracks alongside.

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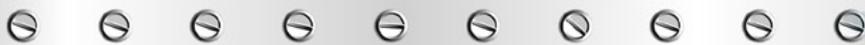
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The Arzwiller is another masterpiece of French engineering they call an incline plane, which takes your boat up 45m.

little askew on one lock and ripped the belting off. However, with a great effort from Ross, Steve and Jim they had the belting back on and we continued on. Amazing what you can do with a big hammer, rope and some Kiwi ingenuity. At the end of this big day, when we had taken on the highest incline lift, longest tunnel and deepest lift on all French canals and been on the river for 7 hours, we stopped at Lagarde for the night. Another quaint village with a small

marina, so we could fill the water tanks and benefit from shore power. Mind you that wasn't much help as we had lost the shore power lead overboard the previous day.

HISTORICAL NANCY

We got away from Lagarde late morning after doing the washing, picking up a new power lead and having a chat with a Belgium couple that had built their own 30m barge. Living the lifestyle and

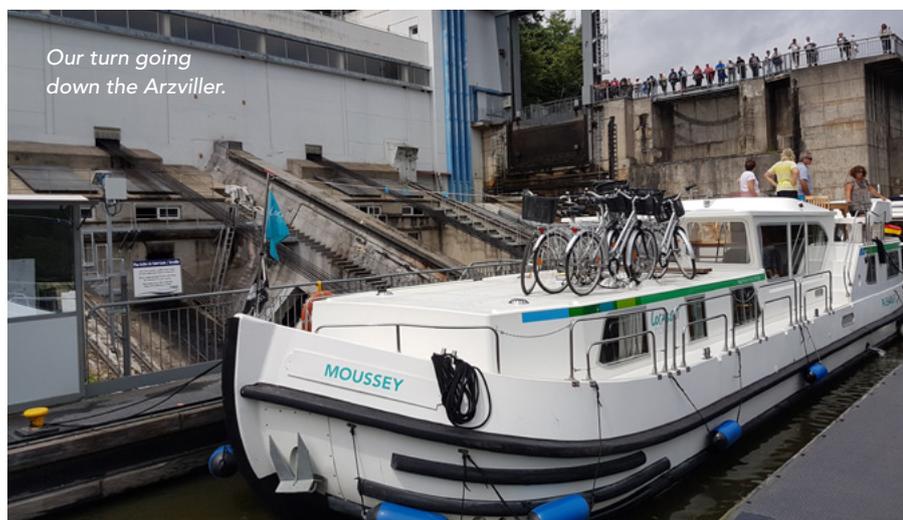
exploring at their own pace. Barge even had a Fiat 500 in a forward garage.

Our first stop was the quaint village of Einville au jard where we went looking for a bakery, but by the time we arrived, it was closed. After a quick look around the village, it was back to the canal and onto our next overnight stop. This proved a bit of a decision as the first three spots we chose just didn't look good enough, too industrial and one even had a salt factory alongside. Eventually, we stopped at Laneuveville devant Nancy, which was right beside the next lock.

That evening we brought out the bbq and spent a pleasant evening on the top deck, eating and drinking until the sun went down. My bottle of Aberlour single malt took a hammering, so planned to get another bottle at the next supermarket run.

Day four saw us make a short trip and only did two locks before mooring in the St Georges marina in the centre of Nancy.

While parked up we had our first indication that our planned big loop up through Luxembourg and Germany may be in doubt. On the German side, there were some lock repairs being done and





Lunch was a delight with baguettes, ham and cheese.



I had to sack myself as skipper after knocking off the rubber belting....three times!

they didn't look like reopening it until well after our deadline to pass. There was also a lock closed on the Moselle, but that was due to open in a few days, so we decided to stay on the river and head for Toul. This meant a slight backtrack and then taking on the 20 lock Embranchement de Nancy, which goes up and over a hill to connect with the Moselle River. Even though we got the green light on all the locks, it still took nearly 3 hours to get through the initial block of 10, end to end. After doing the enormous commercial lock at Neuves-

Maisons we went a few kilometres further on to the small village of Maron.

THE BIG LOOP

It was now day six, so we got away early as we had some ground to make up if we were able to still make the big loop through Luxembourg and Germany. However, a text from the Locaboat base arrived saying that while the Moselle was now open, the blockage at Saarbrücken, Germany was going to be closed for a while yet, so that put an end to our loop journey.

After stopping at Toul so the team could take a tour of the old walled city and the magnificent Cathedral Saint Etienne, we pressed on to Pont-A-Mousson, which took about 5 hours and only 8 locks. On the way to Pont-a-Mousson, we had to spend time in the big commercial locks. These are over 160m long and 12m wide, which is a change from our standard 38m x 5m locks on the canals. When you are the only boat in there, you feel quite small.

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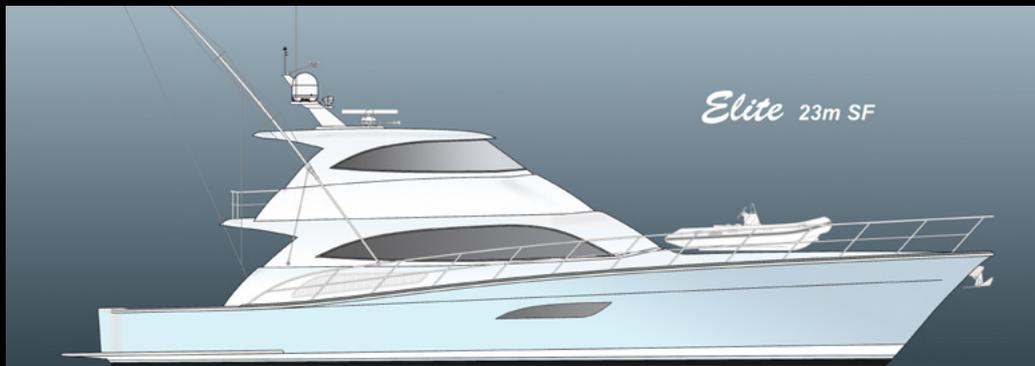
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TURNING BACK

With 100% confirmation that the Saar was closed at the top of the loop, we headed to Metz for a look at this ancient and historic city. It was a four-hour trip, as again we had some huge locks to contend with. We were also running into some big commercial barges and as they have the right of way into the locks were forced to wait a while till they got in.

Metz was amazing with plenty of history and culture. We took a guided trip on a small road train around the city as quickest and most informative way to learn about the place. After we stocked up the grocery list and checked out the local beer, we were back on the boat and set course for Pont A Mousson. Now about midway through the trip and we had punched up 43 hours of motoring, although as we didn't turn the engine off in the locks that was probably really less than 40 hours.

With the scenery constantly changing as we cruised along at 4 knots, the hours seemed to roll by as there was always something to look at and plenty of locks to work. What was great, was we were heading back into the narrow canal system, so no more commercial locks, wide rivers and commercial scenery.

Day eight loomed as another scorcher. We headed back to Nancy and onto our overnight stop Einville-au-Jard, where we had water, power and electricity. However once again I managed to knock the belting off and we spent an hour putting it back on. I was starting to doubt my ability to drive, so I relegated myself onto lock duties for a while and let the other guys do the driving.

TIGHT SQUEEZE

We were still having some engine starting issues so headed to Lagarde where we met the Locaboat mechanic who got things sorted and we were soon on our way. We did about eight locks and then once again the 15m de Rechicourt lock, which was really different being empty, as we entered it from the bottom. With three big boats jammed in and us at the back, we had less than a ½ a meter behind us in the 40m long lock. Again we had trouble from some Germans in their own boat, who kept trying to get us to go back off their transom. As we had no room aft, it was a bit of a yelling match in German and English, but I think we won! The Germans pulled over for the night straight after leaving the lock, so we had a free run through to our next stop at Houilleres where there was a small marina with power and water. Also a chance for a swim in the lake alongside which was bloody awful, but refreshing.

By the time we left Houilleres in mid-morning the weather had turned, with temps in the low 20s with cloudy skies. One day we were complaining it was too hot and another a little chilly. Can't seem to satisfy the team. By evening and ten locks later we reached Altwiller on the Sarre canal which is the start of the loop we were going to do, but because of the block in Germany were not able. We had booked a restaurant recommended by Locaboat, right on the side of the canal for the evening and it was stunning.

Called L'Ecluse 16, because it is right by lock 16 was Michelin star quality and also priced accordingly. As we pulled alongside the bank, I jumped onto the grass and as I landed, I pulled a calf muscle. Thanks to "Nurse" Clair and Soraja I was soon rubbed, wrapped and resting.

In the morning we left our berth on the side of the river right outside the restaurant and heading back down the Saare and through the locks again, We stopped at the village of Mittersheim and topped up with water and the team took a cycle trip around the local area. Not a lot to see but made

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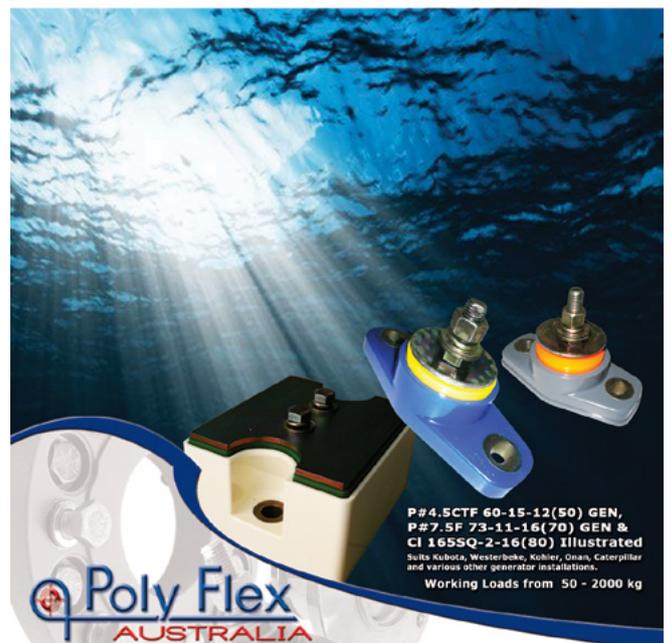
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Dense forest comes right down to the canal in some areas.

OBSERVATIONS

Observations of the trip are it was probably a bit long, ten days would have been better. We had mixed weather but generally hot and sunny. I would not bother doing the big rivers again but stick to the narrow canals which offer much better scenery and villages and more fun in the small locks.

It was fortunate we took out the total insurance package as the loss of the belting could have cost us our 2000! As it was there were no extra charges, so my advice is pay for the insurance and have peace of mind before you start. It's surprising what can go wrong.

While the Penichette 1500 FB we had was ideal for our team of four couples, each with a separate cabin and en-suite, Locaboat has a wide range of boats suitable for 2 to 12 people.

We covered about 450 km in the end and did close to 150 locks, which was twice what we expected. I would call this a technical trip, whereas the last one we did on the Nivernais Canal was more tranquil and somewhat more relaxing. The locks were more fun as they were manually operated, but they were not a problem. The Nivernais Canal would be a perfect choice if it is your first barging experience.

Would I go back. Yes definitely and would like to do the next trip in Southern France, where there is a lot of natural beauty to see. This trip was good for the historic cities and towns like Toul, Metz and Saverne and we all agreed that the smaller villages were also worth visiting. ☺

a pleasant break before back into the locks. Further on we moored at a small marina on the river as we had heard about a lakeside restaurant on a lake Etang du Stock called Les Paquis.

The restaurant was a little inland, so the owners sent their delivery van to pick us up. With six of us sitting in the back on bread boxes, with no windows and in total darkness, it felt like we were in some action movie being whisked away to a secret location.

With only three days left before we had to return the boat to Lutzelbourg, we made plans to get to the tunnel and the lift and through to Lutzelbourg and spend the night. Took five mins to get through the first tunnel and 20 mins for the second one and then it was straight onto the lift. No waiting which was great. However, we had to wait at the first lock after the lift for a tourist boat to go through and then back which took nearly an hour. Stopped at Lutzelbourg for the night

and refuelled in the morning before heading into Saverne for the night.

SACK THE SKIPPER

After stopping at Lutzelbourg for the night, we refuelled and headed to Saverne, along some of the most beautiful tree-lined canals we have had so far. As it was Bastille Day, we were unable to moor in the centre of town, but we still got close enough to experience a magnificent fireworks display. The French really know how to party and celebrate their biggest day of the year. Only downside was I once again managed to dislodge the belting in a lock, this time the whole lot and lost it all. Made some temporary repairs with a bunch of fenders and carried on. Needless to say, I was banned from driving!

It was only a 9 km, ten lock trip back to Lutzelbourg in the morning where we tied the boat up and gave it back to the Locaboat base.

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