



Barging the Midi Canal

A Must-Take Vacation

Southern France: a countryside of vineyards, rolling lavender fields, crumbling and damp stone castles, and a winding canal shielded by rows of towering oaks on both banks. Barging down the Midi Canal is not an ordinary waterside vacation. In fact, it was somewhere between the steaming pot of cassoulet served to me at a classy hotel restaurant and the warm, flaky croissant I ate each morning for breakfast that I realized this was an inexpensive way to experience one of the most extraordinary water vacations out there.

Early in May of this year, my husband and I rented a barge with his parents, brother, and sister-in-law. Our four-bedroom, three bathroom boat was \$4,500 for the entire week, which becomes relatively inexpensive when divided between three or four couples. The barge took us from the charming, old-world town of Castlenaudry, 157 km down the stunningly beautiful Canal du Midi all the way to Port Cassafieres and the shores of the sparkling Mediterranean. We traveled through sixty-four locks, designed to raise or lower the boats and prevent the canal from running too steep, at a maximum speed of only two kilometers per hour. There was something incredibly peaceful about the steady hum of the boat's engine, the dappled shade drifting over the boat, and the quiet lapping of the canal against the wildflower banks.

The smiles of the French lock-workers, and the soft-spoken "Bonjour!" and wave from fishermen on the banks of the canal spoke that this was a place where a person was to slow down and enjoy the beauty around them. Around every bend in the canal I found a new made-for-the-movies landscape: crumbling stucco mansions with red-tiled roofs and bright blue shutters overlooked rolling vineyards; meandering bike paths and rusting iron gates; draping willow trees and soft, new grass. In a way that cannot be found at a bustling beachside resort anywhere in the world, the Midi Canal whispers serenity and contentment in the calm traditions of life in the French countryside.

Each night, we would tie off along the bank as darkness fell, gather around the table in the galley, and play card games by candlelight. Our laughter fell upon the silent countryside as mothers and ducklings swam lazily past our windows.

During the daytime we stopped now and then in picturesque villages to wander the streets and explore musty Medieval Cathedrals, their stone walls smeared with century-old candle smoke. We hiked to crumbling castles that

overlooked valleys of vineyards and winding dirt roads. We bought handmade table linens from old, smiling Frenchwomen and admired colorful fruits and flowers sold in roadside stands. We ate at a variety of restaurants; some were lavish and bustling, some were merely a quiet kitchen set off of someone's home.

The French take great pride in their gastronomie, or culinary traditions. Barging the Midi Canal took us from delicate pastries, chocolate bread, flavorful cheeses, and crème brulee to unusual sausages, raw ham platters, and gizzard salads. Each dining experience was an adventure full of French/English dictionaries, hand gestures, a little laughter, lots of guessing, and finally eating (or simply picking at) whatever dish we managed to order with our miniscule French vocabulary. At a restaurant inside of the ancient castle Carcassonne, I ate the most incredible lasagna I have ever, and most likely will ever, taste. The foods of the Midi Canal supplied sufficient excitement and pleasure for three or four vacations.

But it wasn't just the food or the language barrier that was exciting about this vacation. There was something thrilling about being in a place where the Wal-Mart lifestyle has yet to reach. Whether we were sampling delicate cheeses, biking alongside the canal, exploring medieval cathedrals, or dipping our feet in the Mediterranean, our vacation barging the Midi Canal was the perfect combination of relaxation and adventure.

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