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Get the drift

Life slows to a pleasant snail's pace when travelling by barge along pretty French canals, writes **Garry Marchant**

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FOR an entire leisurely week, the only decision we have to make is whether to dine on deck or in the wood-panelled dining room with its picture windows overlooking the passing scene. And the weather is the deciding factor.

Life aboard a luxury barge slowly drifting down the Canal du Midi in the southwest of France is a most congenial, hassle-free way to explore the countryside. Boating along Europe's extensive river and canal system is like ocean cruising, without the seasickness, and with always something to see, not just endless expanses of water.

Canal boating is so popular on the inland waterways crisscrossing Europe, there is a wide choice of vessels. In summer, boats lining up to go through the locks range from little two-passenger power cruisers to large, luxury "hotel barges" sleeping up to a dozen people.

The Canal du Midi in France's Languedoc area, an especially attractive waterway, appeals to me for its scenic as well as historic attractions. So, on a sunny summer afternoon, I board the 30m, 180-tonne Athos moored alongside the canal in Castelnaudary, about an hour's drive from the medieval walled city of Carcassonne. The largest vessel able to pass through the locks, it is also among the most luxurious.

With five twin and one double cabin, each with its own shower and toilet, but only six passengers on this week's cruise, there is plenty of room.

Cabins are small but well laid out and comfortable, and there is ample space in the dining room cum lounge and on the sun deck, with its lounging chairs and umbrellas.

The crew, captain-pilot Julian Farrant, New Zealand chef Rob, guide-tour director Dannielle Belsham and hostesses Claire and Julie, pamper us without being obtrusive.

The cruise starts amiably enough with a champagne welcome on deck the first evening. Dannielle explains that the canal was built as part of an inland waterway linking the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. This 240km section, opened in 1681 to connect Toulouse to the Thau lagoon on the Mediterranean, is Europe's oldest functioning canal and a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Next morning, we breakfast on coffee and freshly baked croissants while proceeding at a leisurely pace. The Athos makes fewer than 15km a day, which seems just about right when passengers settle into the pace.

River and canal travel is not for the hyperactive. You have to slow right down, to relax, literally go with the flow, and savour the river, so picturesque in places it seems more like artwork than reality.

Under blue skies dappled with a few puffy clouds, we drift down the aquatic highway at a bicycle pace, through farm and forest and past picture-perfect villages. Tall, leafy plane trees planted to provide shade for the canal and tow path line most of the way. And we drift past fields of golden sunflowers as if immersed in a van Gogh canvas.

Passing through the lock provides a flurry of excitement. The hostess jumps ashore,

exchanges pleasantries with the lock-keeper and ties the barge line to a bollard. The previous locks close behind us and, with a sort of swooshing sound, water pours out of (or into) the new lock, raising or lowering the boat to the right level. The lock gates reopen at the other end, our hostess jumps back aboard and the Athos continues on its way.

Fine dining is a highlight of travelling aboard this floating gourmet restaurant. Working in a tiny galley, Rob creates fine fare, with a new culinary treat every night, usually featuring local produce. One day we start with roasted Provencal vegetables topped with mozzarella, another with goat's cheese souffle in a herb broth. Main courses include chicken stuffed with herbs, pork filet with mushroom risotto and duck breast with a calvados and cider sauce served with mashed potatoes.

One evening we tie up far from any village, the crew builds a fire on shore and cooks a good old-fashioned barbecue. On the last night, during the captain's dinner, we sit long into the night under a starry sky chatting with the crew. Food is a serious pleasure in France, so during each dinner our hostess explains the accompanying regional wines and cheeses.

Travelling at this brisk-walk pace, we get ample time to explore the countryside and villages. Every day, Dannielle (I call her the concierge du bateau) takes us on a different excursion in the company van.

At an ancient pottery workshop, we watch the friendly potters still operating the wheels by foot. The sun slants through the open windows in dusty bands, illuminating the men hunched over the wheels shaping their creations with clay-covered hands, in a scene from an earlier century.

We also visit a sheep farm to sample (and purchase) the cheeses and rich ice cream in dozens of exotic flavours such as fruits of the forest and spice cake. At a small winery, the local guide leads us through tunnels lined with huge barrels and racks of wine bottles. The tour ends at a small but well-designed museum and with the traditional tasting, ending, as always, with a visit to the shop.

In one riverine village, we visit a local market with delectable cheeses, charcuterie (cold cuts), fruits, vegetables and pots of home-made cherry jam. Later, Dannielle drives us into the hills to visit the lakes that supply the water for this canal system, an ingenious piece of ancient engineering.

The Athos moors not far from Carcassonne, which looks like something out of a fairytale. It has taken a week to cover the distance we drove in an hour.

After Dannielle's well-informed commentary, we have a few hours to wander and explore the battlements, towers and turrets, moats, drawbridges and cobbled streets lined with souvenir shops and outdoor cafes.

One morning, in a rare burst of energy, we disembark at a lock to walk along the towpath to the next one, 2km away. By walking quickly, we can keep just ahead of the boat, arriving at the next lock to rejoin it.

There are also bicycles aboard for the more energetic. Another afternoon, five passengers pedal off down a dirt road while someone else continues his wine education. Perhaps the hostess was too generous refilling glasses at the lengthy lunch.

Standing at the bridge at the back of the barge, Captain Julian steers the boat with a sure hand, manoeuvring us through narrow locks not much wider than our hull, with never a bump. Aside from the flurry of lock activity, peace reigns along the canal, far from city or highway.

The dreamy, soft spring colours, all green and yellow, skies with high horsetail clouds, ivy-covered stone farmhouse walls, the arch of green and brown moss-covered brick bridges reflected in the still water ahead would stimulate the palette of any landscape artist.

Checklist

Tours on the Athos run about once a month, starting in late March and ending early November. Cost is from \$3645 to \$4440, for two people sharing a cabin, depending on date and cruise. The price includes all meals and drinks and a full program of excursions.

www.athosdumidi.com

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