



WITH REST AND
RELAXATION ON HER MIND,
ROBERTA MUIR SLIPS ON
HER BOAT SHOES AND
FINDS A WHOLE NEW WAY
TO ENJOY FRANCE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANZ SCHEURER





ONLY does it

Earl Pilatti had sailed 180,000 nautical miles – the equivalent of circumnavigating the globe seven-and-a-half times – by the time he and his wife bought the beautiful Barge Colibri in 2004.

Earl's many years of experience skippering some of the world's largest yachts, and his wife Fiona's knack for fitting them out, left them well equipped for the task of gutting and rebuilding the 80-year-old, 27-metre long Dutch beauty.

Growing up in a family of sailors, a hotel barge on the Canal du Midi in Languedoc-Roussillon had been Fiona's childhood dream – and one at which she was willing to work hard to realise.

So, while Earl worked a final season on the Mediterranean to fund the project, Fiona laid floorboards and sourced beautiful fabrics, oak furniture and fittings to spruce up the old dame. She also installed the plumbing and air-conditioning, and carefully designed every area to maximise storage space and comfort within a confined space.

The result is perhaps one of the most beautiful boats to be cruising the iconic and centuries-old Canal du Midi.

GLORY DAYS

In its day, the Canal du Midi was a revolutionary development.

Combined with the Canal de Garonne, it enabled the French to transport goods all the way from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, without having to go around Spain or through the pirate-riddled Strait of



Clockwise from above left: The beautiful and historic Canal du Midi is a major tourist attraction; Roberta (right) and family relaxing on the barge; Fresh fare at the Narbonne markets; Slippery eels are a treat in Narbonne; Just some of the delicious fare served aboard Barge Colibri.



Clockwise from above: One of the many locks along the canal; Harry the barge hound; a life ring in case anyone goes overboard!
Below: Plane trees reflected in the water.

Gibraltar, which was controlled by the English.

Designed by Pierre-Paul Riquet, the canal is undoubtedly an engineering marvel, especially when you consider it was built between 1642 and 1681 – long before railways were invented and at a time when road transportation was limited to wooden-wheeled carts that struggled along rudimentary dirt tracks.

At 242 kilometres in length and 1.5 metres deep, the canal – which took 40 years to construct – was filled with water diverted from three purpose-built reservoirs in the nearby Black Mountains.

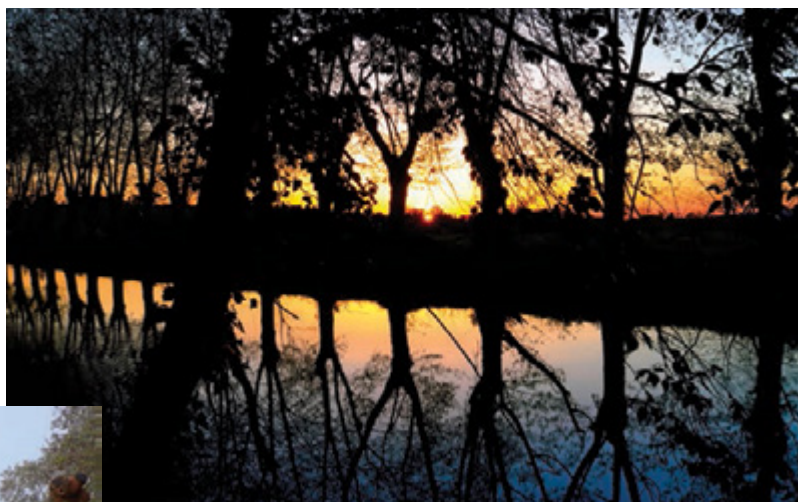
It was built with the aim of allowing people and cargo to be carried from Toulouse to Sète, on the Mediterranean coast, where the canal empties into the Etang de Thau, a salt marsh known for its exceptional oysters.

From there, they could be shipped abroad or loaded onto bigger barges and transported up the Rhône River to Paris.

Likewise, goods shipped from Sète to Toulouse were transferred to other barges and shipped up the Gironde River to Bordeaux, relieving the Bordelaise winemakers of their reliance on horse and cart and opening up the

“ONCE WE’RE MOORED FOR THE EVENING, IT’S TIME TO THINK ABOUT AN APERITIF AND ENJOY **THE BEAUTIFUL EVENING LIGHT ON THE WATER**”





Clockwise from left: One of the many mooring stations along the canal; negotiating a lock; the evening light on the water.

sale of Bordeaux wines to other French regions, as well as abroad.

While the birth of the railway in 1857 rendered the canal largely useless, it has become one of France's biggest tourist attractions, with thousands of visitors each year cruising, walking or cycling their way along the canal.

SONG OF THE HUMMINGBIRD

We board the Barge Colibri – which means “hummingbird” in French – at the town of Poilhes, about five kilometres west of Beziers. We're heading to Carcassonne – around 90 kilometres away – and it'll take us five days to get there.

It takes a day or so to slip into the languid pace of the canal, but by the second day, reclining on a deck chair and watching the vapours of jets skimming across the sky, I realise how lovely it is to be slipping along the canal at just four kilometres an hour, being overtaken by cyclists enjoying the canal-side tracks that once accommodated teams of horses pulling boats along the water.

Life on the barge is relaxed and

casual, with plenty of comfort, delicious food and local wines to be enjoyed. Earl and Fiona are masters at low-key, smooth service, always appearing with a drink, blanket or historical snippet at just the right time. Harry, their handsome barge hound, appears to take his role seriously and quietly keeps a watchful eye on the canal's goings on.

After a leisurely breakfast (Earl does an early run to the nearest village patisserie each day) the mornings are spent sightseeing – visiting vineyards, historical sites and markets. We return to the barge for a casual lunch, usually on deck, and an afternoon cruise along the canal to the evening's mooring.

We are accompanied all the while by Les Montagnes Noires to the north and, on clear days typical of the Midi, the snow-capped Pyrenees to the south.

Along most stretches of the water, the beautiful plane trees that have helped make the canal so famous splash shade over the Colibri's teak table and deck chairs.

The trees, planted hundreds of years ago, once provided shade for the horses and help prevent evaporation, while their claw-like roots reinforce the banks.

Tragically, though, an incurable fungal infection has started attacking many of the trees, necessitating their removal and seriously changing the face of the canal. It's feared that within the next 15 years, all of the original 42,000 plane trees along the canal will have to be cut down.

If you need an incentive to see the canal soon, that's as good as any, though there's certainly no shortage of “must sees” along the route.

One of them is the city of Narbonne, which was established by the Romans in 118BC on the Via Domitia, the first Roman road in Gaul, built to connect Italy and Spain. Part of the ancient road has been excavated in the old town centre, and standing on its cobbled surface evokes an incredible sense of history.

Looming above the cobblestones is Narbonne Cathedral, one of France's tallest churches, which was begun in 1272 but never completed. The choir, side chapels, sacristy and courtyard are beautifully ornate and imposing, but the original plans would have meant the demolition of the city's 5th century walls. In the end, an outbreak of the bubonic plague weakened the city to the point of postponing the building program – and it was never resumed.

Crossing over the Canal de la Robine, which links Narbonne to the Canal du Midi and Aude

River, we visit the large covered market, Les Halles de Narbonne, which has served the townspeople for over 100 years.

It's a feast for the senses, with a vast array of fruit and vegetables; cheeses of all varieties; meats (including a dedicated horse butcher); and a huge variety of seafood, including slippery eels, grotesque-looking monkfish and creamy, squishy violets (a Mediterranean shellfish that's like a cross between an oyster and a sea urchin).

Seafood is the main reason for our visit, and Earl collects the things that interest us most from the various vendors. He then presents the produce to one of the dedicated cooking stalls while we pull up some stools, pour a glass of local *chenin blanc*, and wait.

In no time at all we're presented with a huge seafood platter, a delicious combination of hot and cold fare that sates our desire for delicious local cuisine. As we exit the market, Earl collects a readymade *cassoulet* in a rustic, unglazed terracotta dish. We no longer have to worry about dinner.

THE ART OF BOATING

Afternoons spent on the canal are just as exciting as the morning land excursions, if for nothing more than learning the art of boating. One of the strangest sensations while cruising the canal is crossing one body of water whilst floating on another (in order to combat flooding, over 40 aqueduct bridges traverse the streams and rivers in the canal's path).

But perhaps the most amazing



|||||

“I REALISE HOW LOVELY IT IS TO BE SLIPPING ALONG THE CANAL AT JUST FOUR KILOMETRES AN HOUR, BEING OVERTAKEN BY CYCLISTS ENJOYING THE CANAL-SIDE TRACKS THAT ONCE ACCOMMODATED TEAMS OF HORSES PULLING BOATS ALONG THE WATER”



features of Riquet’s engineering – and the ones that provide the most problems for the do-it-yourself boaters unfamiliar with the canal and her secrets – are the 91 locks used to raise and lower boats along the length of the canal.

Watching Fiona jump ashore, hauling ropes and racing up the steps to the next level of double and triple locks, while Earl manoeuvres the Colibri into a painfully narrow space, is enough to convince me there’s a fine art to managing the locks – and in making it look easy, as Earl and Fiona do.

Once we’re moored for the evening, it’s time to think about an *aperitif* and enjoy the beautiful evening light on the water. Dinner is a more formal affair than lunch (though dress is still as casual as you like) and usually consists of four courses prepared by Fiona, served by Earl and accompanied, of course, by local wines.

A salad of rocket, caramelised pear and Roquefort; duck-mince stuffed *poisson* with beans and potatoes; and lemon and ricotta tart with raspberries is a typical menu – with different (unpasteurised) local cheeses each evening.


Fiona makes good use of seasonal produce and is happy to incorporate any delicacies from the day’s excursion into her menu – one evening, some wild asparagus we pick at a nearby winery ends up in an omelette as our entrée.

On our final night, Earl and Fiona take us to dinner at Château de Cavanac, a chateau converted into a hotel, with huge old stables turned into a lovely rustic restaurant. Estate-grown red, white and rosé wines are on every table, and *foie gras*; smoked salmon; tiny snails in a spicy, oily tomato sauce; kidneys, beef and lamb cooked over an open grill; and goats cheese drizzled with local honey are some of the highlights.

Our final mooring is Marseillette – Earl, Fiona and Harry’s home village. We wake early on our last morning to enjoy the sunrise on the canal, as well as one last leisurely breakfast. Earl then drives us into Carcassonne, adding yet another memorable excursion to our collection.

The city of Carcassonne is UNESCO World Heritage listed and is one of France’s most visited cities. Like something out of a fairytale, the history of this magnificently preserved and restored city is almost overwhelming, but wandering the cobblestones makes it easy to imagine earlier inhabitants living here during events such as the Albigensian Crusades, when the city was a stronghold of the ill-fated Occitan Cathars, or the Hundred Years’ War.

Eventually it’s time to farewell Earl and collect a rental car for the next stage of our holiday. It’s been a wonderfully comfortable and fascinating week – but best of all, we’re relaxed and revitalised.

A week on the Canal du Midi is a perfect short break in itself, but it’s also the ideal start to a longer French holiday – a chance to unwind, recover from the jetlag and find that holiday mode. 

|||||

VOULEZ-VOUS Y ALLER?

GETTING THERE: The high-speed train from Paris will get you comfortably to Beziers in around four hours.

CONTACT DETAILS: www.bargecolibri.com;
Phone: +33 (0)675 330 949