



"Of all the methods of travelling I have ever tried, this is the pleasantest."
Thomas Jefferson, Canal du Midi - 1787

Lost in France

Richard Hill samples a luxury hotel boat cruise along France's Canal du Midi.

SIX DAYS aboard a luxury hotel barge on the Canal du Midi is unquestionably expensive. But it's a unique holiday, especially for that exceptional occasion in life. It is the finest way to luxuriate in and cherish the culture, cuisine and customs of France along one of the world's most fascinating and extraordinary inland waterways.

This celebration commemorates twenty five years since the waterways writer LTC Rolt wrote *From Sea to Sea*, an account of the history and architecture of the Canal du Midi.

From the port of Sete to the city of Toulouse, the Canal du Midi is 240km in length containing 65 locks. Construction began in 1667. In his book, Rolt quotes the Royal decree signed by Louis XIV in October 1666 ordering that: "the construction proceed without delay of a canal for navigation and communication between the two seas, ocean and Mediterranean".

The canal was designed by, and built under the supervision of Pierre-Paul Riquet. Born in 1604, Riquet was over 60 years old when construction began, and died shortly before completion. Constructing the canal was an immense scheme involving over 12,000 workers. It contains some of the most splendid canal structures in the world. The canal was officially opened on 15th May 1681.

Today, one of the hotel boats cruising the Canal du Midi is the *Anjodi*. She is a 98-foot long converted Dutch barge that spent much of her early existence transporting merchandise along Holland's trading canals. In 1997 the vessel was thoroughly renovated

and fully air-conditioned. *Anjodi* carries eight guests and four crew. Routes may vary according to conditions and guests requests. The canal between Agde and Carcassone embraces most of the remarkable engineering architecture of the entire canal. On this cruise our journey begins at Agde, a port on the estuary of the Herault on the Mediterranean.

Agde is a city abundant in antiquity and culture. The Greeks founded it 25 centuries ago, at the foot of an old volcano. Several of its historic monuments are built out of black volcanic rock. The most striking of these is perhaps the riverside church. This and many other black buildings gave rise to Agde becoming known as the 'Black pearl of the Mediterranean'.

At Agde is the extraordinary *Écluse ronde d'Agde*, a three entranced round lock. The lock separates the canal from the two levels (above and below a weir) of the river *Herault*. For vessels travelling straight through the lock, the water level has to be raised or lowered depending on the height of the *Herault*. For this reason, one entrance to the lock has two sets of gates, mitred and opening in opposite directions. Boats travelling toward or from

Agde must swing through 90 degrees to align with the canal. Portions of arc of the lock have been extended, so that it is no longer a proper circle. Nevertheless, it remains, as Rolt described it in 1973; "an outstanding example of the boundless ingenuity of Riquet and his engineers."

"Beyond the little canal port of Agde, just past the round lock," wrote Rolt, "there is little to remark, the canal traversing a dreary tract of marshland close to the coastline of the Mediterranean until, at the end of a long straight, the voyager sees ahead of him a forbidding array of steel girders and menacing guillotine sluice gates spanning the canal."

This is the *Ouvrages du Libron*, the Libron crossing. Generally the Libron is little more than a stream. But on up to 20 times a year it is inclined to serious flash floods. Originally, Riquet built an ingenious floatable 'trough' to bridge the Libron. This was a barge that generally extended over the Libron, but during flood was floated away and moored in the canal to allow the flood to pass by. This was replaced in 1855 by an equally clever and complex construction of chains and chambers, which is used to divert the floodwaters while still permitting normal navigation along the canal. Here the canal passes under a succes-



TOP: The bows and anchor of our boat, *Anjodi*.

RIGHT: *Anjodi* moored in picturesque countryside near the town of Portiragnes.

sion of arches into, which are set, an elaborate system of steel chains, pulleys, tracks, gears, gates and sluices.

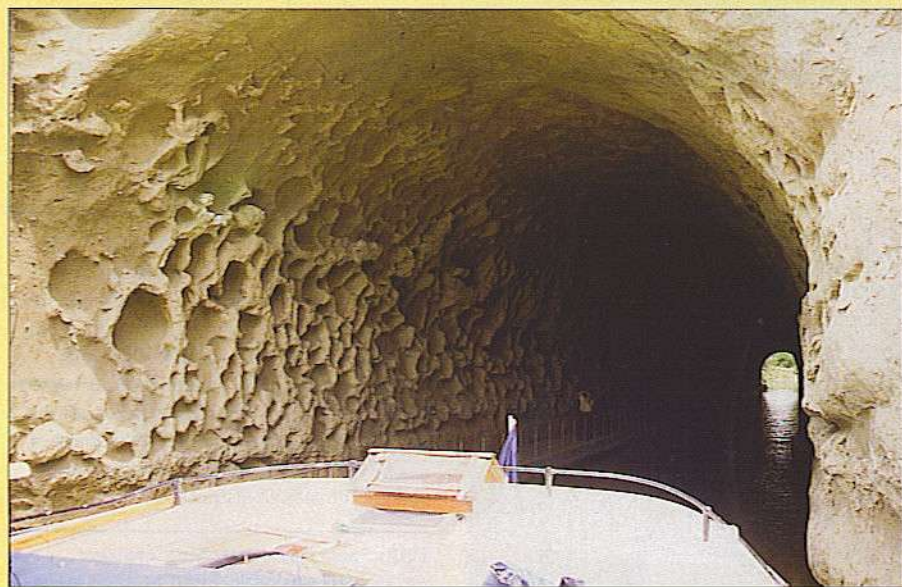
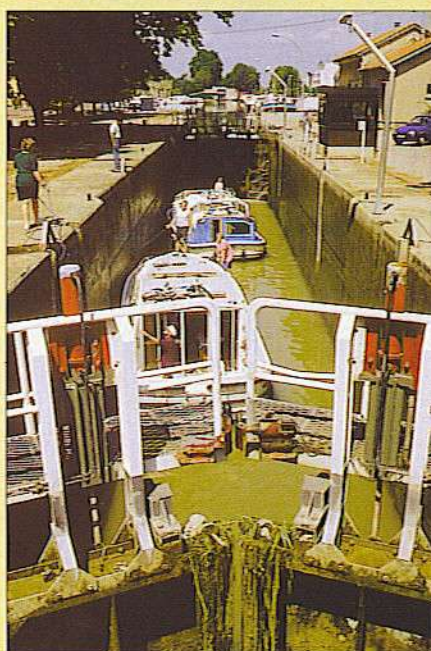
Progressing westward takes the traveller through open marshy flatlands. Through *Portiragnes*, a wine growing village. The surrounding area is habitat to thousands of horses. At *Port Cassafères Bridge*, guided horse riding treks are available. Further west is the attractive town of *Villeneuve les Béziers*, well worth visiting.

"For the westbound traveller," wrote Rolt, "it is at Béziers that the Canal du Midi becomes exciting, both visually and from an engineering point of view." This remains true today. At Béziers, the canal crosses the River Orb. Riquet's original canal crossed by entering the river. By an assortment of weirs and sluices, the height of the river was sustained. During times of flood, the sluices were opened and the river became un-navigable. According to Rolt: "In 1779, for example, owing to an exceptional flood, boats waited to cross for 17 days on end." Such floods also caused considerable silting of the river, and it was for these reasons that in 1854 an aqueduct was built across the river.

Nowadays, the locks at Béziers elevate the canal to the level of the Orb aqueduct. The original course of Riquet's canal bends toward the river at the approach to the first set of locks, the *Écluses de Béziers*. These locks are automatically and remotely controlled by the lock keeper at the *Écluses de l'Orb* at the top end of the harbour, *Port Neuf*. The lock keeper monitors the lower locks by means of closed circuit cameras.

The harbour here is home to *Anjodi*, and will be either departure or arrival point for many of her cruises. It is also her winter home and that of her Captain, Duncan Mc Coll. So passionate is Duncan about this region, its people and traditions, that for several years now he has preferred to stay in

Bézier over the winter, rather than return to



his home in Wales. He has become almost fluent in French and a connoisseur and gourmet of French wine and gastronomie. He

happily shares this knowledge and experience with his passenger guests.

The history of Béziers dates back to the 7th

century BC. The most chilling catastrophe in its history occurred on 22nd July 1209 when hundreds of its inhabitants, women, children and elderly folk, were massacred at the hands of Simon de Monfort's crusaders fighting Catharism.

Béziers is also the birthplace of Pierre-Paul Riquet on 29th June 1604. He was educated at the Jesuit College here and is now honoured around the city in many ways. The 'high-street' of Béziers is *Avenue Paul Riquet*, a tree-lined, pedestrianised avenue with a statue of Riquet at its centre. The avenue is full of restaurants and café's and is deserving of an extensive visit.

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TOP: Anjodi's luxurious saloon with the table laid for the sumptuous 'Captains' Dinner.

CENTRE: Ecluses de Beziers. These locks are automatically and remotely controlled by the lock keeper at Ecluses de l'Orb at the top end of the harbour. Note the closed circuit TV camera.

BOTTOM: The western end of the Malpas tunnel walls are scattered with deep depressions and cavities caused by erosion.

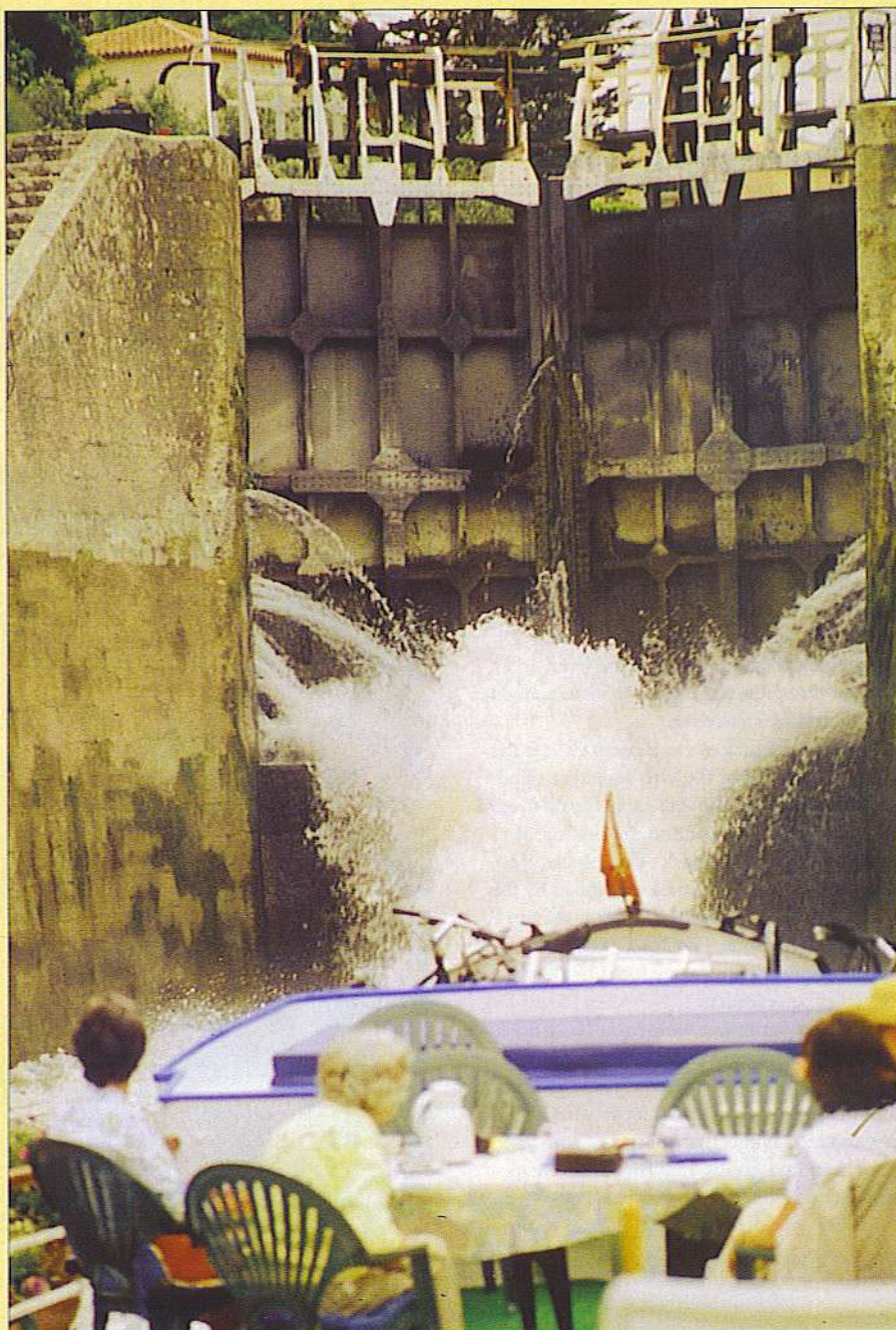
Back in the harbour to continue the journey westward, going by many moored boats including an intriguing floating cat museum. After ascending the *Écluses de l'Orb*, the canal sweeps around and over the seven-span Orb aqueduct, built in 1854 to replace the river crossing described earlier.

What comes next is truly phenomenal. The lock staircase of *Fonserannes*. On the approach to the flight is a water slope, built in 1984 to bypass the lock staircase. It is a magnificent monument to modern canal engineering, but unused. It endured a succession of serious faults. Subsequent commercial trends made the project impossible to rectify and maintain.

The lock flight is entered at right angles into the second chamber, the first having become superfluous after the completion of the Orb aqueduct at a higher level. The journey time through the staircase is quite quick and during the ascent the panorama looking back towards Béziers grows more magnificent with every lock ascended.

The next engineering wonder comes just 7km further along. The crew of the *Anjodi* will on request, take their guests a short distance away from the canal to view the 13th century *Étang de Montady*. It is an immense plane of terrain, which is drained by an arrangement of radial ditches which as Rolt described, "extend like the spokes of a wheel from a central hub."

The canal also is about to reveal its piece de resistance, the *Malpas Tunnel*. The tunnel is the oldest navigable waterway tunnel in the world. It presented such a challenge that several of Riquet's financiers thought it impracticable to bore. It was, as its name 'mal pas' translates, a 'bad passage'. But Riquet defied his critics and the 165-metre tunnel was driven through in just six days. The approach to the tunnel is framed with a splendid stone portal, but advancing through the tunnel becomes unlined. "It is remarkable," observed Rolt, "that the western end of the tunnel has survived so long without lining or support,



for the rock is so soft and friable that it crumbles to sand at a touch." The faces of the tunnel walls are scattered with deep depressions and cavities caused by erosion and the western end has no portal, yet still a superb sight.

It is true that all this could similarly be experienced aboard any of the many self-hire craft accessible on the Canal du Midi. What makes time aboard a craft like the *Anjodi* distinctly different is something only a hosted holiday can offer. The captain and crew make sure that their guests experience the finest of not just the countryside, but also the culture and cuisine of each district.

TOP: Spectacular, exciting cruising working through the locks at Ecluses de Foffile

LEFT: The magnificent cliff-top citadel of Carcassonne.

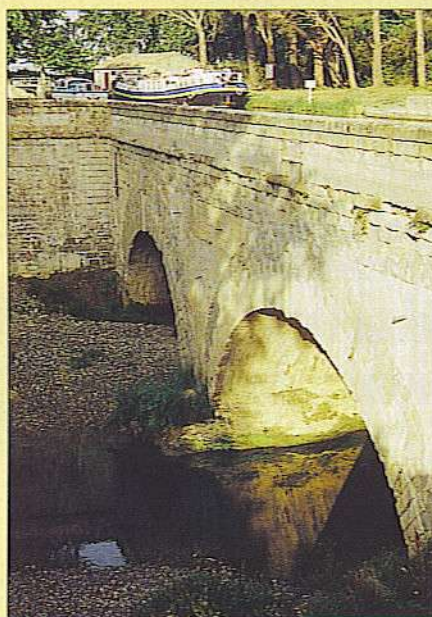


PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD HILL

Every meal is representative of the region and every course is accompanied by an explanation of the produce, preparation and cooking process used. Guests will become appreciative of the source of every delicate taste and bouquet unique to each dish or wine. A certain goat's cheese for example may have a characteristic quality because of the earth in which the grass fodder is grown and perhaps a distinctive maturation process. The captain will select each wine with care and clarify the contributing factors in taste and aroma; the climate, cultivation, constituents and casks used for ageing for example. The result for guests is a discriminating palate and awareness of some of France's finest cuisine. Regional dishes served include; Noisette d'agneau en croute de sel avec sauce romarin, Ragout de Calamars "Provençale" Troncons de Sole au Vin Rouge poireaux et goujonnettes. Regional wines: Minervois - Domaine de Guery, Corbières - Chateau de Nouvelles, Roussillon - Chateau la Condamine Bertrand. Cheeses: Le Saint-Remois, Fromage de Chevre au Poivre et au Thyme, Tomme de Valdeblone.

Though we have cruised less than one eighth of the 240km Canal du Midi, we have passed some of the most important canal architecture in the world. Rolt made the entire journey from Sete to Toulouse. On this voyage, *Anjodi* continued to the remarkable citadel of Carcassonne, and so should any traveller.

On the final evening, following Captains dinner, the journey concludes with a floodlit cruise under the canopy of plane trees towards



Carcassonne. The experience is almost spiritual and in contemplating the experience of the last six days we turn, for the final time, to Rolt: *"Thanks to the unique privileges granted by Louis XIV to Riquet and his heirs, he deliberately set out to create what, in modern planner's jargon, would be called a linear park; the canal was to be the Riquet estate and he lost no opportunity to beautify it. Consequently no financial stringency, no engineering problem however intractable it might appear, was permitted to override aesthetic judgement on matters of landscaping or architecture. Hence Riquet's great canal has become an eloquent memorial of an age when the marriage of the arts and sciences, of beauty with utility, was taken for granted and their divorce inconceivable."* ♪

TOP: The round ice tower and the bridge at Le Somail.

LEFT: Pont-canal de la Cesse, the aqueduct at Port-la-Nouvelle.

◆◆◆ THINKING OF GOING?

FACT FILE

Regrettably Rolt's book *From Sea to Sea* is no longer in print. However copies may be available on loan at public libraries. Copies may also be traced or available through specialist bookshops and book tracing services. The first edition was published by Allen Lane in 1973, and the latest edition, from which the author worked was published in 1994 by Euromapping ISBN 2-910185-02-8.

Anjodi is owned and operated by European Waterways, 35 Wharf Road, Wraysbury, Staines, Middlesex TW19 5JQ. Tel: 01784 482 439. The company also operates luxury canal and river cruises on other waterways in France, England, Ireland and Holland.

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