

Serendipity Travels

Log of the Gey

The first five days of our charter were interesting, to say the least, as we navigated near the Mediterranean coast, crossed a large lake, and entered the Canal du Midi, only to be stopped by a flooding river.

27 September 2014

We arrived at Port Ariane, which is in Lattes, during the lunch break for the charter staff. Hungry ourselves, we ate at a harbor side café. The port is a modern development, just off le Lez (river). It is bordered by high-rise apartments, one suspects that they are rather pricey.



After lunch, we were shown to our boat and able to load our luggage and supplies. In due course, we were given a quick introduction to the ship and its features. Since we had chartered a similar vessel in the past, we felt confident in our ability to handle it and were soon given permission to depart. We were on our way shortly before 17:00.

Out of the harbor, a sharp turn to port had us approaching the first lock of our journey. This one is remotely operated, so Meredith had to figure out how to hail the lockkeeper to open the gate for us. Soon we were in, although it took us a few minutes to figure out how to secure the vessel for its descent to sea level (2.5 m). I suspect the lockkeeper was somewhere between bemused and apoplectic as the rookies messed around with the lines.

Once the descent was accomplished, we sailed down the river towards a junction with the Canal du Rhône à Sète. The downstream current made the sharp turn to starboard a bit

To see pictures of our time on the Canal du Rhône à Sète and crossing the Étang de Thau, overlaid on a map, click: [Canal du Rhône à Sète](#)

more challenging than expected, but we made it without incident.

The western portion of the Canal du Rhône à Sète parallels the Mediterranean coast and is carved from several brackish lakes that lie just inland of the coast. Many of those lakes are occupied with fishing nets – one does not stray from the well-marked canal.

At one point, a floating swing bridge crosses the canal. When approaching, one sounds the boat horn, which alerts the operator. A section of the bridge is hinged; the operator uses two outboard motors mounted on the bridge to alternately open and close the hinged portion.

Past the bridge, we found a place to moor alongside the canal. Calm waters and a nice sunset over Étang de Vic accompanied our first meal on the boat, enhanced by a bottle of Gigondas wine.



28 September 2014

Our morning slumber was interrupted by a small boat zipping along the canal, throwing a substantial wake. Grumpy, I got up to signal my displeasure, only to see several others flying by, oblivious to the effects of their wakes. These are locals, heading out to tend their nets, and apparently not concerned over their effect on the tourist trade.

One of the major obstacles on this canal is a lift bridge in the town of Frontignan, about 10 km from our stopping place. The bridge opens on a schedule, daily at 8:30 and 16:00. Rather than try to make the early opening, we took the time to walk across the barrier island to the shore of the Med.

Explorations done, we returned to the boat and traveled into Frontignan. We found a place to tie up just before the lift bridge and secured the boat so we could walk into town. Today is Sunday, meaning most stores are closed, but we did find a nice restaurant for noon-time meal.

Returning to the boat, we were in time for the 16:00 opening. Once through, we docked at the Port du Plaisance, a nice municipal facility west of the bridge and convenient to town. An evening stroll into the ville found a small restaurant on the town square and a simple, but tasty meal.

29 September 2014

This morning we awoke to heavy rainfall, accompanied by gusty winds. Our intention is to cross the Étang du Thau today, but one must be careful. The lake is long and shallow and the prevailing winds can make it very rough. Pleasure vessels are not allowed to cross if the winds exceed Beaufort 3 – about 12 mph. The rule of thumb for mariners: if there are whitecaps, do not go. We decided to wait a while at the dock to see if the weather would improve.

Finally, about 14:30, the rain stopped and the wind died down, so we decided to move closer to the lake to see if a crossing could be attempted. Exiting the canal, the water was choppy, but no whitecaps, so we pressed on. The first leg of the crossing is fairly straightforward, large markers are visible in the distance.



Once we reached those markers, the next leg was more difficult. Small vertical markers, only about 6 inches in diameter, are spaced at 2-3 km intervals. Outside this channel, to starboard are oyster farms and to port are shallow waters. The markers themselves are difficult to spot at a distance. Tracing the edge of the oyster beds, we were able to locate the first set and make the turn that would carry us

the rest of the way across in a fairly straight line.

As we proceeded, the sky got grayer and the wind increased – now exceeding the maximum. Since we were nearing the half-way point, we elected to continue. The total crossing took more than two hours and was rather tedious. I think that one crossing of the Étang du Thau will be sufficient for Meredith and me.

Once across, we passed the lighthouse at Pointe des Onglous and entered the Canal du Midi. We proceeded as far as the Écluse du Bagnas (our first lock on this canal). The lock was closed for the evening, so we secured the boat along the canal bank.

30 September 2014

There was quite a rainstorm in the middle of the night, but our boat kept all the water outside. We arose, fully expecting to travel on today. Speaking with other boaters, we

To see pictures of our first days on the Canal du Midi, overlaid on a map, click: [Canal du Midi I](#)

learned that L'Hérault (river) was 1.5 m over flood stage. Our route from here requires us to traverse about 1 km on L'Hérault, and the French authorities were not permitting anyone to go there today.

We decided to take the time to walk into the nearby town of Agde. In town, we could see L'Hérault, an ugly brown torrent rushing to the sea, and were just as happy that we did not have to cope with it in our modestly-powered boat.



We found a nice restaurant overlooking the river, and enjoyed lunch while watching debris float by. After lunch we walked around town some more, and visited the lock that we hoped to be traversing the next day.

The Agde Bassin Rond was originally a round lock, designed to be the intersection of three channels: one leading to the river and Étang du Thau, one leading to the remainder of the Canal du Midi, and one leading to a small canal that bypassed the river rapids and lead to the sea. Each channel has its own set of lock gates. In subsequent years, the lock was altered to handle larger vessels and has lost its perfectly round shape, but it is still unique among the locks we will cross.

We walked back to the boat and had dinner aboard. We had planned an extra day into our itinerary, so we were not too concerned about being able to complete our journey.



1 October 2014

Today dawned bright and sunny, and we hoped to be able to travel on. “Non, non, non” said the éclusier (lockkeeper) wagging his finger. The only traffic today would be one commercial vessel, pleasure boats would have to wait another day. The canal by our lock was getting quite a line of boats in waiting.

We considered our options – go back into town, go back to the Étang and visit one of the small towns on the lake, or just chill on the boat, reading and editing pictures. We decided on the latter, as well as considering how to alter our itinerary to make up a second lost day.

2 October 2014

Another nice sunrise, and today we will be allowed to proceed! We pass through two locks to enter L'Hérault, which is much calmer today. It is obvious that there was pent up demand going the other way as well, since we meet several boats on the canal and river. The turn from the river back onto the canal was not too difficult and we were soon in the Bassin Rond.



Once clear of the lock, we cruise along and moor near the town of Vias about 11:30. Our wine supply is getting low, and we are told there is a cooperative in town with a great selection of inexpensive wines. A short walk into town and we find the Cave Cooperative de Vias (roughly translates to Cooperative Wine Cellar of Vias) and purchase a few liters.

Walking on into town, we visit the town church and then find a spot for lunch.

Back on the boat, we press on. We travel as far as Béziers this afternoon. Tomorrow we will negotiate another of the interesting features of the Canal du Midi.