Serendipity Travels

Log of the *Gey*

Notes for Boaters

Whether you are an experienced cruiser or someone with little or no experience operating a boat, you can probably undertake and complete a canal boat journey. As with any endeavor, the more you know going in the better prepared you will be. The notes that follow are written by a person experienced in cruising in the U.S. Pacific Northwest, with asides comparing that style of cruising to cruising on the French canals.

The notes are organized in the following sections:

- The boats
- Accommodations on board – staterooms, galley, head, cabin
- Handling the boat
- Mooring
- Necessary maintenance
- Navigating the canals and rivers
- Going through the locks
- Electrical power for your stuff

The Boats

Many of the boats on the French waterways look like (and some are) the same brands of powerboats that we see in North America. Others have a more "canal boat" appearance, such as the Pénichette® style of the *Gey*. The Locaboat company, from whom we hired the *Gey*, has good illustrations of the boats and their accommodations.

Accommodations

The most important decision when hiring a boat is the number of accommodations. The staterooms are aligned along the length of the boat (see the diagrams at the Locaboat site referenced above). A two-berth boat will normally have one "double" bed, which will be cozy for most adult couples. Beds on boats seem smaller than in homes or hotels, probably because they tend to be flush against the hull or bulkheads. You might consider paying for an extra bed to give yourself more room.

The boat will have one or more heads, depending on capacity. The head will contain a marine toilet, small sink, mirror, and shower. Most of the showers are in a separate stall, *not* using the whole head area as the shower area (owners of small Bayliners will know why this is nice!), but the smallest boats, such as the *Gey,* do combine shower and head area.

The galley will have a small two-four burner propane stove, a modest size refrigerator, sink, and storage areas. Hire boats are equipped with a good array of cooking, serving, and eating items.

Gey had a 4-person dining table, which accommodated the two of us and our books, computer, and iPads nicely.

All-in-all, the accommodations were about the same as one would find on a thirty-foot sedan-style cruiser. Comfortable, but not extravagant.

Handling the Boat

The motor is a small diesel, with a single-lever control (combining both direction and throttle, much like a runabout). Like most boats, you steer the stern, not the bow, and you have control only when you are moving through the water – under power or coasting in neutral. In tight quarters, a burst of power will help the rudder do its job. Reverse gear is your brake.

The boats are long and heavy, so you need to anticipate turns, bottlenecks, and stopping. Cruising speed on straight, open canals is about 8 kph (5 mph), but we were not always able to do that because of congestion (moored or oncoming boats) or limited visibility (curves, bridges, or tunnels). You are on vacation, you are on a boat, and the next little town is less than 10 miles away – take your time!

The most interesting boat handling times (other than simply keeping it between the banks) are dealing with the very narrow places – locks and bridges – and turning in tight quarters. Maneuvering in tight places usually means going slow and using the tiller *plus* very short bursts of power to align properly. To make a sharp turn (i.e., 90 degrees or more), you will probably have to alternate forward and reverse – using the same techniques single-screw power boaters use.

Mooring

Mooring is permitted almost everywhere on the canals, especially in the open country. In more populated or congested areas, you might encounter a sign like that on the left. The second symbol from the top indicates that mooring is permitted (one with a red slash would indicate the opposite). Mooring to the left of the post is for taking on water, mooring to the right is allowed for seven days free, and £25 per day thereafter.

Stakes are the default means for securing the boat to the shore. Every boat comes with a mallet and a set of stakes. Drive the stake far into the ground, with the line tied to it at ground level.

We used stakes only as a last resort. Although there is virtually zero current and wind effects are small, there is always the danger that a stake will pull loose as passing traffic rocks the boat. Whenever possible, we sought out permanently-installed bollards.

Bollards (see picture at left) are the easiest mooring devices: take a few turns around the bollard and return the line to a cleat on the boat.

Necessary maintenance

Experienced boaters know that there are usually a few things that must be attended to on a regular basis, even on a boat that is "ready to go" on the first day of a cruise. Some of the items will be familiar to Northwest boaters, others not so much.

You will be asked your intended route as part of the checkout process. The boats sip **fuel** and normally will carry enough, which was the case for us. In fact, there was no fuel gauge on the boat. If, for some reason, you would need to take on fuel, there are a number of marinas and the marina staff would advise you accordingly.

Of slightly more concern is the **holding tank** (for non-boaters … that is where the toilet empties). Again, no gauge, and I am not sure how you know the level until it overflows (hopefully through a vent over the side). Since there were two of us on a boat designed to carry four people for a week, we did not fret too much about the holding tank. Again, the marina staff should advise if a pumpout might be necessary.

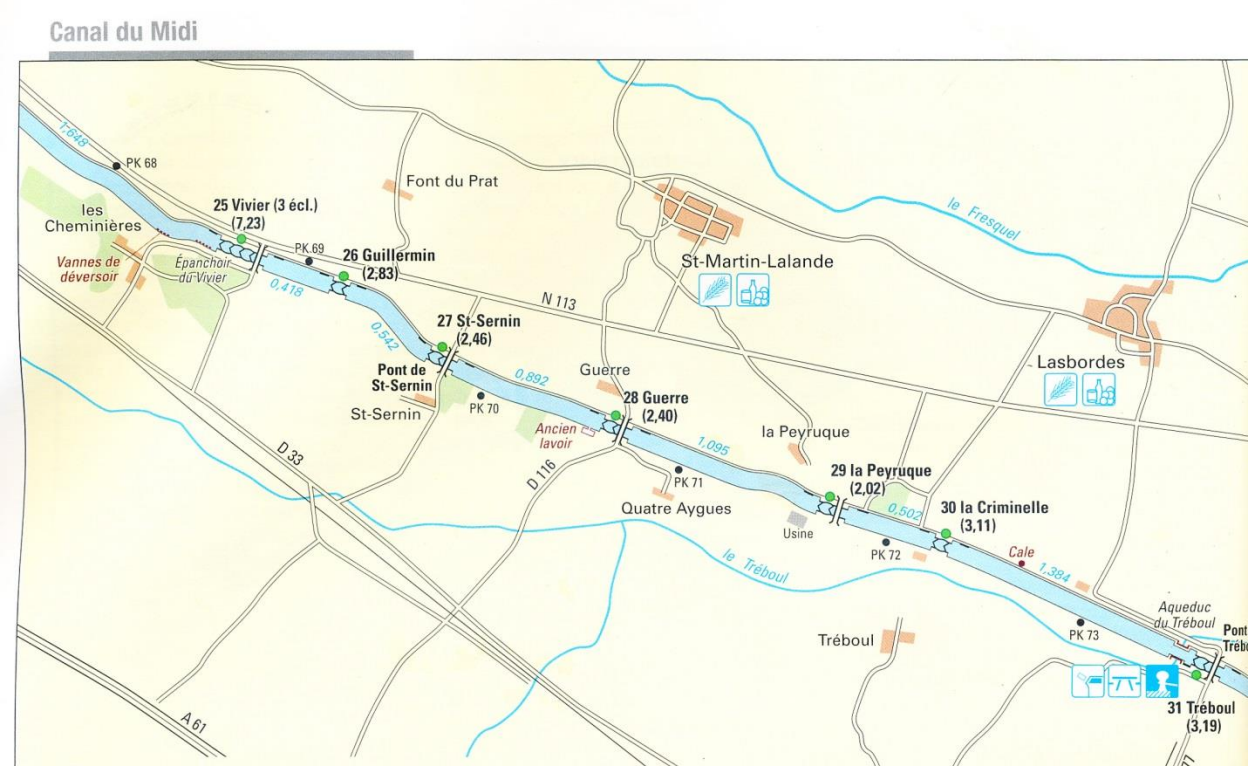
The **fresh water tank** is another matter. The marina staff suggests refilling daily. We did not see a water point every day – but at least every other day we passed places where water could be taken on. We are fairly conservative in our use of water and it took about six days for us to empty it. But you really should avoid emptying your water tank. The water tank is near the bow of the boat. As it empties, the bow tends to rise, setting the stern (and your propeller!) lower in the water. Our advice – refill the tank at least every other day; and daily if convenient.

Navigating the canals and rivers

Finding ones way on the canals is generally less difficult than it is on the open waters of the Pacific Northwest. Navigation involves three questions:

1. Where am I?
2. Where am I going?
3. How do I get there (including – what hazards are along the way)?

A good chart can help in answering all three questions, and we found the charts in *Waterways Guide n° 07 - Canal du Midi* to be extremely useful. A portion of one map is illustrated on the next page.



Our route proceeded from the lower right of the chart and exited at the top left. The following features helped us determine our location:

- Some of the bridges are named (e.g., Pont de St-Sernin).
- The locks are usually numbered as well, with the numbers on a plaque on the lockkeeper's house. The center of the lock symbol ("Λ") points uphill – this canal is steadily climbing from right to left.
- Points of interest such as stores are indicated on the map by symbols and usually described in the accompanying text.
- Kilometer points are indicated on the chart, but we rarely saw them on the canal. The portion of canal we traversed on this chart is about six km.

Knowing where you are, combined with the chart, makes it easy to determine what is ahead. The canals are generally well maintained, so there are few submerged rocks or other unseen hazards – most navigation is simply keeping the boat between the banks and spotting the next bridge, lock, or pub.

We used the guide book, plus Google Earth and other online resources, to plan each day's journey. Usually lunch and evening stops were timed to coincide with a nearby public house.

Going through the locks

All locks have the same basic operation, whether on the Panama Canal, Ballard Locks in Seattle, or a waterway in France:

- There is a watertight gate on either side of the lock chamber. These gates usually swing open to allow the vessel to enter or exit, although there are other possible configurations, such as a vertical-sliding lock gate. Both upstream and downstream gates must be closed before the boat can be lifted or lowered.
- There is some sort of a valve that allows water to enter the lock when lifting the boat. Once the valve is open, gravity fills the lock chamber and the buoyancy of the boat does the heavy lifting.
- There is another valve that allows water to exit the lock when lowering the boat. Again, gravity does the work of emptying the lock chamber.

In the picture above, you see three locks. On the left, both gates are closed. In the center, the upstream gate is open and a boat is entering the lock.

The same locks are shown in the picture at the left. Typical of most of the locks we encountered, the gate is composed of two pieces, hinged on the shore, that swing open or closed and meet at a point in the middle of the lock. The point of the lock gates always points upstream.

There are three sets of duties that must be accomplished to traverse a lock. We use the terms “Lock Operator,” “Line Handler,” and “Boat Operator” to denote them. Although persons sometimes traverse locks single-handed and accomplish all these duties by themselves, it is much easier for one person to work on each task.

Most of the locks in France are staffed by an éclusier (lockkeeper) and the operation of the gates and paddles, described below, is via electric motor. The éclusier will control the operation of the lock, but the boat operator and (usually one or two) other persons help by handling the lines.

The duties of the Lock Operator are as follows. The lock operator must prepare the lock for the boat, secure the gates, let water in or out, open the gates, and finally leave the lock in the proper condition. The following steps accomplish these duties:

1. If the water level is correct in the lock (i.e., at the same level as the boat), go to step 2. If not, do the following:
    a. Close all lock gates.
    b. Open the valves (called *paddles*) closest to the boat. This will fill the lock to the same level as the boat if you are going down, or empty the lock to the same level as the boat if you are going up. The paddles are operated by an electric motor.
    c. Once the water is at the proper level, close the paddles.
2. Open the gates and allow the boat to enter. Electric motors operate a rack and pinion system to open and close the gates.
3. Once in, close the gates behind the boat.
4. Open the paddles at the exit end of the lock. This allows the water level to adjust to the level needed for your onward journey.
5. Once the water is at the proper level, close the paddles.
6. Open the gates and allow the boat to exit.
7. Close the gates behind the boat. Proper etiquette is to close all gates when leaving a lock unless there is an oncoming boat, when you should leave the gates open.

In France, as noted, most locks are attended, so Lock Operator duties are done by others. It is expected, however, that crew will handle the lines of the boat.

The Boat Operator must be able to handle the boat, and toss lines to crew on shore when appropriate. On approaching a lock, you will normally find a place where the line handlers can disembark. Once they are off, and while the lock is prepared for your entry, you must either stay along the shore or maneuver the boat in the waterway to stay out of the way of oncoming traffic. Once the gates are open for you, you must drive the boat into the lock. If two boats will occupy the same lock, then your challenge is to stay to one side or the other so both will fit with a minimum of collision. Once in the lock, you must stop the boat and toss lines (sometimes 2-3 meters up) to the line handler.

For two people, we decided that this sequence worked best, especially when going uphill:

1. Lines are prepared in advance, coiled or flaked to make them easy to toss.

2. The line handler is let off before we enter the lock. Often, there was a small platform along the canal for crew de-/embarkation.
3. Once in the lock, the stern line is thrown up first. The line handler will take up as much slack as possible, then wrap it several turns around the bollard. Forward progress of the boat should be stopped.
4. The bow line is then thrown up. This is wrapped around a forward bollard and dropped back to the boat operator.
5. As the water rises, both boat operator and line handler take up slack. When locking up, the line handler will be able to step on the boat just prior to leaving the lock (or last chamber of a multi-chamber lock).

Once the water level has equalized in the direction of travel, the lock operator will open the gate and you will proceed to exit. Depending on the distance to the next lock, you will either pick up your line handlers or they will walk to the next lock. If there are multiple chambers at the lock, the line handler would usually walk forward holding the stern line, and stop the boat once it is in the next chamber.

Electrical power for your stuff

Modern travelers usually take an array of electronic devices along. We might carry more than most – our load included two iPhones, two iPads, a notebook computer, and two cameras. One of the cameras uses AAA batteries; all the other devices have rechargeable batteries.

Our boat (and the three other canal boats we have used) had a single 12-volt outlet – using the familiar "cigarette lighter" plug. There was a "household voltage" (240 volts in France) outlet that worked when we were connected to shore power.

If at all possible, obtain 12-volt chargers for your stuff. Your only challenge will be keeping items charged – rotating them as necessary. It is possible to drain a boat's battery charging items overnight, so we tended to use the 12-volt socket only when the engine was running, or immediately after mooring.

If you do not have a 12-volt charger for your device (and we did not have one for either the computer or camera battery), you will need a "household voltage" charger. We have a small inverter that plugs directly into the cigarette lighter socket. Some charter companies will rent one to you for the duration of your charter.

Be careful! Household voltage, and that output by a European Inverter, is twice that of North America. Carefully read the fine print on your charger – if it says something like **INPUT: 100-240V ~ 50/60Hz** then it should work fine. If you do not see dual voltages, do not use it overseas.

For More Information

Many of the charter companies have very informative websites – containing information about bases (marinas), the boats, routes, and local attractions.

There are books written about canal boating (our friend Roger Van Dyken has written one entitled *Barging in Europe*) and the Waterway Guides (e.g., *Waterways Guide n° 07 - Canal du Midi)* have several pages of general information.