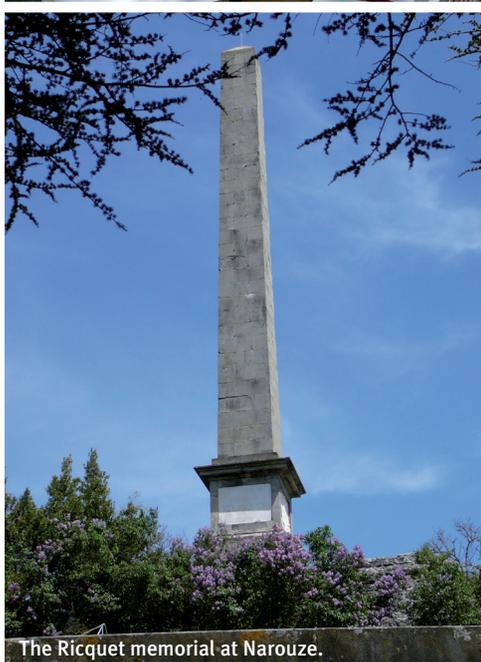


*Bon Viveur II* in the April mist.

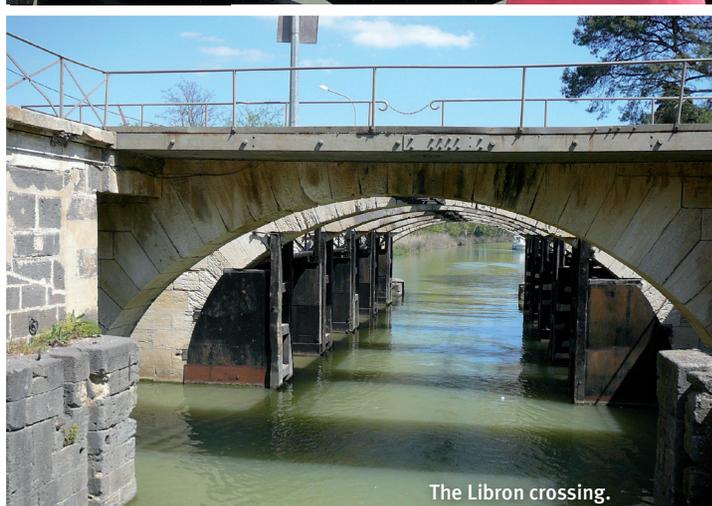
A pleasant lunch on the flying deck.



The lock flight at Foncérannes, Béziers.



The Ricquet memorial at Narouze.

*Bon Viveur II*.

The Libron crossing.

enter; when the boat is in position inside the lock chamber, a crew member pushes a 'go' button. The rest is fully automatic – provided the crew member has remembered to get back on board!

Good mooring is available at Montech, and it is worth stopping here to explore not only the restaurant but also the remarkable pente d'eau (WW August). This is a concrete trough incline, where a linked pair of diesel locomotives push boats up or down in a 'wedge' of water. While it is not available to leisure boats, there is an evening restaurant trip boat on which the public may ride (at a price...).

After the spectacular aqueduct over the Tarn the charming town of Moissac has excellent moorings, where fuel and gas are available. The 11th century abbey, adorned with meticulous wall painting is a treasure not to be missed.

The following year, our cruise began at Agde, near the eastern end of the Canal du Midi. Shortly after leaving the small marina, the canal crosses the River Libron on the level. Here Riquet devised a method of crossing the river which could be utilised in times of flood: two caissons with a boat's length between them, with each caisson able to pass the river's floodwater across it through side doors (WW June 2009). The low-lying land to the west was attractive in the late afternoon sun, as it glistened on

the pools of still water and the hides of the horses which grazed there.

Perhaps the most impressive feature of the waterway is the great seven-rise staircase at Fonsérannes, which lead to le grand bief (the long pound). Just as at Foxton, the public congregate at this spot to view the boats as they are worked through the locks. When going uphill, the intermediate gates are not closed until the locks fill in turn, so that the water can be seen cascading over the cills from the top.

A gentle meander follows past manicured vineyards and tidy farms. At Port la Robine, a branch canal leads away southwards to Narbonne and Port-la-Nouvelle on the Mediterranean, but this time we continued westwards towards Carcassonne. This famous ancient citadel was an important medieval city as it controlled the strategic gap between the Massif Central and the Pyrenees. A network of narrow streets makes this a fascinating place to explore and a walk around the ramparts of the citadel offers panoramic views of the whole area. Mooring is available adjacent to the railway station or in the wide basin above the lock.

The syndicate arrangement of boating in France has suited us well and has proved to be much more economical than hiring in France. An AGM is held each year, at which owners can meet and discuss issues such as the winter maintenance schedule. Major

items are contracted out to local marine engineers and boatyards, but some tasks are done by owners who enjoy "marine DIY", and that can save on costs. The system also allows for one-way cruises and for exchanges between the canals in the Midi region and in Burgundy. Through this opportunity, we have learned to savour the joys of boating in France.

Find out more

These boats are run by independent syndicates. More information can be obtained from BonBV2a@googlemail.com or alanbacon@btconnect.com. *Bon Viveur II* is 50ft long and 13ft wide, and can accommodate six to eight persons. There is an en suite double bedroom aft, and a roomy wheelhouse which can also be used for dining or sleeping. The main saloon includes a convertible settee and kitchen facilities and in the forward area there is a shower and toilet, as well as another double bedroom. Over the aft accommodation is a flying bridge area for those *al fresco* meals and an upper steering position.

Other syndicates are operated by French Barging (0782 732 1030, www.french-barging.com), BCBM Boat Share (01270 628076, www.bcbm.co.uk), and private owners (see www.boatshare.co.uk/abroad for a partial list). Bearing in mind recent failures of shared ownership companies, prospective owners are recommended to make their own checks before investing.

