

French bliss

An on-board chef, a personal guide and a stateroom with a marble bathroom make for an indulgently laid-back trip. **Jon Bryant** sails Canal du Midi in style

The fact that most people on the banks start clapping as the Alouette passes is a good indicator of just how different she is. Our barge, one of just five superior "hotels" on France's waterways, has had a serious makeover by its owner, Orient-Express.

On board there are now two luxury staterooms and an open-plan kitchen, complete with personal chef. What better way to spend the summer than navigating between Carcassonne and Béziers on the Canal du Midi, carefully drifting away from the nine-point turners and holiday captains reversing into their neighbours' boats?

In high season, the waterways can become quite crowded and, with some stretches having up to seven consecutive locks, it can also be quite a wait – unless, that is, you're on Alouette. As a "working" boat, the lock-keepers calmly wave it through. It's like being in a Bentley with permission to overtake at red lights while traffic wardens cheer you on.

The recent refit reduced the number of cabins from three to two, so each is now spectacularly large and complete with a desk, wardrobe and marble bathroom. Indeed, standing under the king-sized shower head it's hard to believe you are on a boat.

The kitchen is all steel and steam, more like something you might expect to find in a countryside manor.

Really, though, you want to be on deck watching the swans and geese pad along the towpath, waving at cyclists as you sail by banks of yellow irises, surveying the lush vineyards beyond.

Apart from our pilot, who even allowed me to steer the boat, my fellow passengers were our hostess and guide, Sarah, and, of course, chef.

Using local produce as a base, our chef created classic French dishes for lunch, such as chicken breast with

asparagus and goat's cheese, and vegetable tart. Dinner promised rustic *magret de canard* or cassoulets. When the boat passed through the Aude and Hérault regions, truffles, tomatoes, foie gras, Roquefort and Armagnac were added to the menu. Sarah's exemplary wine knowledge, meanwhile, only added to the conviviality at meal times.

The barge's salon has all mod cons: a wide-screen plasma television and a laptop with internet access (unless you are inside a lock). There's also a small library of books about the local area. The interior is part Georgian townhouse, part Mediterranean chic, with riverbank touches.

There's even a small portrait of Napoleon, whose République started to control the canals after the revolution. Pleasure sailing, it's safe to say, wasn't exactly on Pierre-Paul Riquet's mind when he came up with the plan to join the Atlantic with the Mediterranean in the late 17th century. It does, though, feel as if the Canal du Midi was built for cruising.

The journey is packed with characterful sights: every lock

After we sailed through Aude and Hérault, truffles and foie gras were added to the menu

has its own lock-keeper and, usually, a three-legged dog. At the Ecluse de l'Aiguille, there's a parade of eccentric sculptures forged together from bits of rubbish found floating in the water, and a Heath Robinson-style iron man who winds up the lock cogs as water rushes into the wood-lined chasm.

Guests can choose from a host of day trips, too, including visits to Narbonne market; Minerve, a stunning Cathar stronghold; and Carcassonne,

France's most celebrated fortified city.

At just after six o'clock, the lock-keepers go home and thoughts turn to evening activities. Towpath boules perhaps? Or a pre-chess apéritif? Candlelit dinner on the deck was served with a choice of the best Bordeaux and Burgundy and a few gems from the Languedoc.

One of the greatest pleasures of Alouette is that everything is done for you: it's a veritable floating five-star hotel. All you have to do is savour the Canal du Midi at a leisurely pace, just gazing at the ripples and hoping the holiday will never end. Otherwise known as sheer, unadulterated luxury.



Dreamscape: the tree-lined Canal du Midi

Way to go

Orient-Express offers six-night cruises between Carcassonne and Béziers on

the Alouette, for up to four people. All meals, excursions, airport transfers and bicycles are included in the price. Other boats in the fleet navigate the

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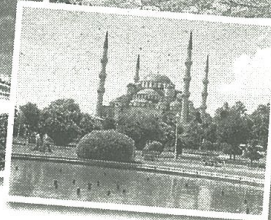
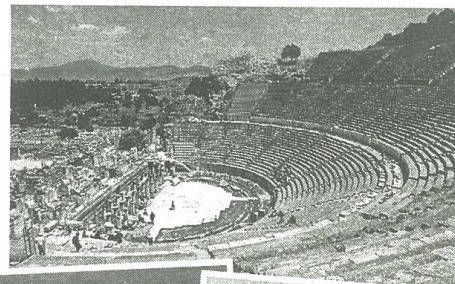
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Ship shape: the Alouette

