



When it comes to barging in the South of France, the scenic Canal du Midi is a must. Cruising this 300 years old waterway, you will savor the slow, easy pace of travel past lush vineyards in the heart of the Languedoc wine region. Passing through historic water locks you will discover charming medieval villages and ancient fortress cities. Sightseeing, wine tasting, and sun-kissed cycle rides await, all the way from bustling Toulouse to the golden sands of the Mediterranean sea.

Sailing the canals in France

For this sailor, taking a boat down the Canal du Midi that runs through southern France and connects with another canal to link the Atlantic with the Mediterranean, was a bit of a different trip -- strangely enough for him there were no sails on the boat.

David Patriarche, who sails a Hunter 34 out of the Whitby Marina and has chartered extensively throughout the world, took his family and a small group of other sailing

friends on a leisurely boat ride along the Canal du Midi last summer.

There were 17 people who flew into Toulouse in France and filled three of the low-slung river boats to head along the inland French canal. They went through 63 locks and covered 163 kilometres in one week, jumping off the boats at the finish near the coastal town of Port Cassafieres located on the shores of the Mediterranean.

They enjoyed seeing the French country-

side slip by at a top boat speed of about 8 km/h, passing by miles of vineyards, jumping off the boat sometimes in small medieval towns to visit restaurants, castles and to just stroll around.

They sometimes got off the boat to bike along the pathway that runs adjacent to the canal. Along the way, they ate some great bread and pastries, drank some good wine and motored by miles of sunflowers.

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"Around the canal you see stuff all over. There's lot of sunflowers. I have a new appreciation for French Impressionist painters," says Patriarche, who organized the trip.

"It's not like going through Paris or anything...you are going through these small towns."

Patriarche, who likes to organize sailing adventures and travel with larger groups, has sailed along the Croatia coast and been to many spots in the Caribbean and has chartered on 20 different sailboats and 10 different power-

boats.

"This trip was a little bit not normal because we didn't have a sail on the boat," he says with a wide grin. He said the trip was filled with history.

The Canal du Midi runs for about 150 miles (240 km), was built in the mid- to late-1600s to carry wheat and is one of the oldest European canals still operational in Europe. It was declared a UNESCO world heritage site in 1996.

"It's pretty much the same today as it was back then," Patriarche said during a recent presentation on the trip at

the Whitby Marina. "It's how the French got rich by shipping cargo through France...That's how the French got their money.

"It's a beautiful place," he says, and boating in the area is filled with wonders like boating across a viaduct that is 30 ft. above the river below. The water for the canal is fed by nearby mountain rivers and streams.

Patriarche says he would get a weird feeling as they crossed over a viaduct by looking down and seeing the river twisting and meandering far below. "You think you are on a river



The bridges along the canal are low but the boats are designed to just fit under.



David Patriarche and his wife Joanne enjoy the sights along the canal, which is a Unesco World Heritage Site.

and look down and there is the river. This happens all over the place."

There's no appreciable current in the canal, which runs with fresh water and is about eight to 10 feet deep. The water is not that clean, and people don't swim in the canal, he says.

"The river is also their sewer system. There is no swimming. That was probably the hardest part. It didn't smell. It's constantly flushed, so it doesn't really smell.

"As you are handling the lines, they said you should wear rubber gloves.

"About everywhere there is a lock, there is also a bridge," says Patriarche, who is planning to sail again with author and long-distance ocean cruiser John Kretschmer this January on an Atlantic crossing from Cape Verde off the African coast to Guadeloupe in the Caribbean.

This ocean trip for Patriarche is to gain some experience sailing completely offshore. He's sailed with Kretschmer before, taking a passage aboard the author's 47 ft. Kaufman yacht called Quetzal in 2015 on a hair-raising jaunt from Lunenburg N.S. to St. Martin.

The weather was so rough -- there were 15 ft. waves -- along the route that Patriarche remembers climbing off the boat in Marigot after about 10 days and complementing the dockmaster for the stability of his floating docks, which only seemed to sway a bit.

Patriarche was promptly told that the docks were

made of cement and were fixed to the earth. It wasn't the docks that were swaying. Things levelled out for him after a while, and he found his land legs again.

Patriarche first took sailing lessons in 1976 in Whitby but then got away from the sport by taking some time off to raise his two boys (the oldest is now in his mid 20s) with his wife, Joanne, who joins him on many of the trips.

He did a charter in the British Virgin Islands in 2006 and got back into sailing after taking some years away with the family. "I took some time off and I got hooked again."

The canals in France, by comparison to the oceans, are very calm, and the low-slung, 50 ft. canal boats, which are designed to just clear under the many bridges near the towns, are easy to manoeuvre in and out of the locks, says Patriarche.

"The boats are super user-friendly. You can walk up the middle so it's easy to get from the front to the back." And docking along the canal is pretty much anywhere you want along the walls, or you can moor by driving a stake into the shore, and tying off.

Tying the boat to one of the many

trees that line the canal isn't allowed because it blocks a pathway that is used by pedestrians and cyclists. There are rings mounted along the canal that boaters can use or you can drive stakes into the ground and tie off.

"Mooring the boat is easy. You just grab a stake and drive it into the ground and tie up. You can tie up anywhere," Patriarche says.

"When you stopped and tied up against the wall, the restaurant would be right there."

The canal boats come with enough fuel to make the trip and run the A/C unit, which is necessary during the hot and sticky summer months in France.

Patriarche, who works in the insurance field and has previously chartered sailboats in Greece, Turkey, Thailand and other locales, says it was a little unnerving at first heading under the very low bridges in France, and being able to just fit the boat underneath.

He says the bimini on the canal boat had to be taken down each time so that they could squeeze under the bridge and continue on their way. "It takes a little bit of nerves of steel to do it the first time...everyone is ducking. It's interesting at times."

The group picked the high tourist season in July to travel, when the crowds are at their peak, and they were delayed sometimes waiting for the locks to open or for traffic on the canal to pass by. They also had to watch out for the 80

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Water rushes quickly to fill up the locks, so it takes only about 7 minutes per lock once you are in.



Quaint villages dot the canal for a picturesque trip.

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ft. work boats that go up and down the canal system and can take up an entire lock.

Most of the time, the group was hurried, and didn't stop as much as they would have liked along the way. "We did one week and we should have done two," says Patriarche. "It was the high season and the holidays, so we had to wait" sometimes in the canal and at locks.

The speed limit along the canal is 8 km/h "and we pushed a little over that but the boats didn't go much faster than that." He added: "The area we covered was a bit too much, but live and learn."

Locking through was pretty quick and usually all three of the canal boats could squeeze into a lock, which have a curved

shape so that more boat traffic can move through. It took on average, only about seven minutes in each lock, and the water pours in and out of the old locks at a quick rate. All of the locks are hand-operated.

"It's pretty fast. They just kind of dump the water in and you have to hold on...you bounce around."

In some places along the canal, there were six locks in a row. "You are just steps away from one to the next, to the next," says Patriarche. They were travelling in the direction towards the Mediterranean and were "constantly going downhill."

At the beginning of their journey, Patriarche says the group enjoyed the views of the surrounding countryside because the canals are built up. As they approached the

Mediterranean, canal levels dropped closer to sea level, and the great views disappeared.

"You can look down in the valley and see the wine country. There were lots of vineyards but not a lot of wineries." Along the canal, there were floating restaurants and places where boaters can buy bread and other French delicacies.

The costs to purchase food and items along the way was a little expensive, and the prices in Euros were similar to prices of food and other staples at home that are priced in Canada dollars, meaning that they lost out when considering the exchange rate.

"We found everything a little bit more expensive. Euros were like dollars, so din-



It's best to book two weeks to enjoy this canal trip as one week is not enough time to see all the sights and enjoy all there is to do along the way.



ners were a little more expensive," Patriarche says.

Language wasn't an issue, even though most of those in the group were unilingual English and some had "high school" French. "It really wasn't an issue."

Patriarche says if he was to do the trip again, he would take more time and book in the fall or late spring -- the shoulder seasons -- when there are less tourists.

The cost to rent the boat was about \$5,300 US for 7 days at peak time, however prices drop substantially to about \$3,100 for 7 days in around October.

But he says he may not want to go back. "Would I do it again? Absolutely not. There are a lot more places to go," he says.

He's looking forward to sailing 2,200 nm. over 16 days in late January on an Atlantic crossing with author and blue-

water cruiser John Kretschmer, even though he had a wild ride through some terrible weather the last time he sailed with him a few years ago.

"It's like childbirth. You say you are never going to do that again."

Now, after meandering down the French canals, he's itching to get back in the saddle for some exciting ocean sailing.



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