

The French Countryside Part 1 – Bordeaux and Languedoc

Exploring the French Countryside

Part One – Bordeaux and Languedoc

September 1, 2011

Dateline: St. Emilion, Bordeaux

Latitude at St. Emilion 44.89 Degrees N, Longitude 0.15
Degrees W

Being avid boaters, we had studied for some time the brochures advertising the pleasures of cruising the canals of France. Being equally fond of wine, good friends and leisure, we thought it would be the perfect thing to combine a stop in Bordeaux, with a cruise on the Midi Canal in the province of Languedoc, a quick trip to see friends in Munich and some lolling around Provence and the Riviera. We flew overnight from Atlanta to Paris with some talkative bikers who had just been to Vegas and had gotten the Harley T-Shirts to prove it chatting away in the rows behind us.

We arrived at 6:30 in the morning with a full day to find our way to the village of St. Emilion in Bordeaux. We took the metro from Charles De Gaulle Airport to the Montparnasse train station to meet up with our friends, and frequent traveling companions, Stu and Sharon. We had reservations on the high speed train, the TVG (which stands for Tren Gran Vitesse) from Paris to Bordeaux, in the southwest corner of France on the Atlantic coast. It is a good thing the countryside was speeding by too quickly to enjoy it since we were all in need of naps due the overnight flight and the 6 hour time difference.



The Chateau
Franc Mayne

We rented a car at the Bordeaux train station and drove east to St. Emilion. We were at first glad to have a GPS system on board, but less so as we drove when the female voice (very similar to that same stern taskmaster found in cars in the US), kept announcing that we had arrived at our destination when we were barely out of the parking lot. We were actually forced to rely on that antiquated method of navigation using paper maps and road signs. We eventually found the village of St. Emilion and found it to be every bit as charming as advertised. We did have to ask for some local guidance in order to find the Chateau Franc Mayne, our lodging for our stay here, since there seemed to be a gazillion chateaux surrounding the town. Chateau Franc Mayne is an inn and vineyard, which was also charming in a major way. It is rather modest as chateaux go, but it had elaborate furnishings with damask, silk, velvet, taffeta and brocade in dark rich colors in great abundance. On a rather non-traditional quirky note, we found several chairs turned upside down and mounted on the wall to serve, we supposed, as "art".



Vineyards of
St. Emilion

Bordeaux not only is a city, it is the largest fine wine producing region in the world (strong emphasis on the word "fine" which indeed it is.) It is nirvana for the wine lovers (a.k.a oenophiles). There are 680 wine producing chateaux, producing 2, 700 wines in this region. The soil is a mixture of limestone, clay, gravel and sand, creating an ideal place for merlot grapes to flourish, but is not the place for cabernet grapes, which thrive in other areas of France. In a little corner of Bordeaux is the Cognac region where the best brandy in the world is made from distilled white wine. It is then aged in oak barrels anywhere from 4 to 40 years before being bottled and shipped world-wide. The quality of wine from the Bordeaux region stems from the chateaux that produce it. Typically a chateau includes a vineyard and a building which can range from an historic grand mansion to a far more humble dwelling. The chateau is the symbol of the wine's character and quality and embodies the traditions surrounding its creation. There are literally hundreds of wine chateaux from the very famous (e.g. Margaux, Latour, Ausone, Cheval Blanc) to the more modest of reputation known only in France or only in Bordeaux, like our very own Franc Mayne.



St. Emilion

St. Emilion is an ancient medieval walled city in the region of Aquitaine in the heart of Bordeaux. Its origins go back to the 9th Century when a monk named Emilion came here from Brittany and chose to withdraw from the world to live a life of solitude, meditation and prayer. Even at that early time there was a town here called Ascumbas. Despite his attempts to

withdraw from the world, he performed a number of miracles and drew a number of disciples to the area to create a monastery from his hermitage where he lived the last 17 years of his life. His followers named the monastic center after him after his death in 767 A.D. and the town grew up around it. In the ensuing years it became a medieval city surrounded by ramparts which still stand today, along with many houses from that era as well. There are also over 100 kilometers of underground limestone caves, or galleries as they are called.

Limestone was quarried here to build cities and chateaux from the 9th through the 19th Centuries. This quarrying created space that became the largest monolithic church in Europe, dug out of a chalky cliff after Emilion's death. It still stands, but its roof and walls are supported by a number of modern era concrete columns to prevent its collapse.

After checking in, we sat outside in the garden taking in the pastoral scenery and enjoyed wine and cheese while watching the sunset before surrendering to bedtime, shortly after dark.

September 2, 2011

Dateline: St. Emilion, Bordeaux



Streets of St.
Emilion

Today we slept rather late, still trying to adjust to the time change, and we wandered into town in our small vehicle in search of breakfast, driving through rolling hillsides covered with grapes as far as the eye can see in every direction. The

limestone layers just below the surface provide hundreds of natural caves, many of which are under the town and the vineyards, and are perfect for storing wine to let it mature. We were here just a few weeks prior to harvest, which occurs mid-September to mid-October. The French wine growers association is called the *Viticole*, and it is responsible for the strict standards and classifications to which French vintners adhere. There are 860 winegrowers in the St. Emilion region (or in wine lingo “appellation, not to be confused with “terroir”, which refers to the the specifics about a particular vineyard within the region, such as soil, rainfall, hill slope, sun exposure and so forth). Wine also has a classification as assigned by various governing bodies, whose rulings appear to be law, particularly with regard to quality and appellations. The top classification for French vineyards is the highly sought after Grand Cru (translation is great growth) and is awarded to a vineyard, not a particular wine. Vineyards are evaluated every 10 years.



Grapes of
Bordeaux

France has 10 major wine-producing regions – Bordeaux is one and Languedoc Rousillon is another. Later in this trip we would visit Provence, which is a 3rd wine producing region of the 10. Winemaking dates back to pre-Roman times but the vine cultures and practices were introduced and spread by the Romans. The condensed version is this: Wine starts with the juice of freshly picked grapes. Natural yeasts are found in the skins of grapes, although sometimes cultured yeasts are introduced to convert the sugars into alcohol as the juice

ferments. These yeasts (called lees) are filtered out before bottling. There is a slightly different process for white and red. For white the grapes are crushed to allow the juice to come into contact with the yeasts. Juice may be steeped and or macerated with skins to add flavor. White wine is lightly pressed and fermented in stainless steel vats. Red wine gets its taste from tannins present in red grape skins. These grapes need to be de-stemmed and crushed to eliminate undesirable tannins in the stems. So when they are crushed, they are de-stemmed at the same time. Grapes for red wine are thoroughly pressed and may have tannins or other flavors blended back in. Oak barrels (either French or American oak) are used to age red wine. White is typically not aged and goes into the bottle from the vat. White wine makers use different shades of glass to identify the region the wine comes from (e.g. green, yellow). For red, the shape of the bottle identifies region (e.g. Burgundy has a tapered neck and Bordeaux has a bottle with "shoulders").



The Cloisters
of St. Emilion

We were struck and pleased by how extremely tidy everything is here. We found a bakery at the "bottom of town" as it is described on one of the many cobblestone streets that run up the hill to the "top" of town. We had great omelets outdoors and managed to find an equally great breakfast wine (a Bordeaux of course). We took a walk up the hill to the top of the town to the Place des Creneaux which boasts the town's bell tower. The tourist Information stop occupies a former abbey, not too far from the ancient cloisters and the ruins of

a monastery which once had cellars that made sparkling wine.
En route we encountered a



The Cave du
March St.
Emilion

number of “caves” (pronounced “kahve”) which are essentially wine cellars, which seemed to spring up every few feet. Each cave of course offers a tasting room, which tends to slow forward progress up the street. The city is also famous for its *macarons* (or macaroons as we call them) and so any storefront that did not offer wine, offered these delicacies. We did both tasting and purchasing and also bought baguettes and cheese which were also fantastic. We sampled the wines of a number of “caves”, hosted by wine experts, including one who billed himself as the *Marchand de Soif* (translation is the Thirst Merchant). As it turned out we proved to be quite thirsty and as we sampled an array of delicious Bordeaux wines, the day more or less began to get away from us.



Monolithic
Church and

Bell Tower of St. Emilion

We did take some time to explore the city including the St. Emilion Monolithic Church (monolithic meaning it was made from a single massive rock) which was a very interesting, structure, dug out by Benedictine Monks over a period of 300 years. There are also 125 miles of underground tunnels (originally dug as limestone quarries and later used for storing wine), steep streets and not a lot of tourist attractions – nothing to do but enjoy the wine, food and soak up the ambiance. The town seems to be carved out of the hillside like an amphitheater and in fact we learned that many of the buildings (not just the church) were indeed carved out of the hillside. Also underground are the catacombs where a number of cardinals were buried.



The Wild Boar
that Must Not
Be Mounted

One of the personal highlights we found was the bronze statue of a boar which we assumed was to commemorate the truffle industry. We had to chuckle at the sign posted in English advising tourists that it is forbidden to “mount” the boar. We assumed they meant climb upon, as opposed to the more sexual connotation of the verb “mount”, which we were sure no one would be tempted to do. We returned to the chateau to enjoy our wine and cheese by the pool. They had an all natural pool with no chemicals and so the bottom was a little slimy, but the water was crystal clear and very cool. We had dinner

at the Chateau Franc Mayne – a delicious chicken pasta with fresh veggies followed by dessert and a cheese course that we had trouble appreciating since we had eaten so much cheese already.

September 3, 2011

Dateline: St. Emilion, Bordeaux



Wildflowers in
Sarlat

Today we decided to take a drive to the neighboring Dordogne region to a village called Sarlat after having coffee at a café in a medieval building, accompanied by pastries from a local *boulangerie/ patisserie*. We decided to stock up for a picnic lunch with a baguette and cheese. The bakery we chose had several loaves on the shelf, but the baker “tsked” over them and insisted that he get us a fresh one directly from the oven to meet his exacting standards. We were duly impressed with the dedication to quality, not just here, but in so many places we would eat and drink over the coming weeks. Our drive took us through lushly forested countryside, and through the village of Bergerac. Gradually we saw pear, walnut and apple orchards replacing vineyards, along with fields full of corn and tobacco. Approximately two hours east of St. Emilion, we entered the Dordogne Region via a beautiful river valley of the same name. The Dordogne played a key role in the 100 Years War since it was the dividing line between turf of the warring countries of England and France.



Unwitting Pate Donors

This area is famous for pate (both duck and goose) and various other delicacies involving the flesh of these same creatures. The production methods for harvesting goose liver here in the Dordogne Region perpetually gets animal lovers up in arms. The farmers reportedly restrict physical movement of the geese and force feed them in a process called *la gavage* in order to slaughter them for their livers, meat and fluffy down. In the last 3 weeks of their lives, they are put in cages and fed 3 times a day to fatten their liver, which in this period of time grows in size from about a quarter of a pound to 2 pounds and yields the distinctive foie gras of the region which can be made into pate or sliced and served. They use the same process with ducks, but without the same perceived excellence. It seems the livers of ducks are accorded less prestige than those of geese.



Sarlat House

It was Saturday and Market Day in Sarlat (pronounced “Sar lah” with the accent on “lah” – the full name is Sarlat-la Caneda and it is in a region known as Perigord. It is an old walled city whose cobblestone streets ramble up and down the hills on

which the city stands. The town was started with the building of a Benedictine abbey in the 9th Century at the site of a natural spring, today called the Cour des Fontaines. Sarlat has more medieval and Renaissance facades, all built of golden ochre stone, than any place in France. The town maintained loyalty to the King of France during the Hundred Years War and was rewarded richly with money to rebuild and expand the town afterward, which explains the golden stone. Much of that building took on an Italian aspect since the reigning Queen of France at the time was Catherine di Medici, who just happened to have a boyfriend (also Italian) on the side, who was the Bishop



The Steets of Sarlat

of Sarlat. The bishop had quite a fancy residence here, built right onto the structure of the Cathedral of St. Sacerdos. The cathedral itself dates back to the 12th Century when the locals built it, believing that the Virgin Mary had delivered them from the Plague of 1348. The bishop later left for Paris with his coffers full of cash. The century from 1450 to 1550 was the peak of Sarlat's importance. Many of the houses here dating from medieval times actually protrude over the street (i.e. they are larger at the top than on the bottom floors) in an attempt to maximize real estate inside the city walls, which gives the structures a somewhat lopsided aspect.



Market Day in Sarlat

On Wednesdays they have a huge outdoor food market (at least its huge for the size of the town), Town specialties are walnuts and foie gras (goose liver), as well as truffles, (many still hunted by by pigs so we understand) mushrooms, cheese, garlic and an array of pork products, just as they were in the Middle Ages. Macaroons are also big here and are much tastier to me than the various goose delicacies being offered. The recipe dates back to 1620 when the Ursuline sisters set up a convent here and started making them.



Park in Sarlat

Every Saturday the market morphs into more of a fair and what a treat that was, with food and clothing and all sorts of household goods offered in an open air environment. There were also a number of wine and pate shops, as well as art galleries centered around the Place de la Liberte, a square dating back to the Renaissance. We found a park at the top of a hill and feasted on our picnic, which prominently featured a nice Bordeaux from St. Emilion. Stu and Sharon sampled the

local pate and pronounced it superb. For me the macaroons were the highlight. After our picnic, we explored the steep streets of the ancient city, with a Disneyland vibe at every turn. We especially liked the Rue de Salamandre – a tiny lane named after the emblem of King Francois I which can be seen on many of the town's houses from the 16th Century. The legendary salamander could not be harmed by either fire or water and it became the town's mascot.



The Lanterne
des Morts

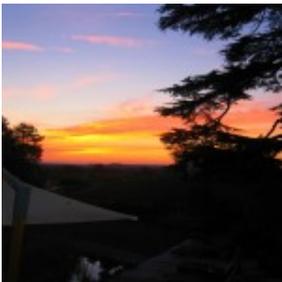
One of the most interesting and ancient sights was the *Lantern des Morts* (Lantern of the Dead) which was a conical tower which dates back to 1147, built to honor St. Bernard of Clairvaux who reportedly delivered the town from the plague, but not before a quarter of the population (1,000 people) died from it. He reportedly stepped in and blessed their bread and showed them a few tricks of hygiene while he was at it.

The golden stone of the old city was especially beautiful as the light changed in late afternoon. Of special interest were the contrasting dark stone roofs called *lauzes* of the old houses covered with lichen. They



Limestone Roof in Sarlat

were originally erected with stone cleared from the fields and people found they lasted so much longer than any other roofing material – actually hundreds of years. However, the roofs had to be very steeply pitched to distribute the weight and small windows were installed to allow air circulation. This circulation was critical to encourage the lichen to grow, which actually kept the porous limestone from soaking up water and provided a sealant to stop leaks between the stones.



Sunset at St.
Emilion

We took the motorway back to St. Emilion and were sipping wine on the Chateau Franc Mayne terrace as darkness fell. After our sunset wine, we drove into St. Emilion to have dinner at Le Bouchon, sitting outdoors. The walls of the town were dramatically lit, providing a wonderful backdrop for our delicious meal. We learned that the St. Emilion area had the first vineyards to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site with vines having been grown here for two thousand years. The *Jurade* of St. Emilion is a brotherhood of wine-growers of this appellation. A royal charter was issued in 1199 by the King of England, granting legal and political rights to “*jurats*” (members of the Jurade who were roughly equivalent to aldermen with the understanding that English merchants had first dibs on the wine produced here). This authority was in

effect until the French Revolution in 1789 when the whole country was in an uproar and the finer points of wine production took a back seat to doing away with the nobility . In 1948 the *Jurade* was re-cast as a wine growers association. Every year they have a “Fete de Printemps”, or Spring Festival, in June and members parade through the town in crimson robes.

September 4, 2011

Dateline: Narbonne, France

Latitude at Narbonne 43.18 Degrees North, Longitude 3.00 Degrees East



Classic
Languedoc

We were up early today to leave St. Emilion for Bordeaux to take the train to the Languedoc-Roussillon region, which stretches from the Pyrenees Mountains on the Spanish border and along the Mediterranean Coast to the mouth of the Rhone River. The name Languedoc comes from the word *langue* (language). Add to that “*d’*” (from) and *Oc*, which was the dialect spoken in the region of Southern France at the time. Literally Languedoc translates as “language of *Oc*”. In this dialect *Oc* meant yes. *Langue d’oil* was the dialect of Northern France. *Oil* later became *oui* and it still means yes today. However, *Oc* has more or less faded from the lexicon. Our first order of business was to return a rental car which was not at all as easy as one might think. We had the sadistic GPS that kept insisting on U Turns and kept scolding us for being off-

course. We finally switched off that annoying voice and again relied on the navigational devices from antiquity – a car rental map, posted signs and directions from locals. We actually had an accidental/incidental tour of the city of Bordeaux while trying to locate the train station, so that provided a few moments of serendipity. The city is built on the Garonne River and has been a major seaport since pre-Roman times. It has few historical landmarks left, with industrial and maritime structures overtaking the city. Those few exceptions are from the 18th and 19th Centuries where an attempt was made to recreate a little of the grandeur of bygone days. A notable exception is the Esplanade de Quinconces – a large area lined with trees and statuary that was built in the mid 1800's to replace a 15th Century Chateau and a number of grand 18th Century mansions, a consequence of Bordeaux's real claim to fame which is wine exporting. It is the second oldest trading port in France after Marseilles, and the dominant export was wine. However, its true heyday came in the 12th-15th Centuries when England controlled the region and gave Bordeaux a monopoly on exporting wine to the British Isles. Bordeaux again gained prominence once the New World was discovered, and being an Atlantic Seaport, the city again could capitalize on export opportunities.

We caught the 11:25 Teoz train to Toulouse and changed trains, catching a 2:46 to Narbonne which arrived at 4:02. A short taxi ride took us from the train station to Le Boat's Charter Headquarters in Narbonne where we would find our canal charter boat for the next 10 days on the Midi Canal.



The Old City of Narbonne

Our boat was tied up canal side (the Robine Canal to be exact) which we would take northward to enter the Midi Canal. Robine was the name the Romans gave the waterway back when they were here, but the topography was vastly different then. Narbonne was a sea port and what is now the Robine Canal was an estuary. The town was very picturesque with tall sycamores, (also called plane trees) lining the banks of the canal, their overarching branches forming a green tunnel. We were told we would find sycamores all along the Midi as well. Napoleon ordered them planted to provide shade for the mules which pulled the barges back in the day. It was not that he was such a humanitarian, but rather practical in knowing mules could be more productive if they did not collapse from heat exhaustion.

There are 91 working locks on the Canal du Midi, which runs 150 miles (240 km.) and it is credited with making the Languedoc a rich trade area. It runs from the Mediterranean to the junction of the Garonne River in Toulouse, which then empties into the Atlantic. There are 13 more locks on a 23 mile stretch on the Robine Canal (also called the La Nouvelle or New Branch) which runs through Narbonne and on to the Mediterranean, thus creating two access points from the Mediterranean Sea. The locks are currently managed by the French Navigation Authority.



The Midi Canal
near Argeliers

The Midi Canal was built between 1666 and 1681 by Pierre-Paul Requet to provide an inland waterway between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. The route was shorter with fewer hazards such as storms, pesky Barbary Pirates and other countries' privateers. The Robine (also called the Embranchment de la Nouvelle) was built in 1776 to allow Narbonne access to the Midi Canal. The place where the two canals join is called the *Canal de Jonction*. On the Midi the first lock designs were rectangular, but due to a problem with collapsing side walls, an oval design was adopted that provided more strength. The oval locks will accommodate a minimum of 2 boats at the same time, but some are longer to accommodate four.



An Oval Lock

Having learned this engineering lesson of ovals versus rectangles, they built all the new locks on the Robine Canal in ovals. The Midi design called for dimensions of: 11 meters at midpoint, 6 meters at the gate and a length of 30 meters. Requet restricted maximum rise to just under 3 meters and thus there was a need for multiple chambers at some sites. The Canal underwent a modernization program in the 1970's and some

of these multiple chambers were converted into a single deeper chamber, made feasible with advanced technology and modern concrete.

A lock is called an *ecluse* in French and there are small bridges across the canal called *pontelles*, and the canal itself is a *fluvial*. The gates of the lock were originally made of oak with balance beams, with each gate having a large sluice drawn up by a vertical screw, but the modernization called for electric and hydraulic systems and metal gates. At each lock there is a double front 2-story lockkeeper's house, showing the name of the lock and the name and distance to each adjacent lock in each direction. On the Embranchement de la Nouvelle (a.k.a. Robine Canal) boaters can operate the locks themselves by pressing a button, but on the Midi, a lock keeper



The Narbonne Lock

must be present, so it is a good idea to time your arrival during business hours and avoid the lunch hour from 12:30 to 1:30. But if you do have to wait, the surroundings are beautiful to wait in. The canal at its Western end at Toulouse is 433 feet above sea level. It climbs to 633 feet above sea level at its highest point west of Castelnaudary before dropping to sea level at Sete. The longest stretch with no locks is 33 miles. The shortest is 820 feet. The locks are numbered from west to east starting in Toulouse. Locks 1-18 are ascending, locks 19-86 are descending, but sometimes there are staircase locks listed as a single lock.

The Romans were quite active in Narbonne and it was the capital city of Gaul, back in the days when France was called Gaul. They built an arched bridge called the Pons Vetus over the Aude River here at Narbonne, which allowed the Roman Road, the Via Domitia, to cross the river and ultimately lead to Rome as all roads did back then. In Narbonne today there are remnants of underground granaries called the Horreum that date back to the First Century B.C.



The Robine
Canal –
Narbonne

Narbonne was also a thriving port during the Middle Ages and a huge cathedral was started in 1272 but then the Aude River silted up and consequently Narbonne was relegated to the sleepy little town of today. We have seen this in several places in our travels, the most notable example being perhaps Ephesus which now sits several miles from the sea, whereas it was once a bustling seaport. We are thankful modern dredging technology did not exist at the time of the silting or else this place might have all the charm of the Houston Ship Channel. There are remnants of a much different sea coast in the olden days with marshy bodies of brackish water called “*etangs*”, stretching the length of the coast of Languedoc-Rousillon. There was also a profusion of bulrushes along the banks of the canal which look like tall grass with wheat-like feathery tassels. In the distance we could see the mountain peaks of the Haut (high) Languedoc where there is a Parc Nationale. In addition to the interesting landscapes, there are many medieval structures here as well, but we simply

didn't have time for much sight-seeing – we had canals to explore.



The Magnifique
on the robine
Canal

We found our vessel, the *Magnifique* #509 (translation the Magnificent) bobbing gently on the sun-dappled water and officially checked in. While it was quite nice and comfortable, the *Magnifique* label was something of a stretch. My husband Gary was the Captain, and the other three of us were to be deck hands. We left our luggage on the *Magnifique* and set out to see the town. We walked to the town square which is actually on the back side of the cathedral. The town still has remnants of the old walls and towers called “donjons”. The Languedoc is another famous wine region and so we sampled some of the local product at an outdoor café, but had to move indoors due to a rain shower and an autumnal breeze that definitely let us know that fall was in the air.

The air was crisp and the steady rain made for good sleeping on board.

September 5, 2011

Dateline: Marker 172 Argeliers, France

Distance traveled today: 25 kilometers with 3 locks



A Bridge in
Narbonne

We slept in a bit since our departure was planned for 10:30 and had a leisurely stroll to a local grocery store for our provisions and then schlepped them back to the boat, crossing the canal on the Merchant's Bridge which was festooned with flowers. It was a small market which helped us keep our purchases to be schlepped manageable, which is always a good idea when we "go by feet" as some of our German friends put it. The speed limit on the canal was 8 km per hour with the caution that you should pass moored boats at only 3 km per hour and thus we knew we were in for a leisurely cruise.

Motoring south would take us to Port Nouvelle and the Mediterranean, but we planned to head north to join the Midi. We encountered our first lock, the Ecluse de Gua, as we headed north upriver on the Robine Canal upon leaving Narbonne, and we



A Deckhand
working the
Lock

had all hands on deck to maneuver through it, an action we

would repeat many times over the course of our canal exploration. The process is this: The captain will send a swabbie/deckhand ashore alongside the lock with a line tied to a cleat to help guide the boat into the lock through open lower doors. The boat pulls forward stopping at the closed door in front of it. The two on-board swabbies loop lines loosely over the bollards (really big cleats) attached to the sides of the lock, which at this point are above their heads. The lock keeper (or swabbie on the Robine Canal), will press a button to close the gate behind the boat and the water will begin to rise inside the lock, taking the vessel with it and the on-board swabbies will tighten the lines to keep the boat steady. Once the lock has filled to the appropriate water level, the lock doors in front of the boat will open, and the captain drives the boat forward out of the lock. The on-shore swabbie re-boards and the boat proceeds. Sometimes there are a series of locks so this procedure is repeated as necessary. The process is reversed coming down stream.



A Lock
Keeper's House

This is not Extreme Sport – it is Extreme Leisure. The most daring thing is boarding the boat via either a 6 inch plank or clambering aboard off the bank which involved some degree of agility. We were immediately charmed by the little postcard villages, hillside vineyards and mountains in the distance as we motored along. There were a number of stone lock keepers houses, some abandoned, some repurposed. The over-arching sycamores formed shady tunnels that we motored through. The sycamore leaf is 3 lobed with several points – much like a

maple leaf, and at this time of year just starting to turn yellow. The tree trunks are mottled brown-gray and off white. It is so peaceful – no Internet, no cable TV, no telephones. There are also massive umbrella pines, and banks lined with oleander and the distinct scent of wild mint was in the air.



A Heavy Duty
Bollard on the
Robine Canal

After only two miles we came to our second lock, the Ecluse Raonel and then we passed by the town of Sallèles de Aude, another storybook village which also had Roman occupiers in ancient times as evidenced by pottery left behind during the First to Third Centuries A.D. , along with the remnants of furnaces and an quarry that they used. Just beyond this point that the Aude River crosses the Robine, and the river is channeled in an aqueduct over the canal.



An aqueduct on
the Midi Canal

Rather than using existing river channel of the Aude and other rivers, the Midi and the Robine Canals were dug by hand. The thinking was that they would be much more stable in that water levels could be controlled, whereas rivers tended to either flood or dry up. They actually built aqueducts so the canal could cross rivers and streams without the waters mingling, thus making water levels much easier to manage without being concerned about rainfall or the lack thereof.



Le Chat de
Pesche

We continued traveling north a short distance until we reached the junction (or *jonction* as the French call it) of the Robine and Midi Canals at Marker 168. The Midi Canal runs east and west and the markers get larger running west to east. We turned east once in the Midi, making our way to our stop for the night near the town Argeliers at Marker 172 in mid-afternoon. We tied up along the banks to one of thousands of sycamores that line the canal. We walked up the canal a ways to check out a restaurant called Le Chat de Pesche (a.k.a. Catfish), but it was closed until dinnertime and so we meandered into the village and stopped at Restauranque for drinks in the garden. Restauranque is sort of a combination restaurant and swimming pool for use by canal boaters. This is something of a necessity for swimmers because swimming in the Midi is not at all advised since boat toilets flush directly

into it. We looked at the menu, but decided we would cook on the boat so we stopped at the local *charcuterie* – a mom



The
Charcuterie in
Argeliers

and pop operation (or more appropriately Maman and Papa). We bought some tasty veal chops and a most excellent local red wine called Marcelin Albert Minervois for the modest sum of 4.90 Euro. Papa wanted to hear about Gary's Harley Davidson, but we found that "Softail Springer" didn't translate well into French. As for Maman, she kissed her fingertips in the stereotypically French gesture and exclaimed "ooh la la" over our wine selection and explained that this wine won the Silver Medal in Paris in a recent competition. We went to the local market (a.k.a. marche) to buy potatoes and onions and had a veritable feast as we ate outside on the upper deck of our boat. The day was pleasantly warm and the evening cool and breezy, perfect for grape growing and canal cruising. Ooh la la indeed!

September 6, 2011

Dateline: Marker 201, Colombieres, France

Distance traveled today: 29 kilometers



La
Languedocienne
Co-op

This morning we learned a valuable lesson the hard way. We learned that one should schedule a shower after the engines have been running, unless of course you want to torture your body with an icy one. After breakfast we took another stroll into Argeliers to check out the grape processing co-op called La Languedocienne. It was a beehive of activity since this is the harvest season with tractors with small open trailers laden with grapes taking turns backing up to dump their loads into a hopper with a giant augur like thing that smashed them into mush, and from there the mush was moved along to a device that separated out the leaves and twigs from the juice and skin. Today they were processing Syrah Rose grapes according to a chalkboard by the hopper.

We saw the Marcellin Albert tasting room across the street and decided to get more of their fabulous wine. There, much to our delight we saw four large spigots



Filling up at
the Wine
Faucet

in the wall which dispensed red, white, merlot and rose – all for sale for 1.50 Euro per liter. Local people queued there to fill up all manner of containers, including one gentleman who had one the size of a 5 gallon gas can. The proprietor told us he comes in every week and fills it up. We assumed he owned a restaurant, but were told no, it's just for personal consumption. We bought a 5 liter container (about 1.5 gallons) and proceeded to fill it for our own personal consumption. We also bought a bottle of cognac for 5 Euros to test our theory that it is impossible to buy any bad wine or liqueurs in France.



Barges on the
Midi Canal

We left Argeliers at 11:00 a.m. and continued east on a brilliantly sunny morning, so clear we could see mountains to the South that we fancied to be the Pyrenees. We stopped near the village of Capestang at Marker 189, having traveled the grand distance of 17 kilometers (a little over 10 miles). There were a lot of boats tied up along both sides of the canal and so we went up river a bit to find a spot in the shade. While we were preparing to leave for our short walk back to Capestang, a bicyclist poked his head in the window and asked if we had a corkscrew. We said yes so he stuck his bottle of wine through the window and Gary opened it for him on the spot so he and his 3 friends could enjoy their canal-side picnic under the sycamores.



Boats at
Capestang

We had a delicious lunch at La Bateliere overlooking the canal , with a steady parade of tractors and trailers full of grapes headed toward Argeliers in the background. Gary and Sharon had mussels (moules) which they pronounced fabulous, and the search for any superior to these became almost a daily quest. As we left Capestang, we noted that there are faucets with fresh water for sale all along the canal which works on the honor system. The procedure was to fill up and then go pay the "Captainiere" located next to the Tourist Information Center in town. We continued on our way passing the ruins of a castle, perhaps a ruin of a Cathar nobleman's home.

The word " Cathar" comes from the Greek word *katharos* meaning "pure". The Cathars were a 13th Century religious sect which was highly critical of perceived corruption in the Catholic Church and were quite extreme in their views. They were convinced that the material world was a force of evil and the forces of good were on the side of those renouncing all the fun stuff (sex, violence and meat).This group of dissenters, with notions of independence from both the Catholic Church and France found themselves in great need of castles for refuge. This movement was centered in the Languedoc-Rousillion region of France and the countryside today is filled with ruins of castles from that era on the highest of the craggy peaks dotting the area.The region also seems to have a lot of Spanish influence, which comes as no surprise since Spain is

just over the mountains.



Cathar Country

The Catholic Church went to war against the Cathars, considering them heretics. The kings of Spain and France both sought to take over the territory the Cathars controlled and joined with the pope in a Crusade against them led by Simon de Montfort in 1209. The heretics' land was promised to the crusaders and the pope issued *carte blanche* forgiveness in advance for any atrocities they might choose to commit. That promise, plus countless looting and plundering opportunities, plus the certainty of a place in heaven proved to be too great a temptation to refuse. Consequently, there were scores of atrocities. In 1209 20,000 people were massacred in the town of Beziers. Not all of them were Cathars- in fact most were traditional Catholics – but the pope ordered the Crusaders to kill them all and let God sort them out. And wouldn't you know that the pope at this time was most ironically named Pope Innocent III. But the atrocities did not end at Beziers. The following year after a 7 week siege against the town of Minerve, there were 140 people burned to death for refusing to renounce their faith. By 1244 it was pretty much all over, with the last Cathar castle falling to the armies of the pope and the two kings.



Tunnel del Malpas

We entered the Tunnel de Malpas (Souterrain de Malpas), 541 feet long and a maximum height of 26 feet, which would be no problem on foot, but when you are on the top deck of a boat, it can get close. We emerged from the tunnel at Colombieres, our destination for the night. We had another feast on board – tuna fish sandwiches, potato chips and jug wine. The 5 Euro cognac was declared superb. It was also an effective sleep aid which we appreciated since there was a lot of canal traffic in the night rocking the boat.

September 7, 2011

Dateline: Marker 166, Le Somail, France

Distance traveled today: 46 kilometers



A Place to
Mind Your Head
or Lose It.

We learned still more boat lessons today in addition to the one about showering after the boat engines have been running:

1. Mind your head – there are low branches, limbs, bridges and tunnels
2. Don't fall in the canal – it will not be pleasant
3. Get the angle right on going up the bridge ladder – too upright you will bonk your head, not upright enough, you will bonk your hiney
4. Step high going into heads – there is a ledge there in case of a flooded shower or toilet
5. Learn to love tepid beverages that you used to think needed ice

Today we continued traveling east, stopping and tying up to a nearby sycamore a few kilometers from the city of Beziers. We were told that many of the sycamores on the canal have a virus and will have to be cut down which would really be a shame. They are the source of so much of the charm (and a relief from the sun).



The Fonserranes Staircase

We opted to stop our eastward progress here since, to visit the city, we would have to traverse 7 locks in a row which were called the Fonserrannes Staircase and which would take more time and effort than we wanted to devote to it, particularly since we had already navigated through 10 locks already. Instead we mounted the bicycles we had gotten with the boat and pedaled over some rough terrain on some really

uncomfortable bicycle seats to view the locks to see what we would be missing. We had several broad vistas here at the top of the locks of the city of Beziers and surrounding country side of the Orb River Valley. Beziers was the



Biking to
Beziers

home of the Canal du Midi designer, Pierre Paul Riquet, and also home to a 14th Century Cathedral, but our bicycle seats dictated that we must dismount as quickly as possible to avoid permanent damage to our respective bottoms, so we didn't undertake any city sightseeing . We speculated that perhaps the French anatomy differs significantly from that of American and thus the bicycle seat would not torture them as it did us. We managed to pedal back to our boat and load the torture devices back on, vowing never to pedal them again.

We set off going west on the Midi, backtracking for a short distance of 6 kilometers and once we passed the "*Jonction*" with the Robine Canal, we enjoyed another leisurely 40 kilometers with no locks. We again crossed the Aude River on an aqueduct that kept the path of the river separate from the path of the canal. We were struck by how many cheerful, and even exuberant people we encountered, almost all French. They would wave to us, raise a glass in a toast and call out their "*bon jours*" as we passed, along with the occasional *bon appetit* if we were eating on board. We saw a number of tasting rooms on our route where you could tie up and walk up a path to

sample the local Languedoc vintages. The wines of the Languedoc are marked with an embossed Cross of the Languedoc which looks like a Maltese Cross with little balls on each point of the cross. The Languedoc Rousillon area makes two types of wine, the Minervois and the Corbieres.



Near Le Somain

We stopped at Le Somain for the night and had another delightful dinner at a small Restaurant called Café de Boche which we found only accepted cash. We ate outdoors and as the day turned from warm to chilly with a definite hint of fall in the air. Just at dusk we saw either an otter or an extremely large rat swimming in the canal – but we agreed we would go with claiming an otter sighting. We were told that they have Canal Jousting in the village of Sete not far from where we are, but it was too late in season for it. Apparently contestants put on costumes and arm themselves with lances and paddle toward each other in gondolas with the idea of unseating the opponent. This would have been something to see. Maybe next time.

September 8, 2011

Dateline: Marker 146 – Homps, France

Distance traveled today: 20 kilometers and 4 locks

We left Le Somain around 10 a.m. after a leisurely breakfast of baguettes and pastries that Stu discovered in the village while on his morning walk. Once underway we saw the occasional ruins of more medieval castles along the banks of the Aude

River as it weaved its way around the arrow straight line of the canal.



Our Favorite Wine Tasting Room

Near the village of Ventenac de Minervois we saw our favorite tasting room on the canal. It was comprised of a space with a chair set up beside the canal. On either side of the chair were 2 large wine barrels set on end. On top were bottles of wine and glasses so you could help yourself to a free tasting. If you wanted to purchase a bottle, you could leave your money in a little box or walk up the trail to a building to buy in volume. We saw several signs along the way advertising local wine for 1.20 Euro per liter which is a bargain by anyone's standards. As soon as we drank up the 5 liters we bought in Argeliers, we planned to fill up. We stopped at a marina in the village of Argens Minervois to get water and a few groceries at the *epicerie* which is a French version of a 7-11, minus the junk food. We stowed our supplies and took a stroll through the town, whose highlight seemed to be the *mairie* (a.k.a. town hall).



Cassoulet

On the advice of the proprietor of the marina store, we sought out a canal-side restaurant called La Guingette, which proved to be a little gem of a restaurant, where the more adventurous diners in our party (Sharon and Gary) ordered a local dish called *cassoulet* which included duck, sausage and white beans, all cooked in a stew like concoction. They pronounced it fabulous. I was starting to see a pattern here (no bad food in France- no bad wine in France) The mystery is how these people stay so skinny. I settled for *loup de mer* which I learned was sea bass and not sea wolf as its name would imply. We all agreed the French fries served with the meal were the best we have ever eaten, but do suspect they were likely cooked in lard.

We did have some excitement at La Guingette. It seems a woman and her daughter had returned to the restaurant looking for the mother's purse and they had been sitting at our table. We all stood and searched, and the maitre d' and waiter joined us, but we found no purse. As they were leaving on a narrow path along the canal to go back to their boat, the daughter lost her footing and plunged into the canal. She was in no danger of drowning since it was barely waist deep, but we do think she was in danger of getting some awful skin disease from the obviously less than healthy canal water. The restaurant employees all rallied around to fish her out, and sort of haphazardly clean her and dry her off. We don't know if the missing purse was located, but we certainly hoped so. Their day was bad enough as it was.



The Ecluse at Homps

We returned to our boat and continued our journey westward to the strangely named town of Homps. We had to traverse a double lock and had to wait our turn due to a traffic jam of sorts, but with all hands on deck (except for one that was ashore), we successfully maneuvered our way through. We tied up and enjoyed a light meal of pasta on board.

September 9, 2011

Dateline: Marker 126 Marseillette, France

Distance traveled today: 40 kilometers with 7 locks



Stalking Flies

We awoke in Homps, still not quite mastering the pronunciation of the name, which was somewhere between “humps” like a camel has and “Whoomp” from the rather mindless party song from 1993 called “Whoomp! There It Is” by a rap duo called Tag Team. We seemed to be attracting flies at this point and were not exactly sure what was up with that, but we fashioned a mostly ineffective flyswatter from a stick and two paper plates held together with duct tape and tried to hold them at bay. We determined that it needed to be more aerodynamic in order to attain the proper speed to actually dispatch a fly, so we

poked holes in it, but that actually did little to improve its lethal properties. We enjoyed pastries from the local patisserie (as did the flies).



La Fabrique
Winery

We continued to travel west, stopping at the ancient arches of the spillway at Le Redoute, built in 1693 to provide flood relief in case of heavy rains. We got off the boat at the lock there to find very little activity. We did happen upon a huge wine co-operative called La Fabrique (which translates as “factory”) but things were pretty quiet there as well. Back on the boat, we had to negotiate a series of locks to get to our destination for the evening, the village of Marseillette. There were 3 double locks, one triple and one single. By the time we tied up for the night we had only traveled 12 kilometers, but it had taken us 4 hours. With all the locks we had gained quite a bit of altitude, but the highest point is still upstream at Narouze, where the altitude is 190 meters above sea level or about 623 feet and it is past where we will be stopping our journey .



A Lock Near

Homps

We made a quick trip to the *epicerie* (the 7-11 like store) for a few grocery items and we had dinner on board. The larger grocery store with more goods is called a *marche* (translation is market) and is frequently a Carrefours chain store, although they could not be called a supermarkets by any stretch of the imagination. We met a real character here who was an Englishman now living in Australia. He jokingly told us he doesn't like Americans ever since one of them "nicked" his sister (that is stole his sister) back in England and took off with her on a Harley Davidson and he hasn't seen her since. He did say the American asked for her hand in marriage from his Dad who said it was okay with him since it meant more food for the rest of the family.

We continued to learn boating tips as we travel the canal. One we learned just today was that the forward deck hand should not stand too close to the front of the boat when the gate of the lock opens. It could result in a spontaneous canal water shower. The staterooms on our boat were smallish – actually sort of coffin like in some respects, but because we had 4 rooms and two couples, we were able to spread out, but we still had to crawl to the end of the bed each morning to get out of it and crawl to the head of the bed to get into it. While this was a bit cramped, we spent most of our time in the spacious galley or up on the deck which we found to be delightful.



Art Gallery at
the Aiguille

Lock

We arrived at the Aiguille Lock (a double lock) during the lunch hour of the lock keeper and so we had to wait, but we did have the chance to enjoy his large "sculpture" gallery. The pieces were whimsical to downright funny figures. There was one of a woman with hair made from bedsprings, bolts for eyes and saw blades for feet. He also has sort of Rube Goldberg mechanical garden where one movement sets another piece in motion and so forth. One we particularly enjoyed was a figure taking a leak in a bowl which fills and causes another figure to box the ears of a third figure, which causes the first figure to take another leak. From there we motored on to Marseillette and spend a quiet evening with dinner on board.

September 10, 2011

Dateline: Marker 118 Trebes, France

Distance traveled today: 8 Kilometers with 1 lock



The Midi near
Marseillette

We awoke in Marseillette (translation is little Marseilles and it is very little indeed). It seemed to be another Disney village, complete with waddling ducks, except Walt would have used mechanical ducks to avoid the abundance of poop that we encountered. We had tied up for the night by an old cemetery which may have contained the only people sleeping better than we did after our long haul of 40 km yesterday. We took a

short walk on the grounds to find there were mostly marble and granite crypts with plaques etched with simple sentiments such as “mon amie” (my love). There were porcelain, silk and some real flowers with watering cans placed here and there for families to use as needed. There were also some sculptures such as the angel with the fallen soldier at her feet which was a memorial to WWI soldiers with WWII names added later. We noted there were many, many names for such a small village.



The
Lavomatique in
Trebes

We proceeded to our destination for the evening, the town of Trebes, which compared to Marseillette was a bustling metropolis. We had several missions to accomplish here – some successful, some not. On the not side we had hoped to visit an ATM to get some more Euros. We found 4 different banks and were turned down 4 different ways. We had hoped to buy a train ticket to Narbonne from Trebes, but found that we would have to take a taxi to a different train station. We had hoped to be able to mail the key back to the Franc Mayne (our B&B in St. Emilion) that I had accidentally purloined, but the post office closed at 11:30 on this day. On the success side, we needed to do some laundry and were directed to a local laundromat which turned out to be about a kilometer from the river where we were tied up at a local marina. With bags full of dirty clothes slung over our shoulders like hobos, we made our way to the Laundromat. It cost 4 Euros to wash and drying was 1 Euro for every 10 minutes. We left our wash going and crossed the street to a restaurant for wine and chicken tapas

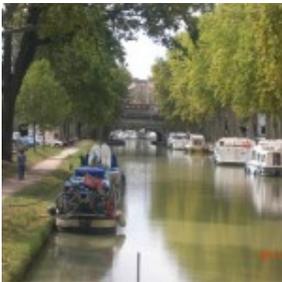
which were supposed to be a snack, but were so good we ordered more and declared that our evening meal.

September 11, 2011

Dateline: Marker 105 Carcassonne, France

Distance Traveled today: 13 kilometers, with 4 locks.

We awoke in Trebes (pronounced "Treb-uh) with just the slightest nasally exhalation on the "uh", where we went to the marina for fuel. There was a crisp breeze with hints of approaching autumn and a lot of boat traffic, which made for challenging boating, not to mention that it was a tight squeeze at the fuel dock. Alongside the canal we saw more chestnut trees, along with umbrella pines and oaks instead of the rows of sycamores and there were dense thickets of oleander all along the route to Carcassonne.



The Midi at
Carcasonne

It took us 4 hours to travel the 13 kilometers from Trebes to Carcassonne since we had 4 locks to negotiate – 3 singles and 1 triple. Carcassonne had several marinas, but we elected to tie up outside of town to enjoy the peace and quiet. We walked into town to the train station to buy our tickets to Narbonne for the end of our trip and made a quick visit to the *marche* for a few provisions and had lunch on board. At the *marche* we encountered what has to be the laziest beggar in the history of the world. He was stretched out on the sidewalk by the door to the *marche* sound asleep and snoring, a bottle of Heineken

nestled in the crook of his arm. He had a beret with a few coins in it, for donations of loose change or other largesse granted to him by shoppers. We assumed he would spring into action at the first sign of any pilfering .



Basse
Carcassonne
with Le Cite
Above it

After stowing our groceries, Gary and I took a walk to see the town and found there to be the new town (also called Basse Carcassonne, which means lower) where we were and the old medieval city/castle up on a steep bank above the Aude River, which they call *Le Cite* (the City). The name Carcassonne according to legend comes from a Madam Carcas who lived here during the time of a siege by Charlemagne and actually made the attackers abandon the siege by throwing a fat pig over the walls despite the number of starving citizens in the fortress. This messed with the minds of the siege troops who decided if they were throwing fat pigs over the wall, there was no hope of starving them out and they abandoned the siege. There is a bust of Madame Carcas at the Narbonne Gate. Scholars however believe the name came from the town's original name, which was Carcas, but that makes for a much less colorful story.



The Town
Square of
Basse
Carcassonne

Some of the construction in the medieval city dates back to Roman times, but most of the restoration was done in the 19th Century. The new town is quite old as well, but it is just newer than Le Cite. The Aude River, whose course we have more or less paralleled all week separates the old and new cities. Back in olden times, the new city housed a lot of workers from the castle and most visitors to the castle. It seems the resident Duke thought it wise to keep them outside the walls in case they turned on him. Carcassonne is now considered a fully restored medieval town, complete with fairy tale turrets and ramparts. Many have criticized the restoration done in the 19th Century for that very fairy tale aspect as being too Disney-like and would prefer the authenticity of the ruins.



A View of Le
Cite from
Basse
Carcassonne

Carcassonne was at a strategic crossroads in its day between Spain and France and between the Atlantic and Mediterranean. Its original settlement was created by the Romans in the 2nd Century BC. Its peak of power was in the 12th Century when a noble family named Trencavel ruled here. This family built and occupied the chateau, called the Chateau Comtal within the walls. The chateau is actually a fortress itself with a moat and high walls, fire towers and galleries for archers to shoot down at invaders. The cathedral called Basilique St.-Nazaire was also built within the walls. There are actually two sets of ramparts – an inner and an outer. The space between is called the *lices* and was used for activities such as archery and jousting.



Chateau Comtal
– Home of the
Trencavels

During the Crusade of 1209 against the Cathars, 24 year old Viscount Raymond-Roger Trencavel offered sanctuary to a group of Cathars who were being persecuted by the Crusaders. His fortress was then besieged in an attempt to force him to give them up. . Carcassonne was independent from France in those days, so for the French it was not as if they were attacking their own countrymen. Trencavel was captured during a so called truce and placed in his own prison where he died under what is termed “mysterious circumstances”. It seems that history is not too clear on this point. The troops left in the fortress soon surrendered, but rather than killing them, the Crusaders expelled them from the city. This way there was no

muss or fuss and they were free to loot at will. They were permitted to settle across the river in what is today Basse Carcassonne. This defeat eventually led to Carcassonne being incorporated into France.

September 12, 2011

Distance traveled today: 300 yards



Madam Carcas
at the
Narbonne Gate

Today we moved from our canal side mooring to a marina in Basse Carcassonne, where we could enjoy shore power and take on more fresh water. We took a taxi to the gates of Le Cite (the ancient part of Carcassonne) which can be reached by two bridges, the Neuf (new) and the Vieux (old). We entered through the Narbonne Gate, which is reached by a crooked drawbridge – made that way to slow any attackers. From there we admired the old Roman walls, now part of what is the inner wall. Subsequent fortifiers in medieval times simply added stone and mortar to make it higher and to add arrow slits, since arrows were not part of the Roman arsenal. The reconstructed outer walls of today contain 52 towers and are almost 2 miles in circumference.



A Barbican
Used to Defend
Le Cite

We made our way to a restaurant called Adelaide on a square called St. Jean's Place to enjoy lunch, and we again sampled the *cassoulet*. We proceeded through the gates of the inner walls which are the same gates from Roman times, passing the barbican – whose design was semicircular and open on the inside to allow defenders to fire down on any invaders who got past the outer wall. Each gate also had a portcullis (a huge iron grate that could be lowered) and big wooden doors. The inner walls also had arrow slits. With all these defenses it is clear why a siege was more successful than a head on assault. You could starve them out if you could not root them out by force, and then there was always a host of diseases that could wipe out either side or both.



The Lises and
the Inner wall
of Carcassonne

After lunch we planned to take in the highlights of Carcassonne, which included massive moats (called *lises*) between the inner and outer walls. Contrary to popular castle

lore, the moats in medieval castles were not filled with water. They were essentially ditches intended to keep invaders from rolling towers up to the walls and going over the wall. They also prevented tunneling since anyone attempting a tunnel under the outer wall would emerge into the space between the two walls where they could be attacked with rocks and boiling oil or whatever was on hand. On the subject on tunneling, sometimes they would be dug to try to undermine the foundation of the outer wall and to force it to collapse. To combat that, there were walkways above where invaders could have unpleasant things dropped on them.



Inside Chateau
Comtal

We hired a guide for a tour of the Chateau Comtal. The tour was supposed to be in English, but it was more like “Frenglish”; however, our tour guide was very knowledgeable and enthusiastic and even played the roles of some of the more colorful characters who have lived inside the wall of Le Cite.

We learned that the Chateau Comtal was used in 1990 as the movie set for Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, starring Kevin Costner, and many of the locals were used as extras. We also learned in the course of our “Frenglish Tour” that Carcasonne was restored by a duke (“duc”) whose name was Viollette. In French “*duc*” is pronounced like “duck”, which caused us some confusion until we caught on to this small detail as we heard, “the duck did this and the duck did that”, etc. One thing the duck (oops make that the *duc*) did that



Some of Le Duc's Restorations

has caused a lot of controversy is that he took some artistic license with the restoration and did not adhere strictly to historical details in the architecture. The purity of the site was not maintained. One example cited of his transgression was that he put flat walls on the sides of the barbican when everyone knows they should be rounded. He also put a variety of roofs on various structures within the fortress wall – some cones, some chateau style, some Romanesque, some Gothic. It was quite an eclectic mix, but to the average tourist (ourselves included) – it is a beautiful thing. At various times in history, there were four types of monks from different orders – Cistercian, Benedictine, Dominican and Franciscan and so their buildings added an interesting mix as well, long before Le Duc got involved.



The St. Nazaire Church

We walked by the St. Nazaire Church which was a basilica in its day, but due to the diminished population today it is not even a parish church. It started out as a Romanesque Church,

but after the fall of Carcassonne, the northern French decided they would tear it down and replace it with a Gothic structure (their architecture of choice). The teardown proved quite costly so they abandoned it and just added Gothic elements where they could. We made a brief stop to see the Hotel de la Cite which is both an elegant hotel and restaurant which we found to be beautiful, but ridiculously extravagantly priced. It was a good thing we already



The Hotel de
la Cite

had lodging. This was the Bishop's Palace back in medieval days so we concluded the Bishop lived pretty high on the hog. We took a self guided walking tour and strolled through the village and then took a bus back to the Centre Ville (city center) and walked to the boat to "freshen up" for dinner. Later we would take the navette (little train) back up to Le Cite for dinner. We have enjoyed spectacular weather with clear skies, crisp days and cool evenings. From the ramparts of the castle we could see the Pyrennes Mountains to the south. To the north we saw a straight line of trees running east and west that define the Midi Canal and the somewhat snaky course of the Aude River between the Castle and the new town.



A View of
Basse
Carcassonne
from the
Ramparts of le
Cite

We went back to the Citadel that night and the dramatic castle lighting made it appear truly magical. We had dinner at the Auberge des Lices in the shadow of the cathedral and there was another excellent *cassoulet* on the menu. We learned that a member of l'Academy (Universelle de Cassoulet (a.k.a. Universal Cassoulet Academy), who knew the dish, passed it down from the Romans. It can include a "*confit*" (pronounced con-fee with the accent on "fee") of jelly like stuff made from duck fat with either pieces of fruit or duck meat suspended inside. (This detail was a deal killer for me, but our adventurous eaters who ordered the cassoulet, pronounced it *magnifique*.) We managed to find a taxi to take us back to our boat in Basse Carcassonne where we spent the night.

September 13, 2011

Dateline: Marker 118 Trebes, France

Distance traveled today: 14 kilometers, with 4 locks

Today, we again headed east to return our boat to Trebes, where we would disembark. We traveled 13 kilometers today to get back to Trebes, passing through the same 4 locks only in reverse and going down instead of up at each lock and so we had to let the lines out versus tightening them up.



We were blessed with yet another beautiful day – a cool morning, a warm afternoon and a cool evening. While in one of the locks we were side by side with a French family who told us they spend July through September on their boat. They showed us a little garden of herbs growing on their top deck. When we cleared that lock and were queued up for the next one, the lady of the boat scurried off their boat, over a small bridge and around to our boat to give us some of her fresh herbs she had grown to use in preparing our dinner that night. The bounty included basil and lemon thyme and assorted *herbes aromatiques* as she described them. We were quite impressed with the warmth of the French people who quite undeservedly often get a bad rap for snootiness. We have found that an initial greeting of *bon jour* (good day) or a *bon soir* (good evening) goes a long way in starting a congenial conversation and is essentially the well-mannered thing to do here. In contrast we have seen English speaking tourists charging up to locals and demanding to know where “the damned cathedral is at” without any sort of preamble or greeting and they can definitely receive the “stink eye” from the French.

We arrived in Trebes with several chores to do. We still needed to mail the key back to the B&B in St. Emilion – having failed at that on a previous visit, and we also needed to shop for our last meal aboard. We went to the patisserie for bread and the charcuterie for meat and also managed to secure a few Euros at the local ATM.



A Challenging

Place to Tie Up

After doing our shopping, we motored downstream from the town of Trebes to tie up in the shade of the sycamores. We have learned not to tie up to trees across the tow path since that is frequently used by bicyclists, joggers and casual strollers, and in the dusk, they could accidentally "clothesline" themselves. We ended up tying up to tree roots on a steep bank right over the water and this involved an interesting maneuver whereby I lay prone to tie a line to the roots and Stu was in charge of holding on to the waistband of my shorts to keep me out of the water. It was touch and go for a while there and we thought we would both go in, but thankfully we managed to avert disaster for this, our final night.

September 14, 2011

Dateline: Nice, France



The Train to Nice

We returned the boat in Trebes to the LeBoat office there and took a taxi to Carcassonne's train station at 10:00 a.m. We then caught the 11:30 Teoz train to Marseilles. There was a delay (or *retard* as they call it), but we did manage to catch our 4:35 TGV train to Nice arriving around 6:00 p.m. and then took a taxi to the Hotel Campanile at the Nice Airport. We ate at the hotel and Gary ordered *osso bucco* and pronounced it the

best ever. (this is a common pronouncement – not that there is a real comparison – the best one is usually the one he is eating now). We also enjoyed a full-sized real bed instead of our cozy berth on the *Magnifique* which had been our home for 9 days. Tomorrow we will fly to Munich for the next part of our adventure.