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Special Contributor

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Photos by Emilie C. Harting

Castles, Roman ruins abound on relaxing trip down France's Canal du Midi



The hotel barge Anjodi rounds a bend during a tree-lined stretch of the Canal du Midi. The barge's maximum speed was 10 knots, which allowed a leisurely look at scenery.

My longtime dream of traveling along the Canal du Midi in southwestern France finally came true this spring on a six-night cruise on the hotel barge Anjodi.

Vibrant green trees reached up on either side to form an *allée* above the glasslike water. Each day we passed by neatly planted fields of mustard, rapeseed for canola oil, wheat and red poppies, and the occasional village on the horizon. At times, horses ran wild in the distance.

The canal, one of five UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the region, was built in the 1600s to transport wheat from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean.



Disney used the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Carcassonne, a collection of villages, churches and forts, as a model for some of its theme park structures.

Now, pleasure boats meander along the canal, going up and down locks where the land rises and falls.

Each day, we went by van to historic sites, many with Roman origins. Some passengers walked at every opportunity; others sat on deck, reading and sunbathing, or socialized in the lounge as the boat moved along at a maximum of 5 knots.

We were in the midst of the Languedoc-Roussillon region, known for its local cheeses, among them Roquefort, a sheep's-milk cheese, and its chablis and cabernet wines. Our master chef paired these with dishes such as slow-roasted lamb, or regional dishes such as confit of duck and supreme of guinea fowl.

Fish entrees such as fillet of wild bream were served with local vegetables, followed by parfaits and Armagnac-laced desserts.

We explored the fortified medieval city of Carcassonne, a hilltop panoply of castles, drawbridges, towers and village squares. Walt Disney was inspired by its appearance. At Minerve, a fourth-century city built into steep, rocky ravines, we went down into one of the crevices to an ancient well.

At Fonserannes, we climbed the famous seven locks, considered a marvel of engineering when they were built in 1697. At each successive level, we rose about 40 feet. The reward was a full view over the valley to the palace on the hill at Béziers.

Villages along the way were especially memorable: Agde, with a confluence of bridges and canals at the center, and Poilhes, a quiet 17th-century hamlet on a curve of the canal where we shared the path with bikers.

In the larger town of Pézenas, known for its bright doorways and unusual window boxes, the main square had a diorama of the playwright Molière, in full dress. He was conversing in the very spot where he often sat and took notes on passersby in the 1600s.

At the end of the trip, the Anjodi slipped under a bridge and docked at the village of Le Somail.

Here there's an enormous bookstore, Le Trouve Tout du Livre, and centuries-old houses with pastel shutters and towpaths on either side. It was hard to leave the tranquility of the canal and the rolling landscapes of southwestern France.

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