

## Canal du Midi Cruise, 2003 – Synopsis

**Day 1 - Sept 6 – Castelnaudary (pk 65)**

Pick up boats at Crown Blue Line.  
Dinner in Town.

**Day 2 - Sept 7 - Castelnaudary – Bram (pk 81)**

17 locks – 46.44 m.  
Lunch after first locks in Castelnaudary.

**Day 3 - Sept 8 - Bram – Carcassonne (pk 105.5)**

7 locks – 17.39 m.  
Lunch above Lalande lock (pk 98).

**Day 4 - Sept 9 - in Carcassonne**

Car trip to Albi.

**Day 5 – Sept 10 – in Carcassonne**

Car trip to Montsegur and Limoux.  
Dinner in Town.

**Day 6 - Sept 11 - Carcassonne to Trebes (pk 118)**

6 locks – 16.91 m.  
Lunch in Carcassonne on the boat.

**Day 7 - Sept 12 - Trebes to Marseillette (pk 126.5)**

3 locks – 7.84 m.  
Lunch in Trebes on the boat.

**Day 8 - Sept 13 - Marseillette to Homps (pk 145.5)**

11 locks – 31.76 m.  
Lunch near Puicheric at pk 135.

**Day 9 - Sept 14 - Homps to le Somail (pk 166)**

6 locks – 15.99 m.  
Lunch near Argens-Minervois at pk 151.

**Day 10 - Sept 15 - le Somail to Foncerannes (pk 206)**

No locks  
Lunch at Capestang at pk 188.5.

**Day 11 - Sept 16 - Foncerannes to Beziers (pk 208.2)**

9 locks – 24.03 m.  
Lunch in Town.

**Day 12 – Sept 17 – in Beziers**

Train excursion to Narbonne.

**Day 13 – Sept 18 – Beziers to Agde (pk 231)**

4 locks – 10.68 m.  
Lunch in Port Cassafieres at pk 223.

**Day 14 – Sept 19 – Agde to Port Cassafieres (pk 223)**

Lunch in Agde at l'Amiral.

**Day 15 - Sept 20 – Port Cassafieres**

Return the boats to Crown Blue Line.

Total distance travelled:

Castelnaudary to Agde (65 – 231) + Agde to P. Cassafieres (231 – 223) = 174 km.

Total number of locks: 63 for a vertical drop of 171 m and 4 cm (French are very precise).

## Boat Parties

<b>Boat #1</b> <b>("Crusader #28")</b>	<b>Boat #2</b> <b>("Crusader #18")</b>
Carol Manchester (CM) Keith Manchester (K) Anne vanderLinden (A) Willem vanderLinden (W) Carol Loncarevic (CL) Bosko Loncarevic (B)	Elizabeth Mason Clive Mason Lois MacArthur Duncan MacArthur Connie McCubbin John McCubbin

## Edited weblog as Diary

**Saturday, September 06, 2003**

Castelnaudary, KM=65

Day 1, Sept, 6, 2003

Our party assembled at the Crown Blue Line Base shortly after lunch. After the unavoidable confusion of registering, paying the deposit on boat insurance, and purchasing basic food supplies, we had a (very) short course in boat handling and rules of the road. Then we were given the keys to the boats and are now on our own.

Crews from both boats got together on board 'Crusader No. 28' for the first sampling of local cheese and wine. After polishing four bottles of excellent local Rose, it was decided to leave the berth at the base and take our first trip across the Grand Basin - all of 0.5 km.

We walked up the Rue de la Republique looking at all the restaurant windows to discover that all of them were offering cassoulet - no surprise there. Ended up at the Maison du Cassoulet, near the old town's center. An excellent dinner for 12 with plenty of wine cost Euro 20 per person, which seemed quite reasonable to all of us.

The real cruising starts tomorrow with boat No. 1 going east towards Bram, while boat No. 2 goes west towards Naurouze, before turning east and joining us at Carcassonne .

All's well.

More on Day 1

The night-life was not on our side of the river. Other than a few small restaurants in the main square, the town was dead. The only young people we saw wandering around were a few groups of two or three Foreign Legionnaires (their Headquarters are just outside the town). One stopped by our table and said 'Americans ?' We responded with one voice 'No, Canadians !' and he said 'So am I, from Red River, Alberta !'. In the true Foreign Legion tradition, there are all sorts of people who have recently joined (no questions asked) including three young Canadians. They have just completed their basic four months training and are awaiting the first posting which could be anywhere, from Sierra Leon to border guards in the Pyrénées.

**Day 2 – Sunday, September 7**

Start in Castelnaudary

End in Bram

Before breakfast, B went into town to buy baguettes and croissants for breakfast and noticed how much more life there was in the main square: there were a dozen older men playing petang while farmers were setting up some stalls to sell vegetables. When this was reported back to the boat, the stewards department decided that it would be nice to have some roast chicken for dinner. So B hopped on one of the two supplied bicycles and headed back to the town square. In the mean time the boat got underway with the intention to meet at the first lock.

Returning, B decided to take a "shortcut" and got hopelessly lost, now in rain that was quite a bit heavier than just a shower. It is difficult to miss the Canal du Midi, the main feature of the countryside around Castelnaudary but B did it for almost an hour. Eventually, he found the first lock to discover that the boat was still there waiting for the locks to start operating at 11 :00. (As a water conservation measure the locks will only open on the hour unless there are four boats waiting.)

After a very tasty (free range) chicken dinner we got under way and spent the day learning how to 'make fast' and 'let go' the lines while passing through 17 locks for a level drop of over 45 meters.

It rained, off and on, most of the day but as there was no wind, it was not difficult to learn to steer the boat.

After a rather challenging day, we decided to tie up at the port of Bram at 18 :00 . After an excellent chicken soup, most of the crew had a run ashore to see the village of Bram, famous for Simon de Monfort's cruelty during the opening days of the Albigensian Crusade. One must read about it to appreciate the history of this region.

Today, Bram does not have much to offer visitors. The outline of the medieval town is preserved in the pattern of circular streets surrounding the church in the centre but the city walls are all gone. We could see this pattern clearly from the air as we approached Carcassonne Airport on Saturday.

### **Day 3 – Monday, September 8**

Start in Bram  
End in Carcassonne

William and Anne vanderLinden had driven down from Holland to join our expedition. They left their car in Castelnaudary and today W decided to bicycle back about 15 km and move the car forward to Carcassonne. We tested our 'communications' equipment (cheap Radioshack Audiovox walkie-talkies) and off went W while the boat proceeded down the canal for a much better ride, in better weather, and with only 7 locks to negotiate. We have now passed through almost a half of the total number of locks so further progress should be easier and easier.

Our plan worked out well and W re-joined the boat around 14 :30, a few km up the canal from Carcassonne. His only comment on his adventure was that 'French do not know how to make bicycles. Mine was an instrument of torture'.

### **Day 4 – Tuesday, Sept. 9**

[ Boat in Carcassonne all day]

We should have listened to Willem who travels to France twice a year and knows French work habits well. Instead, K & B decided to go to the market bright and early, getting up at 6 am. Maintenance workers were just hosing down the pavement and starting to set up stalls and were a bit confused to see us, not understanding why we were there. We returned two hours later to find the market just getting going. We bought fresh eggs and goat cheese from a farmer, bacon sausages and pate from a boucherie, milk, jam and grapefruit from an epicerie.

We decided to leave the boat for a day and make a side trip to Albi. W has a nice hatchback Rover but it only sits 5. So for the trip to Albi, K sat in the back compartment (normally reserved for Midas, their golden retriever) while CL occupied that space on the return trip.

It was the day of heaviest rain yet. At times it poured so hard that we could hardly see the road yet W kept going ahead and keeping the wheels on the road.

Albi is about 100 km NNW of Carcassonne. The road leads through Mezamet and Castris and through the Regional Forest Park over the Black Mountains (Montagne Noire). If the weather had been nicer, we could have stopped at any of the dozen lookout spots for a picnic. Instead, we kept going and arrived at Albi just before noon. We did what the guide-books recommend: drove through the modern town, crossed the Tarn river on the new breach and then turned around to enter the medieval city using the Old Bridge. The view of the old Cathedral from the old bridge is one of the famous French post cards.

We parked in the Cathedral parking lot. When we stepped out of the car we were overwhelmed

by the fortress like walls towering above. The purpose of this institution was clear: it was built just after the Albigensian Crusade (started in the middle of the XIVth Century) to show defeated Cathars (and any other aspiring heretics) who was the boss. The love of God is not in that building. Instead, a huge painting of the last judgment dominates the area above the high altar. The sinners are informed in a most graphic manner what to expect in hell. The only redeeming feature inside was the rood screen separating the choir from the nave. It is a most intricate piece of carved stone anywhere and breathes the loving care with which the un-named stone masons created it.

(running out of time – this Cyber cafe closing in five minutes)  
(Added later)

Good lunch at a very French restaurant overlooking the Cathedral square. Food good (but no Michelin Stars) but B's order was served almost cold. Very un-French. Just before leaving home, we read that French servings were on the average 30% smaller than in USA. That was not the case here as servings were ample.

After lunch we visited the Toulouse-Lautrec museum located in parts of the Bishop's Palace. A lot to see, esp. his experiments with lithography. Most impressed with a few pencil drawings when he was 11. An obvious talent.

After a short circuit through the old town streets (easy to get lost) W drove back along Route National taking us almost to Toulouse and then through Castelnaudary back to Carcassonne (A61).

Back on the boat, cold and could not start the engine. After calling the emergency number at Crown Blue Line, K discovered that cooling water had leaked out of the diesel engine.

## **Day 5 - Wednesday, Sept. 10**

[ Boat in Carcassonne all day]

[Editor's Note: The challenge of this trip has not been the French language but French keyboards. They do not use 'Qwerty' layout; instead, most important keys seem to be all in the wrong place: all the digits are shifted and below them are various symbols and accented letters (two per key so must use Alt/Graph key). A and Q are interchanged and Z and M are in the middle row instead the bottom one. It is frustrating and excruciatingly slow to type. The PC's here run windows and have MS Word with French spell checker so that's no help.]

Trip to Montsegur - fantastic!

The weather improved during the night and there were patches of blue sky when we got up. Clive visited our boat at breakfast time to tell us about their adventures. They had arrived at Carcassonne too late to get through the last lock so had to moor upstream from the Port. A few locks above Carcassonne they met a large boat going upstream and occupying the middle channel. They steered to starboard and grounded in the soft muddy bottom. It was a firm grounding and no amount of pushing could budge the boat. While pushing from shore, John fell into the mucky, filthy canal up to his armpits and had to be stripped and washed from head to toe. Eventually, with the help of another boat they freed themselves.

It is a surprise to all of us that these boats have no sewage holding tanks. The bilges are just pumped out as we go along. Considering the amount of traffic on the canal and the number of people that use it daily, this is environmentally not acceptable. Amazing that French would allow this. W thinks that they must be violating some EU regulations.

Anne decided to stay on the boat and have a quiet day so around 10:30 five of us piled into W's car for a visit to Montsegur. The road up to Lavelanet goes through farming country. It is hilly and

the villages are perched on top of these hills with a church in the centre at the highest point. The settlement pattern was obviously established in early medieval times or earlier.

As the road climbs to the foothills of the Pyrenees, the scenery changes from fields of sunflowers and vineyards to rolling meadows and forests.

The first sight of Montsegur is breathtaking. The remains of the castle are perched on top of an approx 300 m high outcrop of Jurassic limestone. The sides are mostly vertical with a goat path along a ridge on the north facing side. We climbed up to the summit in about 25 min and had a lunch in the court yard of the castle ruins.

The siege of Montsegur is one of the defining moments in the brief history of Cathar heresy. It was the last refuge of the major portion of Cathar hierarchy with over 200 perfects and adherents living there. There were also about 100 knights and foot soldiers defending the castle since Cathars did not take up arms even in self-defense. It is impossible to imagine how that many people survived there for 10 and a half months in a space not much larger than a couple of city lots. We were there on a sunny late summer day and yet the wind whistling down from the Pyrenees made it feel cold and forbidding. Hard to imagine how they felt in January with no fuel for warmth and only scant food supplies.

When one of the protective walls was breached the defenders decided that the time had come to negotiate the truce. The terms of the armistice were most generous for the time: all those who denounced Cathar heresy were free to go with knights bearing their own arms. Cathars were marched directly into a funeral pyre, and the story says that most of them jumped into it voluntarily. One is deeply moved while standing on top of the remaining ramparts, or at the bottom near the field where heretics, who were universally known as "the good men", were burnt.

## **Day 6 - Thursday, Sept. 11**

(Yes, we all remembered 9/11)

Start in Carcassonne at pk 106  
End in Trèbes at pk 117

Day started with the crew doing various chores: B to the market, K to Gare SNCF (to report to Crown Blue Line that we have no 220 V/AC); CL and CK to the laundry; and W+A to move the car forward to Trèbes and then hitchhike back.

This was the day for Boat #2 to go exploring. They rented a new Peugeot van with room for 7 so they invited one of us to join them. CM, as the keenest observer of Cathar history was selected as our representative. They left around 11:00 and, after visiting Peyrepertuse and Queribus castles, returned at 19:00 to the boat at Trèbes, just in time for a magnificent potroast dinner, prepared in our own galley by CL and A.

The smooth sailing of Boat #1 from Carcassonne was interrupted at the locks at Villedubert when B tripped, fell forward, and hit the cobble stones. The doctor at the little clinique around the corner from our mooring place in Trèbes told us that he treated injured canal travellers every day. Compared to most, B's were minor. The deep cut above the right eyebrow required four stitches. C had given the first aid on board and cleared the wound and the young doctor complemented her for being a good nurse. His final comment was: "This is a dangerous sport", presumably as a warning to others in our party since we still have eight days to travel.

The jury is still out deciding whether it is more fun to pull on the ropes through the locks or to read about Canal du Midi at home. They agree, however, that staying home is safer (and much cheaper).

## **Day 7 - Friday, Sept. 12**

Start in Trèbes at pk 117  
End in Marseillette at pk 126

The day started slowly and we did not leave this town until after lunch. At CL's suggestion, B visited the local optician who was able to straighten the frame of his glasses and grind a lens to fit the broken one. Should be functional till we get home.

Perfect weather, light clouds, just enough to keep the daytime high below 25 degrees. Walked around to see the local cemetery. They are all similar in this part of the country, with a memorial to the fallen of WW 1 in the centre. It was frightening to read the names on the monument. Trèbes is now a town of 6,000 but could have been half that size in 1914. Yet their fatalities were: 22 in 1914, 30 in 1915, 20 in 1916, 11 in 1917 and 10 in 1918. The bloodiest year was 1915 and after that there just were not enough young men left in town to keep up the rate of slaughter.

The old town is built on a local hill situated between river Aude and the Canal. It has a church at the highest point and then concentric medieval streets around it. However, the buildings are all recent, perhaps XVIIIth or XIXth century. Most of them are shuttered, and it is hard to say if they are occupied or not. Particularly noticeable is the absence of young people. There are some working age shop attendants, doctor, post office workers, etc., but there are no adolescents and only a few children. The towns would be dead if it were not for the tourist business.

Willem moved his car forward and met us when we arrived at our mooring. While we were having an excellent dinner (1 kg) of shrimp (cooked by Willem), boat 2 arrived and moored astern of ours. After greeting them like long lost friends we continued with our shrimp dinner, while they walked into town to find a restaurant.

We are impressed with the engineering skill employed in the design of the canal considering that it was started almost 350 years ago and that all the work of digging, as well as construction of locks, bridges and aqueducts was done with human (and presumably horse) power. It is probably as functional as it ever was but the annual maintenance has not been negligible. All the original wooden gates have been replaced by metal, hydraulically-operated gates and there is a constant fight against erosion of the banks and presumably dredging to maintain the depth for 7 ft draft boats. The trees we see now lining the canal are about 100 years old so they are third or fourth generation. We can see how important they are in stabilizing the banks and shading the canal to reduce evaporation.

Brilliant view of Mars as we go to bed.

## **Day 8 - Saturday, Sept. 13**

Start in Marseillette at pk 126  
Lunch at Puicheric at pk 135  
End in Homps at pk 145

A perfectly routine day: No groundings, nobody fell in the canal and no banged arms or scratched faces.

The weather is finally fully cooperating - almost too much so as the mid-day sun is pretty hot. We pushed off in time to catch the first set of double locks by 10:00. Stopped for lunch near Puicheric and arrived at Homps around 16:00. (Eventually I will re-edit these entries and use the 'official' times from the bridge log).

The second boat followed us; it was the first time on this expedition that we travelled together - but not for long. They do not like preparing meals on board so they had walked into town to find

an open restaurant while we continued with delicious lunches on board: several kinds of fresh bread, cheese, tomatoes, smoked sausages and pate. And of course tons of fresh grapes and wine. (So far we are doing very well but I will not tell you our daily consumption of wine).

After lunch, W helped us through the locks, moved the car forward to Homps and then biked back towards the boat to meet us near the last lock before Homps. Having a car is a mixed blessing as one has to move it along as the boat travels down the canal and then backtrack to rejoin the boat. On the other hand, it is wonderful to have the car to go to the supermarkets for supplies since the stores near the canal charge about 25% premium. And of course one can make side trips. We will know better at the end but it seems to me that we need only 9 or 10 days for an unhurried traverse from Castelnaudary to Port Cassafieres. On a two week rental that leaves 4 or five days for exploring the towns along the Canal (Carcassonne, Beziers and Narbonne) and for side trips.

Have not looked around Homps except to find this internet cafe. It is in a new bed and breakfast place opened 9 weeks ago by a young English couple. The best thing is that they have four DELL computers running MS 2000 and use QWERTY keyboard. It's heavenly.

### **Day 09 - Monday, Sept. 14**

Start in Homps  
End in le Somail

Somail could well be a unique hamlet in France: it has no boulangerie! Instead, there is a floating convenience store ("Epicerie flottant") where fresh bread, etc. can be obtained. Judging by the number of boats moored here, this is a popular mooring place though it is hard to say why: there is only one, rather expensive restaurant and an Italian pizzeria. Bridge, with a built-in chapel at one end is very picturesque and features in most promotional literature for the canal. The other attractions are a second-hand bookstore with over 50.000 volumes and a Hat Museum (more than 6.500 hats!), unique in Europe.

Le Somail is the base for the second largest boat charter company, Minervois Cruisers. This could not be a good year for business, judging by the number of boats tied up at the base.

We decided to give the stewards department a night off and eat out. The only restaurant in port looked expensive and crowded so it was decided to climb into W's car and drive 5 km upstream to Ventrenac-en-Minervois. It was a good decision. After walking around this small village we settled at Lou Costellou's open air restaurant. He had a big barbecue fired with grapevine stocks which burn with intense heat. Excellent and cheap meal. Next door, Chateau de Ventenac's wine cave was unfortunately closed.

### **Day 10 - Monday, Sept. 15**

Start in le Somail  
End in Foncerannes (Beziers)

The first "lock-less" day as we are now travelling along a 54 km long stretch without any locks.

The canal, downstream from Sommail is very scenic as the view is not obstructed by high banks and vegetation. Canal is full of curves as it follows the contours of the terrain though it is not obvious how M Riquet selected the route. In some cases a direct line would have been just as effective. Perhaps he could not obtain a "right-of-way" across some estates and had to circle around them.

Anyway, we are impressed with the engineering design of bridges, locks, aqueducts, spillovers and water feeders. All seem to be in the right place and have lasted in use all these years (the last horse-pulled barges disappeared in 1935, last commercial traffic in mid 1990's). Sometimes

we forget that Civil Engineering is the oldest profession (well, second oldest).

It is interesting to see the type of trees along the canal. At the beginning of the trip, near Castelnaudary, they were mostly poplars. These were replaced by oaks and then plane (sycamore) trees. Yesterday we started seeing Med. type pine and cypress trees, and near some locks even palm trees.

W and A again moved the car forward and met us in Capestang for lunch. It is a town of some size and has four boulangeries. From the high point one can just see the Mediterranean as a thin line on the horizon beyond the rolling fields of vineyards.

[A note on French dogs: they are different from ours. Not only do they understand French, but they look different. Mostly they are small, scruffy and of unknown (if any) breeds. They also leave poop everywhere, a real hazard when walking around.]

In Capestang, on June 8, 1944, 179 men were taken as hostages to Germany.

Castle was the second residence of the Archbishop of Narbonne and was heavily fortified against the local count.

W suggested (mostly in jest) that we put more money in the kitty and extend the boat charter by another week. General lack of enthusiasm for this suggestion showed that two weeks is more than enough to savour this experience. Time to go on, see something else, do something different (and we still have most of this week on the boat).

## **Day 11 - Tuesday, Sept 16**

Stay at Beziers

Beziers, the largest town visited so far, is entered by descending seven contiguous locks at Foncerannes. It is a spectacle that attracts guided tours to watch greenhorns get their ropes mixed. We are of course old pros and went down without a hitch. After the locks the canal crosses river Orb on a long aqueduct. All very scenic.

Events of 1209 at Beziers are one of the turning points of European history. The Albigensian crusade against the Cathars had arrived before this impregnable fortified city after marching down the Rhone valley for many weeks. Crusaders who signed on for 40 days, had their sins and debts forgiven and were free to return home. What kept them going was the prospect of looting and pillaging, none of which they had had so far. There was grumbling amongst the lower ranks with many intending to head for home as soon as their 40 days were up.

After a few days siege, some young townsfolk opened the city gates intending to chase some mercenaries who were prowling around the city ramparts. Seeing the gates open, some crusaders rushed forward and managed to enter the city before the gates could be closed.

What followed is known to this day as "Grand Mazel" or la grand boucherie. On the first day of St. Mary Magdalene, 22 July, 1209, more than 20,000 Biterrois (as the citizens of Béziers region are called) were massacred, city was pillaged and finally burnt down. Crusaders had tasted blood and for many years went burning and looting Languedoc eventually bringing it under the direct control of the French King.

Had Beziers resisted, crusaders might have gone home and Languedoc might have emerged as an independent country speaking a Catalanian dialect. Cathar Heresy might have become an accepted religion. France might not have been able to resist the English in the 100 years war, and English and French crowns might have been united under an English king ... and so on and on. But there is not much profit in playing with "what if" history since we know what happened.

After we established our bearing it was decided that the day was to be spent on independent exploration, each couple going their own way, visiting more or less the same high points.

It is easy to walk from the canal to La Gare S.N.C.F. (railway station) which is the starting point for walking tours. Just north is "Jardin du plateau des Poets", a restful, shady place with a pond surrounded by pampas grass and, of course, statues of French poets (just like on Kalimegdan in Belgrade). Continuing past the Garden is a broad Allé Paul Riquet with a huge statue of the Beziers' most famous son at the lower end, and the Municipal Theater at the other. All along this boulevard are restaurants catering to the locals and tourists alike. They serve excellent meals for about 15€ ( per person, with a 1/4l wine).

Next stop is St. Nazaire's Cathedral rebuilt after 1209. It is less forbidding than the one in Albi, though its large size and a commanding location at the highest point are sufficiently convincing. With the sun streaming through large stain glass windows, the inside is warm and less frightening. There is a magnificent organ at the west end but nobody was playing it. It is possible to climb 167 steps to bell tower for a magnificent view of the town and surroundings.

There are several museums in the town and we have yet to compare notes on these. Musee des Baux Arts is very mediocre and probably not worth a visit. On the other hand Musee des Biterrois is an excellent way to learn all about the region from the geological history to the Maquis resistance in the second World War.

We did not visit the new bull ring (bulls are not killed in the ring, only later).

Back on board, a spaghetti and meat balls dinner with garlic bread and lots of red wine. What a life !

## **Day 12 - Wednesday, Sept. 17**

Day trip to Narbonne

It was another "Dark and stormy night ..." on board Crusader #28. We were concerned that some boys were hanging around the port as we were warned that several boats had reported break-ins in Beziers. Once they had disappeared, we worried about a fuel leak as there was a strong smell of diesel in the air. In the morning an oil slick was surrounding all the boats on the northern seawall and port patrol were looking around to discover the source of the "spill".

We made a good use of SNCF today. As a "group" (more than five) of seniors (all over 65) we purchased day return tickets to Narbonne for 6.60€ each. What a bargain! It was nice not to be travelling by boat. The trains are efficient and running on time but not as clean as we might have expected it.

Narbonne (population 48,000) has had a continuous habitation for almost 3,000 years. In 118 B.C. it was made the capital of the Roman province and became an important centre for export of food, wine, wood, etc as well as a junction of roads leading to Spain and Aquitaine.

Although it was besieged by Visigoths in the 4-5 century and by the Saracens in the 8th, it was never totally destroyed (unlike Beziers). It is thus surprising that there is not much physical evidence of the Roman settlement left (A small patch of Roman Road Via Domitia uncovered in the Main City square does not look impressive.)

The archbishops of Narbonne were powerful Princes of the church (at least until the Revolution) commanding great resources through their vast land holdings. Income from these estates was used to enlarge the Cathedral, build the attached archbishops' palaces ("old" and "new"), and re-enforce the city's defenses. In all religious conflicts of the past 800 years, the archbishops kept

their city on the winning side and their citizens prospered. Yet, the Cathedral was a disappointment. Its proportions are all wrong; it is too short for the height. The front half seems to have collapsed and is under restoration. It may well take another 100 years to finish it. They measure time in centuries not quarters. The church is very plain and un-decorated and the only thing we remember about the interior was another impressive pipe organ (with a recital scheduled for Sunday but we will be a long way from Beziers by then.)

Through the church cloisters (very old, executed with a heavy hand, lacking the grace and serenity of some one can see in travel guides), we enter the court yard of the archbishops' palaces. The section directly in front is the City Hall. On two sides are two museums: The art museum is mostly notable for the exhibition rooms which were a part of the Archbishop's apartments (Louis XIII and XIV slept there). Noted a portrait of mathematician Paul Fermat (of "Principle" fame) and two beautiful Roman floor mosaics.

Most interesting was an attached exhibition of French paintings of Algeria scenes done in the second half of the XIXth C. There was a terrific painting of a Bedouin village in the evening with the blue sky shading from light to quite dark blue and a light moon. Stunning colours. Also most women in these paintings were not wearing 'hijab' and none wore a 'yasmak'. Hmm!

Among the furniture in these rooms was a dining room table over 5 m long. It was made of single planks each about 15-20 cm wide.

The archeological museum has the largest number of Roman wall paintings in France. It is difficult to imagine by what means were Romans able to transmit their culture to far corners of their empire so that mosaics, paintings and statues as well as pottery and utensils were everywhere of the same quality and design. Judging by the sculptures displayed, Greek and Roman men might have benefited with some Viagra.

Market

Town square and the revolt of 1907

Church of St Paul and the crypt with the 4<sup>th</sup> C 'paleo Christian' cemetery.

(They are closing this cyber-cafe and I have no more time for detailed descriptions. )

### **Day 13 - Thursday, Sept. 18**

Start in Beziers

End in Agde

Left Beziers as soon as the locks opened with W driving ahead, to leave his car at the CBL Base at Port Cassafieres.

In one of the locks we met a party of school children on one of the large cruise boats. All the children we had seen so far looked lean and fit. They are active, constantly running, playing tag or 'King of the Castle'. Some girls around 12 looked a bit plump, but by the time they are 17-18 they thin out into a beautiful shape. They do not seem to have too many home computers as all "cyber cafes" we have seen are full of teen age boys playing computer games.

In general, people look fit. In middle age they become stout and some may be called over weight, but we saw very few that were obese.

Stopped for lunch at Cassafieres to take on water and have mediocre pizza from the restaurant at the base. Watched two herds of Camargue horses walking up and down the opposite shore, accompanied by cattle egrets.

Continued after lunch for another hour to the "end of the line" at Agde. Finished with engines before 15:00.

Agde differs in appearance from all the other towns we have visited because the principal building material here is volcanic basalt, dark and very hard stone full of small vesicles. The main eruptions took place 740,000 years ago. Because of the hardness of basalt most of the walls have the same appearance as when they were built, hundreds of years ago. The most impressive remaining building is the local cathedral. It was fortified in 1176, 33 years before the Albigensian crusaders hit the region. So obviously there was a lot of unrest in the XIIIth C and the church was getting ready for the wars to come. The church walls are over 3m thick and show no sign of time erosion. They will be there for several thousand years.

There is not too much to see in Agde, so B took one of the bikes to Cap d'Agde, a Mediterranean resort about 8 km away.

It is a different world. Cap is a modern creation and has the largest nudist colony in Europe. It also has a number of protected and interconnected yacht harbours in one of which there were more than 400 yachts. The shore line is completely built up mostly with apartment buildings (time share ?). There is a large pedestrian precinct lined with bazaar-like stalls selling every kind of imaginable trinkets. The general impression is of a rather tacky place.

The beaches are beautiful, and the sea was clear and Mediterranean (pale) blue. B did not get to the nudist beach but that did not make any difference as the tops were strictly optional. It was cool to go swimming with the temperature similar to Nova Scotia Lakes in July.

#### **Day 14 - Friday, Sept. 19**

Start in Agde  
End in Port Cassafieres

A quiet day with the shortest run of the cruise, only about 12 km. It started with the obligatory search for baguettes and croissants for breakfast. After clean up, the last 'run ashore' and then lunch at "L'Amiral", a riverside restaurant overlooking river l'Herault.

We were not too hungry as it was rather soon after breakfast so we negotiated for three servings of bouillabaisse with plates for six. It took rather long time to cook the fish but when they finally brought it out it was a feast for the eyes. There is no way that a single person could eat one serving and six of us could not finish three. It was delicious.

After lunch, during the run up the canal we passed the Crusader #17 on their way to the end-of-the-line for a quick look at Agde.

Later, when both boats were tied up side by side at the CBL Base we had a first get together in a week to compare notes and polish the last few bottles of wine and eat up all the remaining snacks. Later still, there was a rip-roaring dinner at the base restaurant followed with a loud sing-song.

And that is pretty well how our ski holiday ended (ski = spending kids allowance).

#### **Day 15 - Saturday, Sept. 20**

Final day in Port Cassafieres

The last day of this unforgettable (in more ways than one) experience. Leaving the boat is a

hectic procedure and everybody feels rushed. If you would like a group picture take it early in the cruise and do not leave it till the last day.

We cleared the boats by about 09:30 and then dispersed in different directions. Keith and Carol took a taxi to Beziers, where they will take train to Carcassonne and then a plane on Sunday to UK. vanderLindens drove to Provence where they will spend a week at their cottage. On the way they dropped off Bosko and Carol at Montpellier after a most harrowing experience of driving through this car-unfriendly city and getting stuck in underground parking garages. After a couple of days in Montpellier, B and C will visit Canadian Memorial at Vimy ridge before returning home via London.

[Editor's note: Just in time for Hurricane Juan which hit Halifax at midnight on September 29<sup>th</sup>.]

On boat #2 John and Connie McCubbin took a taxi to Beziers. From there, they will go by train to Paris and then fly home. They will be the first to return to Canada. MacArthurs and Masons also took a taxi to Beziers where they will rent a van for another week of touring this region.

So the project Canal Boats, 2003 is over. The previous night we sat down and jotted a number of suggestions that future boaters might wish to consider. After all we did learn something.

Here are, in no particular order, our

### **Recommendations**

- If renting bikes check them out (esp brakes and gears) before leaving CBL base. One is recommended, two are more than enough.
- Rent Friday-Friday rather than Sat-Sat. In that way there is Sat to purchase food and boat supplies and check out the boat. Crusader #17 had a serious problem with a plugged toilet.
- Two weeks felt like too long excursion and ten days may have been a better choice (though we would have seen fewer off-canal sites).
- Strongly recommend one way trip. It would be very boring to repeat the whole trip in return direction. Going downstream is preferable as it is a bit easier going through the locks.
- Crew must be healthy and with no physical handicaps. Two weeks on a boat is a strenuous physical experience and requires a degree of stamina. Several members of each crew had had spills and falls.
- Do not be tempted at the beginning of the cruise to buy too much cheap wine. Instead buy fresh bread, cheese and wine every day and thus sample regional varieties.
- A barbecue on the boat would be a great help as it gets quite hot cooking dinner in the galley.
- Tolerate everyone's differences. In a confined space of a small boat, tolerance and patience are more than just virtues.
- It is a great help if someone in the crew has some experience with boats (esp diesel engines), could speak French and knows something about First Aid (not necessarily the same person).
- Do not bring books, cards or any other amusements as there is no spare time (boat lights are inadequate for reading, and anyway everybody wants to turn in early).

- Time of the year: Avoid July-Aug (expensive and too many people/boats on the canal). First half of Sept seems ideal and we were lucky with sunny skies all the way except for the first 3 days. It would be miserable to be cooped up inside the boat for any length of time if it rained throughout a trip.
- Limit the baggage and do not bring too many clothes. The stowage space is very sparse.
- Plan on side trips (Narbonne, Albi, Cathar Castles) by train, bus or rented car.
- Bring a cork screw (the boat did not provide an efficient one).
- Internet access is available in most places along the canal (and everywhere in France). As already mentioned, French keyboards require patience and persistence.
- Bring at least one good middle size kitchen knife.

[These are Crusader #28 recommendations. The other boat has had a different experience and may have different recommendations. Hope to include them at a later date.]