

Log of Morag - Seaward 23 –2014

Our long and wet British winter finally and joyfully ended amidst the green meadows and trees of France in April, the middle week of which was taken up, on the hard standing at St Jean de Losne, in preparing Morag for the season. A short test run upstream to Auxonne kicked off year 2 of our French adventure, and then we were off downriver towards the Med in the company of a few other cruising boats and the very occasional 'river hotel' - floating palaces which dwarfed our small vessel as we transited the substantial locks together. The Saone is an exceptionally beautiful and gentle waterway, interspersed with modest little municipal harbours (generally bank-side pontoons) with equally modest mooring fees. Adapting slowly to the eccentricity of France - never knowing when the boulangerie, the capitainerie, or the restaurant might be open - must be one of the chief pleasures and frustrations (!) of departing the UK.

Meandering through historic little villages, we encountered old friends and established new friendships, a pattern well established on this 'tour de force' around France. Local people are consistently courteous and welcoming, and the many vessels wearing a Union Flag could be relied upon to offer hospitality to fellow exiles.

In due course Morag berthed at the new marina at Lyon, just upstream from the Saone's confluence with the mighty Rhone. Old commercial quays have been transformed there into strikingly modern flats and retail space, with easy access to the city centre via tram or river shuttle. The Rhone ushered in a yet grander scale of lock, with "l'eclusier" hidden in his watch tower and contactable only by VHF (thank goodness for schoolboy French!). Despite the daunting size of these locks, their passage could not be simpler as a result of convenient waiting pontoons and floating bollards, all that is required of skipper and crew is to sail in and make fast. The Rhone's reputation for fast-moving flood streams is no doubt well-earned, however we experienced the river in benign mood with a gentle 2 - 3 knot flow speeding our Southbound passage.

Marine halts are infrequent, and forward planning via the excellent "Guide Fluviale" is essential. Fine dining was a feature of these halts, as well as wine-tasting at celebrated vignobles: Tain l'Hermitage was memorable in this respect.

We were detained by adverse weather for only 3 days, the Southerly Mistral struck just South of Avignon when we were by good fortune berthed in the new marina at Aramon. Whilst a 70 - 90 km/h wind whistled overhead, relentless by day and by night, we

took advantage of a hired car and toured the Roman ruins at Arles and the 15th century magnificence of the chateau at Tarascon.

At Port St Louis du Rhone, Morag's keel first tasted the salt waters of the Mediterranean, and we reached Les Isles de Frioul just off Marseille 3 hours and 33 miles later. The infamous Chateau d'If was in sight of our marina berth! A week's cruise along this coast included a few nights in Saintes Maries de la Mer, self-styled capital of the Camargue, with its flocks of flamingo. We re-entered the canal system at Grau de Roi en route to Aigues Mortes; at the latter port 5 days were spent moored in the shadow of its medieval fortress and the 13th century Tour de Constance - from whence Richard Coeur de Lion embarked with the English host on Crusade. For a student of history, this was just wonderful.



Morag Southbound on the Saone

A passage across the Etang du Thau brought us to the beautiful and relatively un-commercialised port of Bouzigues; snugly berthed behind the breakwater we enjoyed swimming in this inland salt lake, close to hectares of oyster and mussel beds which testify to excellent water purity. Thence to the Canal du Midi, where we found ourselves for the first time amongst numerous hired cruisers with tyro skippers - adding a new piquancy to navigation, and a clutch of new fenders around Morag! Some of the archetypal tree-lined reaches have been damaged by tree disease, but

for the most part they survive intact, shimmering with green and golden light. Coupled with 30+ degrees of sunny summer warmth, friendly lock-keepers, and idyllic little ports such as Carcassonne and Castelnaudary, this canal must rate as one of the best inland cruising areas in the world.

At Port St Saveur, in the very heart of Toulouse and with excellent marina facilities to hand, we spent 3 or 4 relaxing days before entering the canal lateral de la Garonne. Quieter than the Canal du Midi, more verdant than the sun-baked lowlands near the Med, and with all the locks going downhill (!), this final stretch to our terminus at the Port of Moissac made a very pleasant conclusion to the year's voyage.

Morag is now wintering afloat at this ancient town, with its Abbatiale and atmospheric cloister dating from 1100AD. And the skipper and his fiesty little boat eagerly await what next season will bring, on the long journey to home waters in the West of Scotland. Hopefully an interlude at the Seaward Squadron Rally 2015 at St Peter Port.....