

# L'Eau de Vie

Floating gently along southern France's Canal du Midi, *James Innes Williams* develops an appetite for slow travel.

It's been eight years since Rick Stein first beguiled us with his French Odyssey: whetting our appetite for real French food – cuisine de terroir – as he travelled by barge, tasting his way from Bordeaux to Marseille. And still, with countless cookery programmes, recipe books and travelogues created since, Stein's journey remains tantalisingly fresh in my mind.

In no small part this is due to the nature of his journey through Languedoc, his slow drift along the 330-year-old canals and waterways of southern France, that link the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. Stein took his time, savouring countless meals in: 'a constantly changing vista: a ruined chateau, then a distant village with church and spire, then yellow fields of corn and endless rows of vines running up the hills beyond.'

Needless to say, the romance of his slow journey proved infectious, so it was with great relish that my wife and I set out to Carcassonne for a week's cruise along that very same canal from Puichéric to Sallèles d'Aude. Travelling a total distance of only 32km point to point, this journey was to be as much about the romance of this form of travel, as the places themselves, and more than that, about the region's food.



*Enchanté cruises along the Canal du Midi*



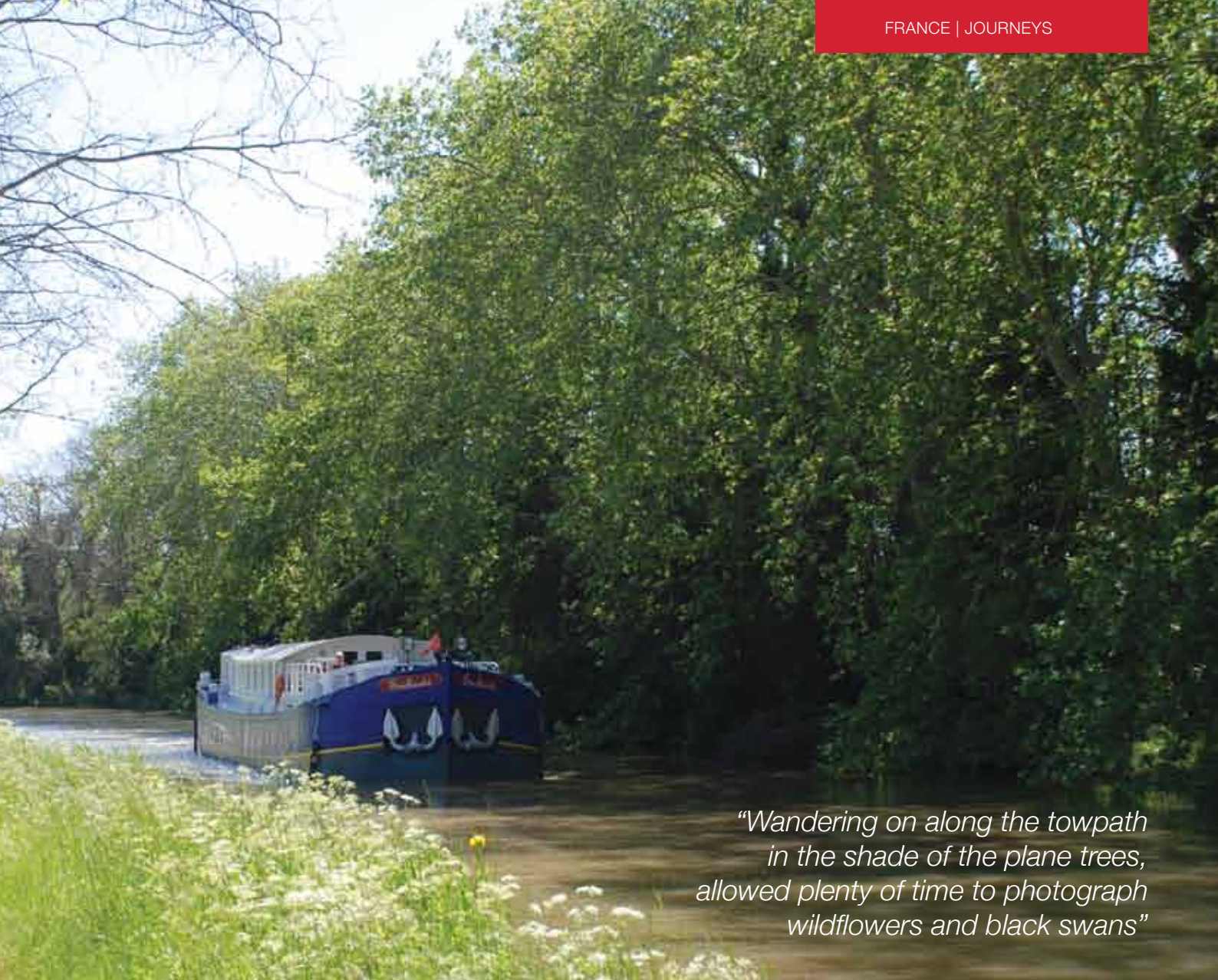
*Cité de Carcassonne*

After all, it can be fairly simple for a couple of Brits to explore the delights of southern France, but to do so on a barge necessitates giving in to that slow drift, allowing France – and its food – to come to you. And while we would be cruising in Stein's wake, we would be doing so in the more luxurious *Enchanté*: the only double-decker hotel barge on the canal, with large suites for up to eight passengers and even a jacuzzi on the sun deck. However the true luxury was the food, every meal prepared by the on-board chef, Sylvain, to exquisite standards.

Our introduction to the world of haute cuisine began the moment we boarded: canapés and a glass of bubbly were served as we met our fellow passengers and crew, familiarising ourselves with the barge's layout. We were then treated to our first four-course meal, prepared in front of us in the open galley kitchen. Goat's cheese wrapped in filo pastry with honey almonds on a bed of green leaves, was followed by guinea fowl served with a tarragon jus. Three cheeses – Bresse Bleu, Ossau Iraty and Morbier, then finally tarte tatin in a caramel sauce, served with cinnamon crème fraîche.

More than just delicious dishes – each created from the very best fresh local ingredients – every day we'd be treated to





*“Wandering on along the towpath in the shade of the plane trees, allowed plenty of time to photograph wildflowers and black swans”*

different cheeses and wines, always with an interesting story attached. Greedily we devoured the stories, wine, and the delicious cheeses: from Reblochon to Saint Maure de Touraine – a soft cylindrical cheese with a stick through its centre that brings bad luck if broken and good luck if drawn out like Excalibur from the lake.

Of course, eating like this for a week, with generous breakfasts, lunches and dinners – not to mention the free flowing drinks – would soon see anyone’s midriff gain a little extra weight. But the great joy of pootling through the countryside at this gentle pace is being able to hop on and hop off the barge at each lock as you like. Walking alongside the barge, you soon realise the great size of the vessel. Seemingly built to fit the canal’s dimensions to a tee, *Enchanté* squeezed into Pierre Riquet’s oval locks, skirted across his marvellous canal bridges and under low arched road bridges. Eli, the captain, was often needed to remove the barge’s wheel as it protruded just that little bit higher than the roof and would hit the bridge if left connected. Such grace for such great bulk.

Wandering on along the towpath in the shade of the plane trees, allowed plenty of time to photograph wildflowers and black swans, or to circle around the towns and villages up ahead.

Delightfully simple pleasures. And of course, the option to flop on the open deck and watch the world drift by was there too.

With each day came the opportunity to explore a new local area dotted with Unesco sites. Over the week we investigated Carcassonne, the most complete medieval fortified city still in existence, with 52 watchtowers, a portcullis, two sets of city walls and other defences. There was also the hilltop town of Minerve, a 12th-century Cathar fort surrounded by deep limestone gorges; a Benedictine abbey in Lagrasse, and Narbonne, home to a mightily impressive, yet unfinished cathedral. We also had time to explore an olive press and visit a vineyard, where the owner looked after everything himself, from harvesting to labelling the bottles – with a little help from his dog, Grenache.

However, for all of that excitement, the stars of the week were the barge and the food. Relaxing on the sun deck, ducking under bridges, spotting herons up ahead, French onion soup and foie gras; this was one of the most relaxing weeks we had ever experienced. Undoubtedly we could have explored the region in a day or two, but then we wouldn’t have experienced it. After all, sometimes for a flavour to truly develop, it needs time to steep, to seep in. You need time to savour the slow drift. •





Narbonne food market



Lady Carcas, Porte Narbonnaise, Carcassonne



Minerve