

Route canal



GARY BLAKE and
WENDY JOHNSON

take a gastronomic tour
of south-west France, using
the spectacular and historic
Canal du Midi as a guide



Beautiful, colourful
Villeneuve-
les-Béziers lies
alongside the Canal

PHOTOS: GARY BLAKE

GRAND TOUR
Canal du Midi

Our Tom-Tom satellite-navigation system apparently calculated its options from some 500,000 roads to find the best route from our home in Reading to Toulouse, before stubbornly defaulting to a blank screen. It required impatient resetting as we smacked our lips in anticipation at the prospect of revisiting France, and the lovely Languedoc-Roussillon region.

We'd heavily researched our trip, and it was, in part, based on a previous tour by boat on the Canal du Midi, when we were in the company of two Dutch chefs. They provided us with an insight into local food and wine as we meandered along. Historically, the canal was an important transport link, as a shortcut between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. It was originally commissioned by the Sun King - Louis XIV - in 1600 and built by Pierre-Paul Riquet.

On this trip we'd meet it again, but this time we'd be criss-crossing the water in

“Our Danbury was a ‘Surf’ model, an irony not lost on us as we paddled in the Mediterranean sea 900 miles later”

a camper: a ‘pre-loved’ VW T5 panel van, newly converted by Danbury. Aptly, it was a ‘Surf’ model, the irony not lost on us as we paddled in the calm Mediterranean sea some 14 days and 900 miles later.

The Languedoc-Roussillon region runs in a broad arc, which stretches from Toulouse to Sète on the Mediterranean coast; it's bordered by the Pyrénées to the south, and the Cévennes National Park to the north. It then continues along the coast in its curve to Arles in the east. The region produces more wine than any other in France; in fact, with 700,000 acres under vines, it's the single biggest wine-producing region in the world. With Roman antiquities aplenty around Béziers, Nîmes and Arles - including aqueducts and amphitheatres - and spectacular Cathar castles and hilltop fortresses mid-route, it's a fascinating region to explore.

The passion for organic, locally grown fresh food is also predominant; hence you'll find markets in villages and picturesque market towns, with their slow pace and sun-bleached squares.

FOLKESTONE TO TOULOUSE

With the Danbury well stocked with food and drink (utilising the ample and ingenious use of storage space) - and having left space in the tank for cheaper French diesel - we set off for the Caravan Club's Black Horse



Above Vineyards near Lézignan, in the Corbières wine region Right Sailing past the historic town of Béziers

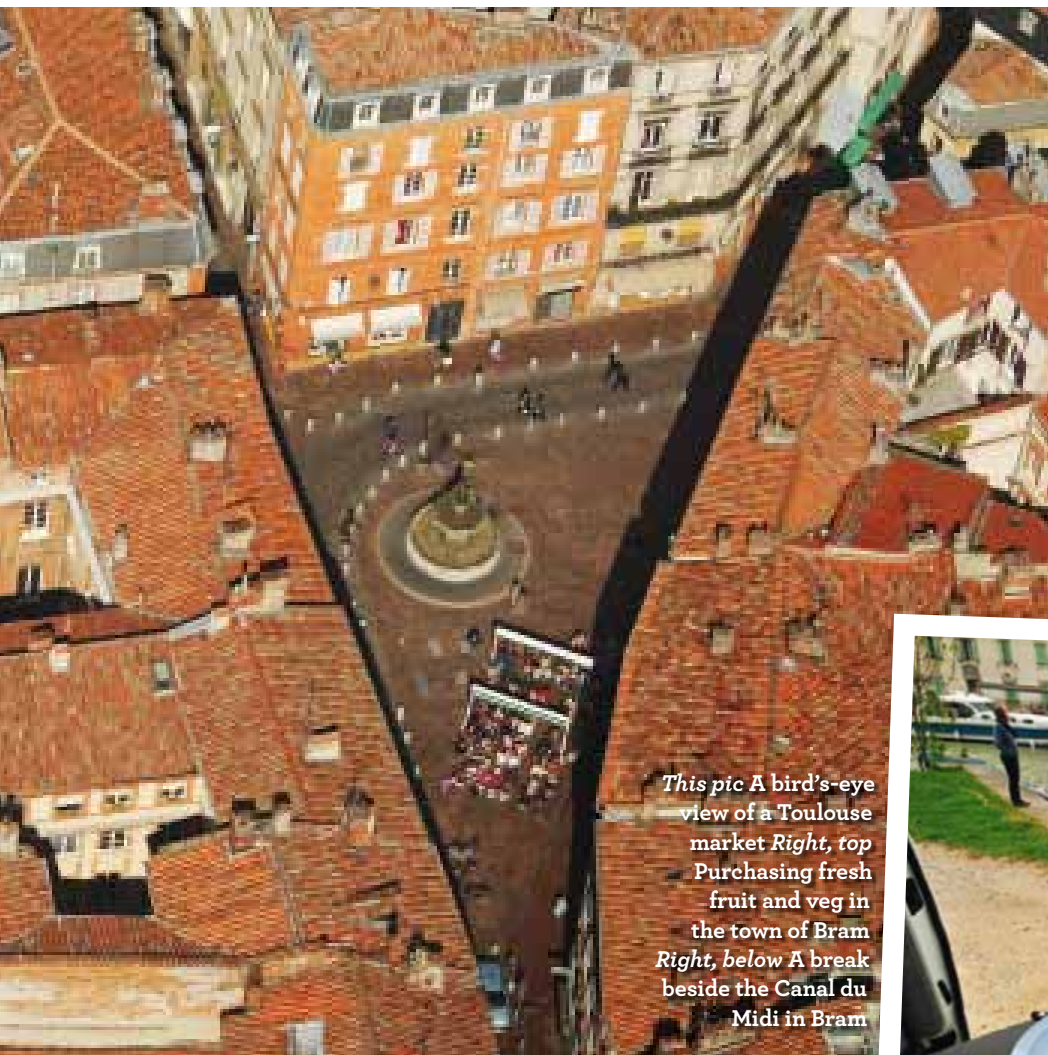


Clockwise from above The Danbury crosses the Canal du Midi in Toulouse; meat is a staple ingredient in southern-French cuisine; a view across the water to the heart of the cityscape; spicy sausage is a traditional dish in this area; Toulouse is famed for red-hued architecture, leading to its ‘Pink City’ nickname





Toulouse is built in warm colours of the most gentle of pinks and flamboyant of oranges, which earn it the name of La Ville Rose ('the pink city')
Discover more facts at www.uk.toulouse-tourisme.com



This pic A bird's-eye view of a Toulouse market Right, top Purchasing fresh fruit and veg in the town of Bram Right, below A break beside the Canal du Midi in Bram



Farm site near Folkestone for some rest prior to our 6.50am Eurotunnel crossing the following day. While on the train, we sipped coffee and perused our back-up 'analogue' maps on the 'van's table. We couldn't help but smile smugly and say to ourselves, "how easy is this!" as turbulent seas rocked the ferries above us.

We'd aimed to cover the 600 miles from Calais to Toulouse in one and a half days, which we figured would enable us to spend as much time as possible in southern France. So we sped through a flat and green land interspersed with fields of bright yellow rapeseed, cowslips and lilac-lined verges. The historic city of Chartres beckoned us from a distance, and we made a coffee and croissant stop right in the central square.

The scenery changed markedly at Limoges, with its hills, green valleys and picturesque old towns (see our Grand Tour of the area, June 2012 issue); the famous Limousin cattle could be seen dotting the landscape, too. Just

after Limoges we made our first overnight aire stop. With the Danbury's blinds down we were cosily cooking our dinner in the 'van in next to no time.

The following morning, we were on our way to Toulouse. The total autoroute tolls of €72 (£66.63) weren't a lot considering that the roads en route are wide and excellent for covering long distances. To back up my French *un peu* I'd photographed our low-roof vehicle against a height barrier to show motorway toll attendants that it was the less than two metres, and therefore in the *Classe 1* category, so we didn't pay need to pay half as much again for *Classe 2*.

“Toulouse is a place of warm, pink brickwork, and is famous for its indigo and violets”

FOOD MARKETS AND MORE

Le Rupé – now under new enthusiastic management – is the only campsite with easy access to Toulouse. Despite being in the least desirable part of the town, it makes a good base with a free shuttle bus running to the local Metro station, which is an easy 20 minutes from the centre.

Toulouse, or La Ville Rose ('the pink city'), is a place of warm, pink brickwork, and is famous for indigo and violets, now the city's emblem. Our purpose was to visit the famous Victor Hugo Food Market on Tuesday but, as it's closed on Mondays – and that was the day we'd arrived – we started with a visit to Le Maison de Violette. It's situated in a barge on the Canal du Midi, where the tradition is kept alive for growing the double violets for which the city was famous, as well as making delicate soaps, perfumes, teas and chocolates.



Clockwise from top The little Danbury Surf proved ideal for tackling the region's narrower roads; sausages made from duck – and donkey; fresh red chillies lined up on a market stall; the Maison de Violette on the Canal du Midi





Carcassonne is a beautiful and medieval fortified city that has double surrounding walls (3km in length) and 52 towers. Its gates are open until midnight. Find more tourism information at www.carcassonne.org

Our lunch was at Les Beaux Arts Brasserie, overlooking the River Garonne and with distant views of the snow-capped Pyrénées. Here we had one of our best meals and sampled the famous Toulouse sausage.

After lunch we picked up a copy of the 'Discovery Itinerary' from the tourist office (it can also be viewed online), and walked one of the city's five historical routes; it took us to a variety of interesting and unexpected places in Toulouse's labyrinth of streets and alleys.

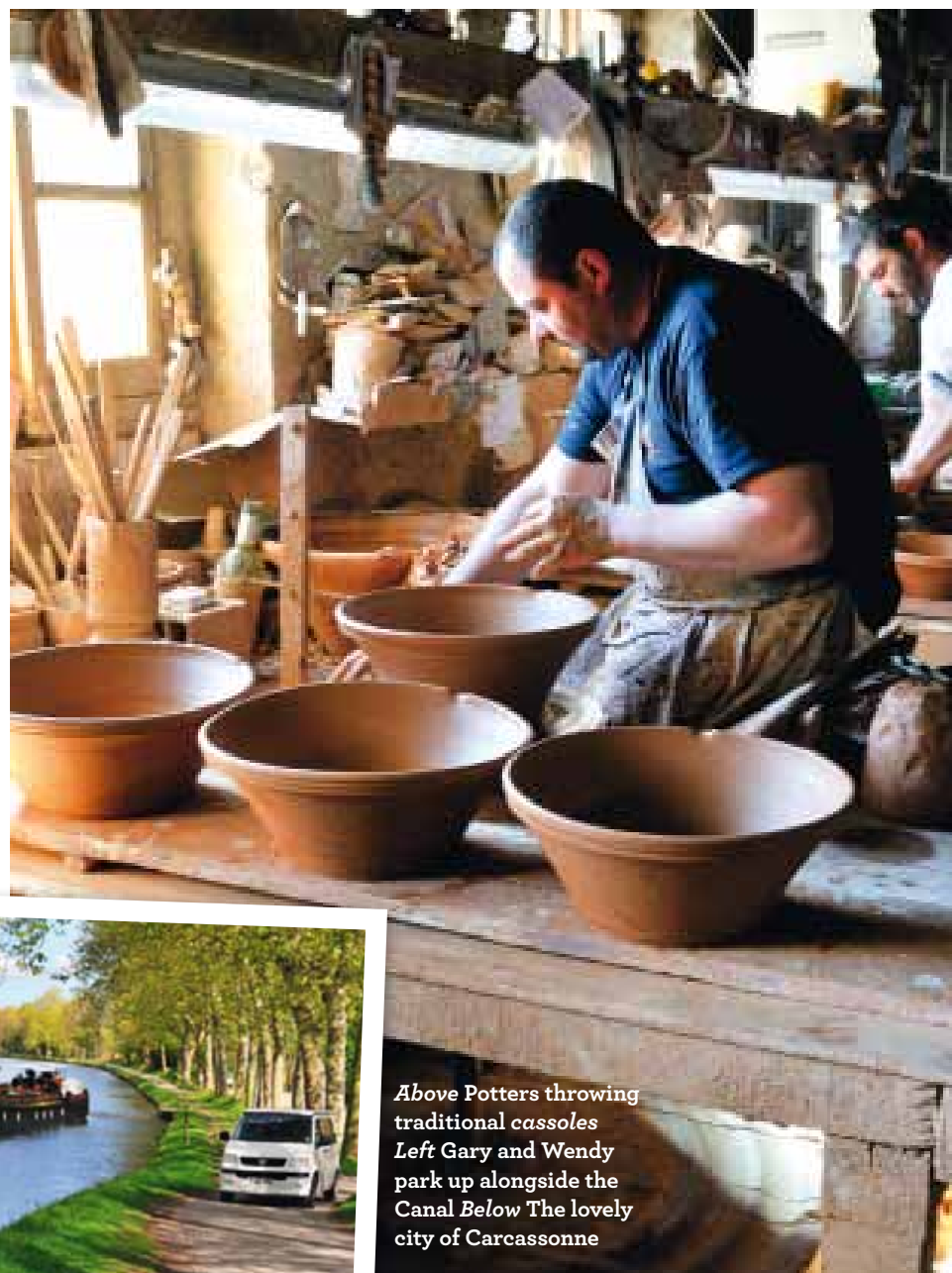
“Unwisely, we'd tried to park in Toulouse. The answer was public transport and a second night onsite”

The following morning we made it to the Victor Hugo Food Market in central Toulouse; it was worth waiting the extra day for. The selection and quality of food on offer is beyond belief, from the famous, spicy Toulouse sausage to the vast range of fish from both the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea; there's also a range of fresh local produce from the area. The food connoisseur will be spoiled for choice, and good first-floor restaurants serve the ultra-fresh produce straight to the customer.

Somewhat unwisely, we'd been tempted to try to park in Toulouse.

This, however, proved practically impossible, even with the small motorhome that we had; so a second night at the campsite was the answer, to allow us time to get back to our 'van via public transport.

With cheese, sausages and bread loaded on board, we once again set the Tom-Tom, this time for the hour's drive to Castelnaudary via the quiet canal-side roads. The Canal du Midi was now to be our constant companion, from source to sea, and was the guide for our gastro/cultural discovery trip in a region where British motorhomes aren't often seen.



Above Potters throwing traditional *cassoles*
Left Gary and Wendy park up alongside the Canal
Below The lovely city of Carcassonne



Above The Canal du Midi forms an easy-to-follow path to the south coast
Below Wendy tries out her wine-tasting skills



The Canal has wide towpaths for bicycles, and Tarmac roads adjacent to it meander along and frequently cross stone-arched bridges. The latter rise over villages that used to provide produce that the Canal would then transport.

The Canal du Midi is a World Heritage Site, declared one of the most remarkable feats of civil engineering in modern times, and also a 'work of art'. Starting in Toulouse and 150 miles long, it's built on a vast scale, with oval-shaped locks and 42,000 plane trees, planted to stabilise the banks and give a cooling canopy for the boatmen.

PORK DISHES AND POTTERY

Besides being a base for the French Foreign Legion, Castelnaudary is the home of *cassoulet*, the rib-sticking traditional dish of the Aude department of south-west France; its ingredients include haricot beans, confit duck and pork sausages. This area takes its gastronomic heritage very seriously:

a *cassoulet* academy has been established, and restaurants can be seen with an official mark of approval in their windows. The tourist office has also produced the 'Route du Cassoulet', a 180km self-driven, source-to-plate tour that criss-crosses the Canal du Midi; visitors are invited to meet bean, duck and pig farmers, potters and wine makers. We dropped into a haricot farm to see where the beans are nurtured and graded, and then called in to see where the *cassoles* (*cassoulet* dishes) are made at Poterie Not. Started in 1830, it's reputedly the oldest pottery in France that still hand throws pots. Philippe Not and his two sons are delighted when visitors cram into their workshop, and have a great selection of dishes and *cassoles* to purchase.

But our best *cassoulet* was yet to come. We sited ourselves at Camping la Cité, in Carcassonne; the former is a four-star dream-location campsite next to the spectacular fortress. We strolled down

Southern France can be surprisingly lush and verdant, as demonstrated by this poppy field



Wendy stocks up with bread from the barge-based grocery store in the village of Le Somail

a lane beside the site and dined within the medieval walls at Brasserie Le Donjon.

To learn more about Languedoc wines, we met Stephanie Delmotte in her bar – Comptoir des Vins et Terroirs – in the centre of the castle. She stocks 150 wines from unusual and small vineyards, and is more than happy to give a wine tasting. We, of course, walked back to the site – French drink-drive laws are very strict. As of July this year everyone driving a vehicle must carry a self-testing breathalyser kit, to help ensure that they remain under the drink-driving limit;

finer for those not doing so will come into force from November 2012.

THE CATHAR TRAIL TO TASTINGS

From the 11th to the 13th centuries, the Carcassonne region was a stronghold of Occitan Cathars: a Christian religious movement, and a definite irritant to the nation's Catholics. Today you can visit their fortresses on rugged hilltops throughout the region.

The Cathar trail is, like the *cassoulet* version, well signed; a drive of just some of its length over several days will allow

you to discover a wealth of dramatic landscapes. One – around 15km from Carcassonne – has the remains of the four Cathar castles of Lastours, and we visited them the following day. They're situated at the end of a dramatic gorge, and following a climb we reached the lookout, which offers panoramic views. We called into L'Auberge du Diable au Thym, a small bistro attached to a one-star Michelin restaurant. We thoroughly enjoyed a good lunch, with menus costing just €15-20 (£12-16) per head for three courses – and we discovered that we were in an area remote enough for wild boar to be on the menu.

Carcassonne behind us, we visited Château Villerambert-Julien and met Michel Julien: his vineyards cover 190 acres and date back to the 13th century. He produces white, rosé and four red wines, mainly from the Syrah and Grenache grapes. Unusually, some of his land contains marble (the estate even supplied marble to the Paris Opera House), and the soil is poor; this in turn leads to a smaller grape, but one that has a more intense flavour. Wine tastings in summer are available from 10.30am to



Clockwise from left
Fish doesn't come much fresher, in Sète; where the famous Noilly Prat vermouth is made; handsome waterside houses in Sète

Sweet Muscat wine is produced in this corner of France; it's possible to buy in bulk directly from the producer. Free tastings are available at many vineyards, too. Discover more about the wine at www.creme-de-languedoc.com

midday, and from 2-7pm; Michel is happy to find one or two places for motorhomes to pitch up among the vineyards after tastings. Prior booking is essential for an overnight stay.

Château de Pennautier, meanwhile, is where we met Rachel Pacquelet: a former *sommelier* to Raymond Blanc at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons. Rachel now manages the wines of a large group of vineyards who supply the Majestic chain here in the UK. Tastings at Château de Pennautier are from 10am-midday and 3-6pm, with a variety of reasonably priced wines and lunches offered.

Rather than indulge, however, we drove on to the Auberge de l'Arbousier at Homps, which overlooks the water. There we discovered the *apéritif* of the area, a sweet Muscat. To see what the Canal was all about, we then took a two-hour boat trip through dappled light from the avenue of trees, with the scent of thyme wafting from the river banks.

By now we were getting into the spirit of the region's food and wine, and felt as though we were becoming more and more French with each day that passed.

DISCOVER ENGINEERING EXCELLENCE

We next made a visit to the 17th-century Château de Paraza, where Canal builder Pierre-Paul Riquet lived and could see construction work being carried out from his windows.

On to Le Somail, which was a must-stop canal-side village with good 'van parking beside the water. We browsed around the antique bookstore Le Trouve Tout du Livre, which has 50,000 books – and discovered a hat museum! We followed this with a short drive to the co-operative of L'Oulibo at Bize Minervois, where we learnt about all things olive following a tour and tastings.

Afterwards, a meander along the Canal roads led us to the mother of all locks – Écluse Fonserannes, a staircase

“ We were getting into the spirit of the region's food, and felt we were becoming more French every day ”

of eight that allowed boats to be raised almost 22m. We then drove on to the spectacular Orb Aqueduct where the canal crosses the River Orb at Béziers. Both impressive feats of engineering, indeed.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

We enjoyed our first *moules frites* with two beers at our next canal-side campsite eatery at Villeneuve-Lès-Béziers, as we finally reached the sea. Although we'd now made it to the Mediterranean, the Canal parallels the coast and continues to Sète. There, it exits at Étang de Thau, in front of the factory where Noilly Prat – the popular French *apéritif* – is produced.

So, journey's end, and we ate in hot sunshine on Sète's quayside. With our new-found knowledge we ordered Noilly Prat amber, before tucking into delicious fresh fish landed just four metres away.

Food is taken very seriously in France. We had fewer of our usual 'van cook-ups on this tour, and returned with stacks of provisions. We can certainly say that we did just what the French do – truly appreciate their tremendous gastronomic culture. ©



1 Campsite Le Rupé
21 Chemin du Pont-de-Rupé,
31200 Toulouse
Tel : 00 33 (0)5 61 700 735
Web www.camping-toulouse.com
This site, on the Limoges side of Toulouse, has 187 pitches. It's convenient for the city: parking is notoriously difficult in Toulouse. A shuttle bus runs twice daily from the site to the nearest Metro station (from where it takes 20 minutes to reach the centre).
Price per night €24.20 (£19.59)



2 Camping de la Cité
RD 104 11000 Carcassonne
Tel 00 33 (0)4 68 10 01 00
Web www.campingcitecarcassonne.com
The city's municipal site, with a fantastic view of historic Carcassonne. It's within easy walking distance, but there's a steepish, cobbled road to climb. Excellent shower and toilet blocks are available, but you should note that they are unisex.
Price per night €22-31 (£17.81-£25.10), depending on season



3 La Pinède
Rue des Rousillous, 11200 Lézignan-Corbières
Tel 00 33 (0)4 68 27 05 08
Web www.campinglapinede.fr
Located 500 metres from the centre of Lézignan Corbières, this site has a nice terrace and snack bar. A short drive away are the historic sites of the Cathar region, with its castles and abbeys; there's also the Canal du Midi, on its final leg to the nearby Mediterranean sea.
Price per night €15.70 (£12.71)



4 Camping les Berges du Canal
Promenade des Vernets,
34420 Villeneuve-Lès-Béziers
Tel 00 33 (0)4 67 39 36 09
Web www.lesbergesducanal.fr
This site is located next to the Canal du Midi in Villeneuve-lès-Béziers; it's under new ownership, but needs a bit more work to really impress. There's a water-side restaurant that's open during the summer season, a couple of swimming pools, and a spa bath, too.
Price per night €17 (£13.76)

🍴 Food and drink

All the meals we ate on our tour were of excellent quality, mostly three courses, and thoroughly enjoyable. The average meal cost us around €15-20 per person, without wine. Pork, duck, beef, and of course fish – both river and sea – are the primary ingredients that you'll find on local menus.

Each village and town has its own market day, with the freshest of organic fruit and vegetables available. Charcuteries often sell home-made, cooked meals that are ready to heat up, which is a boon to the motorcaravanner on tour.

For the *vin* lover, great fun can be had at any of the numerous wine-producing châteaux; provided you have a non-drinking co-driver, of course. The wines are mostly inexpensive compared with UK prices, so save some room to load up a case or two to take home.

📍 Way to go

We chose Eurotunnel for our crossing; a return trip cost £189 in late spring. On our route down to south-west France – we drove via the city of Limoges – we used motorways for easy driving and fuel economy; half of these were toll roads. Your alternative if you'd like to avoid the latter is to use France's comprehensive *route nationale* network.

There are an impressive number of service stations on the motorways; the best we found were on the tolled roads. As always, though, we'd strongly recommend that you don't spend the night here: take a short detour off the *autoroute* to find an *aire* – of which there are many – in a nearby village or town. We had AA Relay cover in case of breakdown; the company confirmed that they would supply us with a people carrier for our onward journey and cover accommodation costs.

🚐 The motorhome

DANBURY SURF VW T5
Our Danbury Surf VW T5 'van was converted from an ex-fleet panel van. Prices start at £20,995 for pre-owned vans and from £30,999 new. Visit www.danburymotorcaravans.com

📄 Find out more

- *Michelin map 82 – Toulouse Region*
- *A Guide to France*
www.about-france.com
- *Eurotunnel*
www.eurotunnel.com

£ The costs

Fuel cost	£367
Tolls total	£67
Eurotunnel crossings	£189
Camp site costs	£221
TOTAL	£844 ©

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