

discover

Sharing our love for France's spectacular waterways

Canal du Midi

Pink cities, Cathar histories, impossibly low bridges,
UNESCO status, medieval wonders, Corbières & Cremant

Canal du Midi

YOUR COMPLETE GUIDE TO FRANCE'S MOST POPULAR WATERWAY

- **Introducing the Canal du Midi**
- **Canal du Midi essentials**
- **Why visit the Canal du Midi?**
- **Where's best to stop?**
- **How to cruise the Canal du Midi?**
- **When to go?**
- **Canal du Midi top tips**
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Travelling the magical Canal du Midi is a truly enchanting experience that will stay with you forever. It's a journey whose every turn brings spectacular beauty that will leave you breathless. It's an amazing feat of engineering whose elegant ingenuity will enthrall you. It's a rich and fertile region known for superb local produce, fabulous cuisine and world class wine. So, no matter how you choose to explore the Canal du Midi, by self-drive boat or hotel barge, just make sure you're prepared to be utterly enchanted.

Ruth & the team



HOTEL BARGE SARAPHINA

INTRODUCING THE CANAL DU MIDI

The Canal du Midi runs from the city of Toulouse to the Mediterranean town of Sète 240km away. It's a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most beautiful and well-known stretches of inland waterway in France. These days it is a tranquil haven for tourists who come to bask in its beauty, but in its heyday, at the end of the 19th century, it carried over 100,000 tonnes of cargo and a million passengers a year.

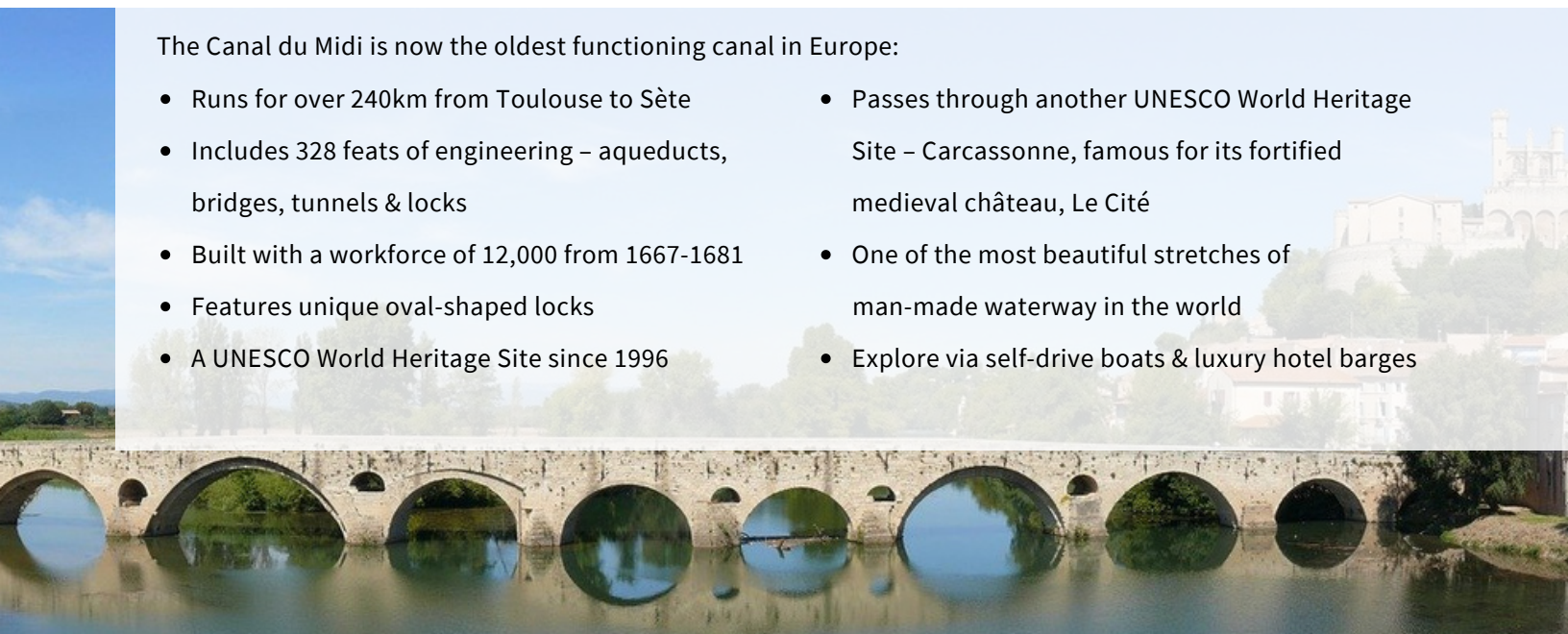
It was the Romans who first dreamt of connecting the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. However, the practical obstacles proved too much to overcome and it remained a dream. It wasn't until 1667 that construction began of a waterway, commissioned by King Louis XIV and created by Pierre-Paul Riquet. Fourteen years later the Canal Royal de Languedoc, as it was then called, opened. It was renamed as the Canal du Midi during the French Revolution.



CANAL DU MIDI ESSENTIALS

The Canal du Midi is now the oldest functioning canal in Europe:

- Runs for over 240km from Toulouse to Sète
- Includes 328 feats of engineering – aqueducts, bridges, tunnels & locks
- Built with a workforce of 12,000 from 1667-1681
- Features unique oval-shaped locks
- A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1996
- Passes through another UNESCO World Heritage Site – Carcassonne, famous for its fortified medieval château, Le Cité
- One of the most beautiful stretches of man-made waterway in the world
- Explore via self-drive boats & luxury hotel barges



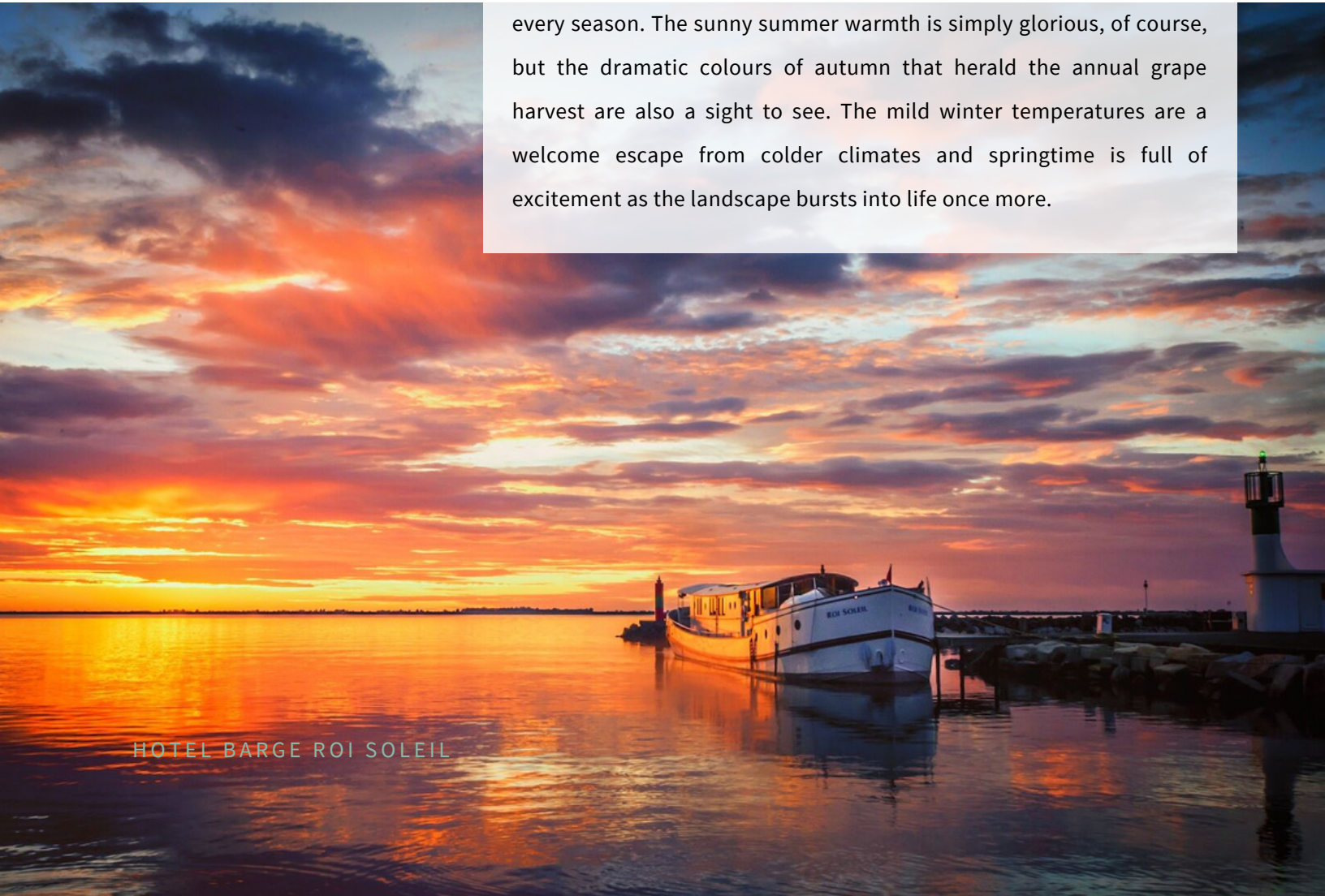
Why visit?

STUNNING SCENERY & CLIMATE

- **Breathtaking scenery**
- **Steeped in fascinating history**
- **Glorious year-round climate – warm summers, mild winters**
- **Fabulous local produce**
- **World class cuisine**
- **Superb wine makers to discover every day**

Spanning the regions of the Languedoc-Roussillon and Midi-Pyrénées (now known collectively as Occitanie), the Canal du Midi passes through unique and breathtaking landscapes. From the avenues of majestic plane trees that still line much of its route and gently sloping vineyards, to the charming villages and towns you pass through, there's beauty and wonder at every turn. This is a region steeped in fascinating history, naturally blessed with picture-perfect scenery and there's no better way to explore it than from the water.

What's more, this is a region with a climate that offers something for every season. The sunny summer warmth is simply glorious, of course, but the dramatic colours of autumn that herald the annual grape harvest are also a sight to see. The mild winter temperatures are a welcome escape from colder climates and springtime is full of excitement as the landscape bursts into life once more.



HOTEL BARGE ROI SOLEIL

STEEPED IN HISTORY

Louis XIV commissioned former tax collector turned engineer Pierre Paul Riquet to build the canal, regarding it as a project worthy of his status as Sun King and as a means of gaining a trading advantage over his rivals, the Spanish, although in 1672 when he discovered the phenomenal cost of the enterprise, he stopped the construction dead in its tracks.

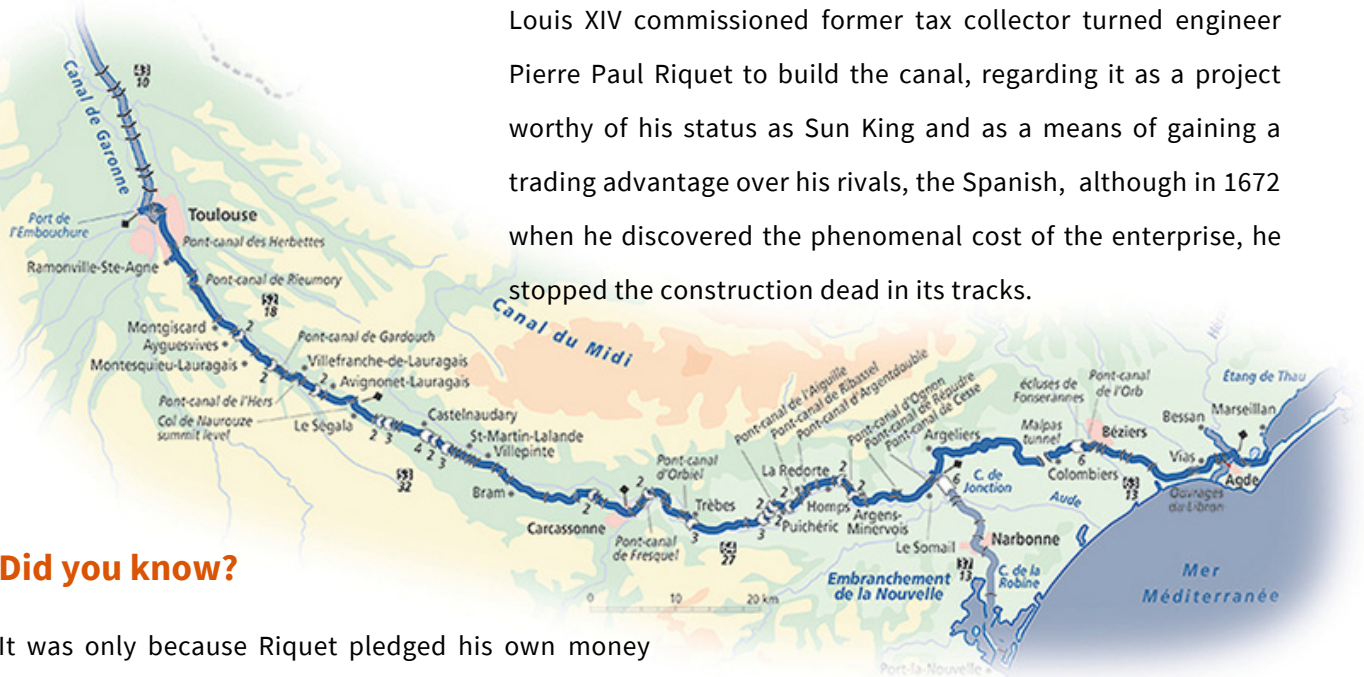
Did you know?

It was only because Riquet pledged his own money and was able to gain the support of Colbert, the finance minister, that the project was saved.

The canal took 12,000 workers using mainly picks and shovels 15 years to build. In order to retain his workforce, Riquet was obliged to adopt some enlightened employment practices: he paid wages above the going rate until the local farmers complained that their agricultural workers were being poached from them, he employed women, he let people have Sundays and public holidays off and even gave sick pay.

Early attempts at building locks with straight sides failed, so in order to reinforce them Riquet used the strength of arches as a model and designed the distinctive oval locks, 100 feet long and 20 feet wide, which remain such an attractive feature of the canal to this day.

Whatever stretch of the waterway you are cruising there are a couple of sites to note: all 173 meters of the historic Malpas tunnel were excavated in 1679, making it the first navigable tunnel in the world. Equally interesting is the St Ferréol Basin, which used to be the longest dam in Europe and is the source of the canal's water supply.



STEEPED IN HISTORY...

Although the Canal du Midi is a piece of living history still in use today, it winds through a region which is steeped in history in its own right, and we have picked out a few highlights to give a flavour of this richness. There are plenty more to discover, adding adventure and fascination to a sunny afternoon.

Abbaye de St Papoul

About half an hour's drive to the north of the canal near Castelnaudary, the Cathedral Abbey, founded in the 8th century, is a stunning Romanesque building that is famous for some beautiful sculptures created by the so-called master of Cabestany, which adorn the columns of this beautiful church. Set in pretty countryside, this would make a great excursion from your boat.

L'Horréum in Narbonne

Now a fascinating museum, the Horréum (public warehouse) was a Roman wine cellar which remained in use, no doubt storing some splendid vintages, until 1975. The museum offers an unrivalled glimpse into the earliest origins of this beautiful city.

Theatre de Molière, Sète

Another of the famous sons of the Languedoc was the playwright Molière, France's rival to Shakespeare, who spent 10 years (1647-57) in the south with his famous theatre troupe Illustre Théâtre. In Sète, the magnificent theatre named after him is well worth a visit, not just to see a performance but for its breathtaking baroque architecture (there are guided tours on Saturdays). Other Molière sites can be seen in the ancient town of Pézenas, whose pretty cobbled streets and excellent shopping make it an irresistible destination anyway.



SUPERB LOCAL PRODUCE & CUISINE

This region is renowned for its abundant local produce. And with great ingredients comes world-class gastronomy that varies from traditional south-western dishes of cassoulet, foie gras and Toulouse sausage, to Mediterranean style specialities featuring lamb, fish soup and oysters. Enjoying street life and a local restaurant or two will definitely be one of your vacation highlights.

Don't miss the Auberge de la Croisade which is situated on the banks of the canal near Cruzy and was one of the places celebrated TV chef Rick Stein visited for his programme French Odyssey; the food really is delicious! If freshly caught oysters are your thing, you might want to visit Chez Alex et Lucie (such a well-kept secret they don't even have a website!) at Bouzigues on the Etang de Thau.

You will find a sumptuous array of local breads, pâtés, cheeses, cured meats, olives, fruit and vegetables in markets across the region – the one at Olonzac, a couple of kilometres from the canal-side village of Homps, is our favourite and operates weekly on a Tuesday morning.

DON'T FORGET THE WINE

This is France's most productive wine region, famous for its Languedoc red, rosé and white wines alike.

From hearty reds like Corbières to the light and sparkling Crémant de Limoux, you'll find superb quality wines at very reasonable prices all along your route, with a great many wine makers more than happy to offer free tastings and to sell you a few bottles to sample as you make your way peacefully along this enchanting waterway.

We suggest Les Terraces de Gabriel beside the canal in Capestang.

Jancis Robinson recommended their 2016 rose Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense in her Daily Telegraph wine column, so it must be good. It's also worth trying the wines at the Château de Paraza in the village of the same name. There is a wonderful little art gallery right beside the canal, which is worth a visit too.

Where's best to stop?

TOULOUSE > ETANG DU THAU

- **Agde**
- **Béziers**
- **Canal de la Robine & Narbonne**
- **Capestang**
- **Le Somail**
- **Paraza**
- **Carcassonne**
- **Castelnaudary**
- **St Ferréol**
- **Toulouse**

From Toulouse in the west to the Etang du Thau in the southeast, there are many places to stop – formal moorings with water and electricity, simple 'haltes' to rest up for lunch and grassy banksides 'au sauvage' to enjoy a sundowner with sunflowers.

The canal meanders through magnificent scenery, historic towns and many of the region's best vineyards.

Here are just some of the notable places en route:



WHERE IT ALL STARTED

Agde

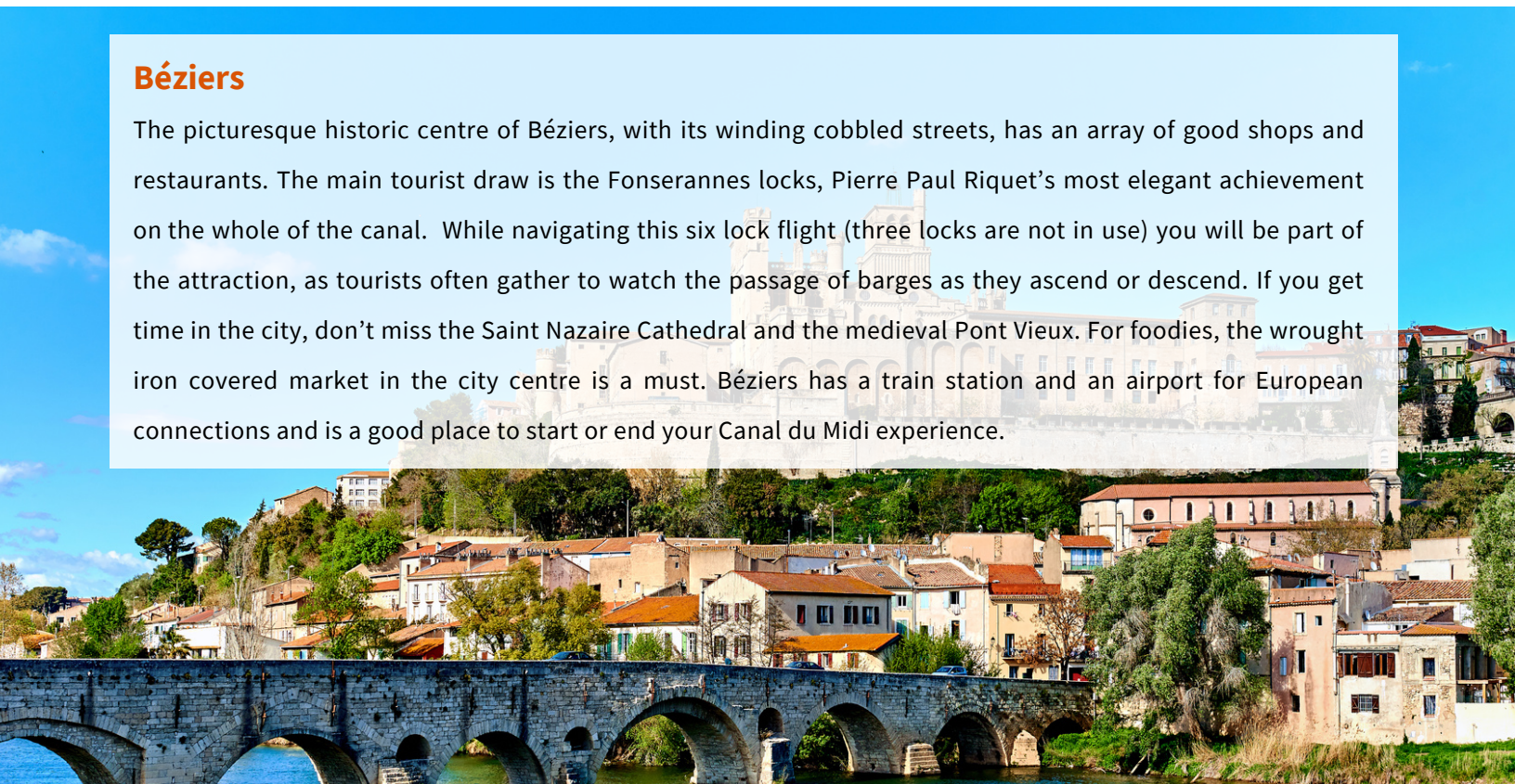
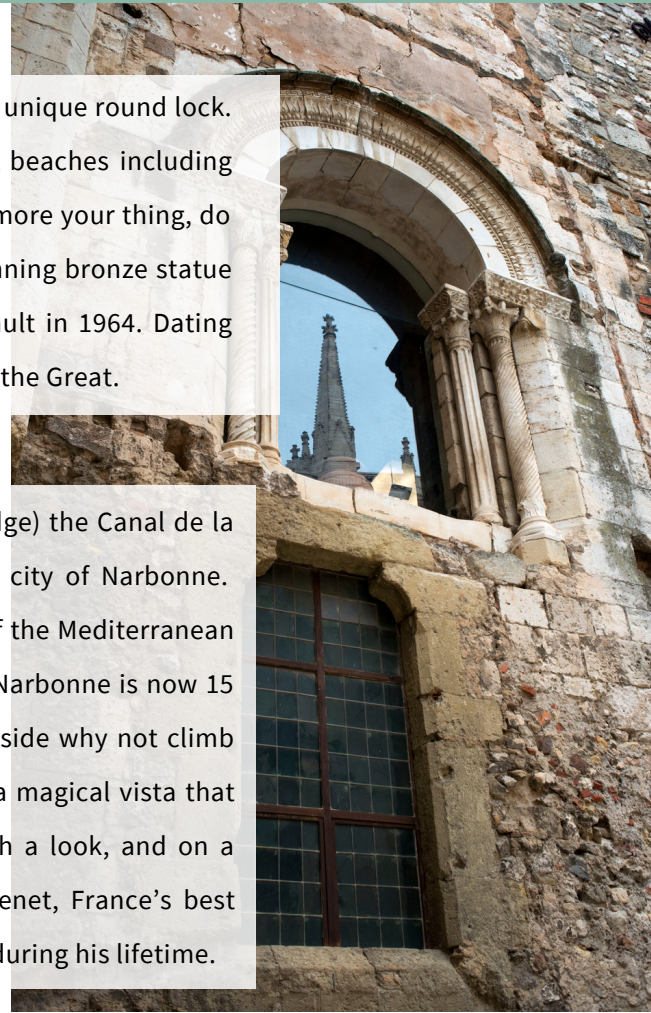
A charming seaside village located on the river Hérault famous for its unique round lock. The nearby resort of Cap d'Agde also has some of Languedoc's best beaches including one for naturists, if you really want to work on your tan. If culture is more your thing, do visit the Musée d'Éphebe. The centrepiece of the museum is the stunning bronze statue of a young man which was discovered on the river bed of the Hérault in 1964. Dating from 200 BC, it is believed by some to depict the legendary Alexander the Great.

Canal de la Robine & Narbonne

Near the village of Capestang (and the much-photographed low bridge) the Canal de la Robine branches off to the Mediterranean and passes through the city of Narbonne. Dating back to Roman times, it was originally a port on the shores of the Mediterranean but over many centuries of silting, the shoreline has shifted so that Narbonne is now 15 kilometres inland. For spectacular views of the surrounding countryside why not climb the Donjon Gilles Aycelin in the centre. Completed in 1306 it offers a magical vista that stretches all the way to the Pyrénées. The Bishop's Palace is worth a look, and on a musical note, you might want to visit the birthplace of Charles Trenet, France's best loved chanteur, whose song *Le Mer* sold more than 70 million copies during his lifetime.

Béziers

The picturesque historic centre of Béziers, with its winding cobbled streets, has an array of good shops and restaurants. The main tourist draw is the Fonserannes locks, Pierre Paul Riquet's most elegant achievement on the whole of the canal. While navigating this six lock flight (three locks are not in use) you will be part of the attraction, as tourists often gather to watch the passage of barges as they ascend or descend. If you get time in the city, don't miss the Saint Nazaire Cathedral and the medieval Pont Vieux. For foodies, the wrought iron covered market in the city centre is a must. Béziers has a train station and an airport for European connections and is a good place to start or end your Canal du Midi experience.



PICTURESQUE VILLAGES AND MARKET TOWNS

Capestang

Formerly one of the main trading posts on the canal, Capestang is well worth a few hours of your time. Its pretty tree-lined square is dominated by the ancient church of St Etienne. Do pop inside to see the spectacular chandeliers; during the Second World War the inhabitants were anxious to protect this village treasure and took all three of them down and packed them into boxes which they hid in various garages around the village. With so much going on, they were completely forgotten about after the war and only recently rediscovered. After extensive refurbishment at Versailles, no less, they are now once again shimmering in their rightful place.



St Ferréol

To fully understand Pierre Paul Riquet's immense achievement in constructing the Canal du Midi, a stop off at the Musée et Jardins du Canal du Midi is indispensable. Set in some pretty gardens à style Anglais, there is plenty of information to be gleaned. You can walk around the reservoir at St Ferréol, constructed by the great man to feed the canal with water; even today, at 780 metres long, this seventeenth century dam is an impressive sight.

Paraza

Not only does this picturesque little village have a great art gallery, Le Clap, it is also home to one of the foremost wine producers along the canal, the Château de Paraza. This château itself is also where Riquet stayed when he was working on the canal and is a suitably pleasant spot to explore. Very occasionally, local chefs operate a pop up restaurant in the château's cave, so check their website if you are planning to moor in the village, as it is an evocative setting in which to dine.

Castelnaudary

This bustling market town is the home of cassoulet (a traditional stew of duck, Toulouse sausage and haricot beans) – there's even an annual festival celebrating it at the end of August. The town is also famous for the Grand Bassin, the largest open area of water in the canal and it is not unusual to glimpse members of the secretive French Foreign Legion in training along the towpath, as they are based just outside the town.

CATHAR FORTRESSES AND ROSE TINTED CITIES

Carcassonne

As well as being a great place to explore, with a lovely central square, good cafés and restaurants, Carcassonne is steeped in history and home to the famous La Cité – Europe's largest medieval fortress and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is a maze of Disney-esque little streets offering numerous opportunities to buy souvenirs and local crafts. A walk along the ramparts will blow away the cobwebs as there are 52 towers to tick off.

The Musée des Beaux Arts has a fine collection of paintings including ones by Brueghel and Courbet, and if after all of this you crave still more history, a trip to the Château de Lastours nearby provides an excellent introduction to the struggles of the Cathars who fought bitter religious wars against the Catholic church in the twelfth century.

A few kilometres north of the city in the foothills of the Montagne Noir lies the lovely village of Montolieu, a must for book-worms as there are fifteen eclectic bookshops in which to browse, and the setting, in a gorge between two rivers, is spectacular. Carcassonne has a train station for connections to Toulouse in the west and Béziers eastwards, and an airport for European flights.



Le Somail

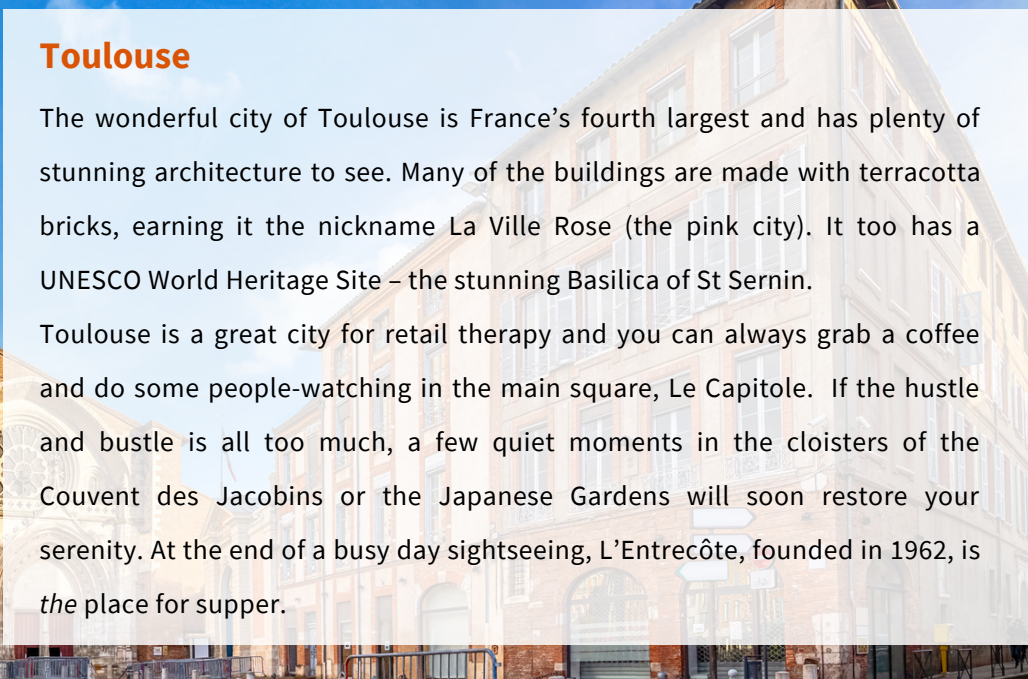
Cameras at the ready! The gorgeous little village of Le Somail is probably the most photogenic spot on the whole canal. There are some attractive waterside cafés and the obligatory gift shops selling a variety of local crafts, as well as a fabulous second-hand bookshop, which was transported brick-by-brick from Paris.



Toulouse

The wonderful city of Toulouse is France's fourth largest and has plenty of stunning architecture to see. Many of the buildings are made with terracotta bricks, earning it the nickname La Ville Rose (the pink city). It too has a UNESCO World Heritage Site – the stunning Basilica of St Sernin.

Toulouse is a great city for retail therapy and you can always grab a coffee and do some people-watching in the main square, Le Capitole. If the hustle and bustle is all too much, a few quiet moments in the cloisters of the Couvent des Jacobins or the Japanese Gardens will soon restore your serenity. At the end of a busy day sightseeing, L'Entrecôte, founded in 1962, is the place for supper.



How to cruise it?

SELF DRIVE OR HOTEL BARGE

There are two very different, but equally enjoyable options when it comes to cruising the Canal du Midi – self-drive boats and hotel barges.

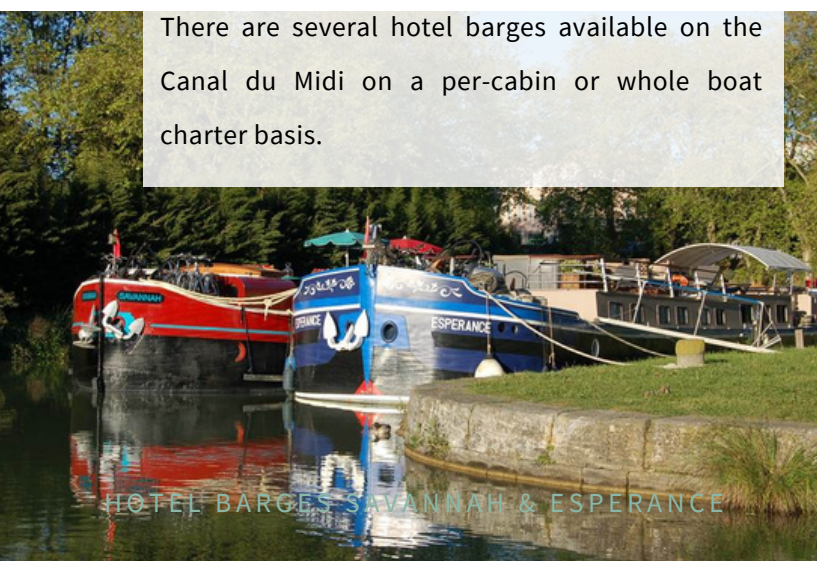
Hotel barging

Luxury barges are large, sedate and beautifully converted from vessels that used to carry cargoes of wine or wheat. Fully crewed, they offer all-inclusive cruises for those wishing to enjoy the finer things in life.

With just 2 to 5 cabins, they offer a unique experience to share with a handful of fellow guests or you can take a whole boat charter for your own party.

You'll enjoy gourmet food, fine wines and a tailor-made itinerary if you charter one – then all you need do is relax and experience the ultimate in luxury afloat.

There are several hotel barges available on the Canal du Midi on a per-cabin or whole boat charter basis.



Self drive boat hire

There are four operators with an excellent range of boats to choose from when it comes to hiring a self-drive boat, so you are sure to find the ideal vessel to suit the size of your party and your budget. Whether you're an experienced sailor or a complete novice, the canal is easy to navigate with friendly lock-keepers on hand to help.

Completely free to travel at your own pace, you can stop wherever you please, stocking up at local fresh-food markets and discovering charming cafés and restaurants on the way.

At every turn you'll find mesmerising sites to see, fascinating history to explore and superb local wine to discover. For couples, families and groups of friends alike, this really is one of the most enjoyable and rewarding holidays.



When to go?

ALL THE SEASONS

Spring

Late spring is a lovely time to see the canal, temperatures are mild and the sun is beginning to shine, although there is a chance of some inclement weather too. There's a wonderful Medieval Festival in the village of Sommières during the first week of April, in which merchants and performers dress up in costume and a good time is had by all.

Autumn

In early autumn you'll find that most places are still open and, although temperatures are cooler, there's still sunshine to be had and the autumn colours make this season a sight to behold.

The beautiful town of Aigues Mortes holds its three day annual festival during October – a heady occasion which includes a demonstration of bull running by the skilful horseman of the Camargue on their famous white ponies.

Summer

The blissfully sunny and hot months of July and August are peak season in Europe, with the largest choice of things to do and see, including summer festivals and events. It can get quite busy at locks and popular mooring spots. June can be slightly cooler, but there's usually plenty of sunshine and the canal is less busy.

The legendary water jousting festival of St Pierre takes place in Sète during the first weekend in July – this is a hugely popular event and definitely something to plan your holiday around.

In August the canal side village of St Gilles holds its annual Peach and Apricot Festival, giving you a chance to see the Languedoc in its summer best.

Canal du Midi top tips

- Packing essentials include – adaptors for your electrical kit, a cardigan or sweater for cooler nights and sun cream
- Squashable luggage is easier to store on board and will leave you more space
- When you're self-drive boating, buy a canal navigation guide to help plan your week
- Don't forget, many shops are closed on Sundays and one other day in France
- Bikes are available on most boats so that you can explore your surroundings further

What next?

CALL THE TEAM TO GET STARTED

If you're ready to explore the Canal du Midi, then we're here to help (yes, we're literally here in France, too).


With years of experience of both self-drive boat hire and luxury hotel barging on this unique waterway, we're perfectly placed to find you your ideal cruise vacation.


Contact us


cruises@french-waterways.com

www.french-waterways.com

Our regional contact numbers:

 +1 646 741 3242

 +61 272 022 340

 +44 1865 597 850



French Waterways

Cruising Inspiration and Information



HOTEL BARGE SAVANNAH