



Sunset near Castelnaudary.



# Syndicate on the **Midi**

Angela Marks finds shared ownership is a practical way to explore the delightful French canals



The inclined plane at Montech.

**A**fter six wonderful years on a Dutch-style barge on the Canal du Nivernais in Burgundy, we were getting itchy feet and were keen to explore some other parts of the network.

While staying with some narrowboat friends in France, we were shown an advertisement for syndicate-owned boats in France. The two boats, *Bon Viveur* and *Bon Viveur II*, are based in Burgundy at St. Jean-de-Losne or on the Canal du Midi. Unusually, they are made from a wood and epoxy composite, so can be readily craned out and transported from region to region. High summer in the south is too hot and low season in the north is too cold, so the move to the Midi for autumn and spring effectively extends the useful cruising season.

We purchased two fixed weeks' shares, eager to begin exploration of the Canal du Midi. It is possible to reach the south of France by air, or by train in just one day. Both modes of transport have suited us better than the long drive from Calais.

It was mid-April when we arrived at Castelnaudary station and rolled our bags towards the large lagoon, originally constructed to act as a reservoir for the staircase locks to the east. After finding the boat, we made a quick expedition to the town to buy supplies – and it was certainly pleasant to relax with a plate of local cassoulet and a glass of wine.

On setting off the next morning, the magic of this remarkable canal began to sink in with views of the snow-capped Pyrenees to the south. The canal is bordered by manicured plane trees which seem to march across country for mile after mile. These were originally planted to provide shade in this hot, arid area.

This ambitious canal was completed in 1681, well before the canal age in Britain. Riquet's genius was in understanding the need to capture sufficient water supplies from streams in the distant mountains, and to bring water to a reservoir on the summit level by means of rigoles, or feeder streams. A monument to Riquet was constructed at Naurouze, where the remains of an octagonal reservoir can be visited.

The locks on the Canal du Midi are barrel shaped, because it was believed that rectangular locks would not remain rigid. They are strongly built in dressed stone, and all are manned by a lock-keeper. Many of the double staircase locks have been singled to make one deep lock. The lock-keepers are often equipped with radio controls which are used to activate the paddle gear and the gates. At one triple staircase lock, the *éclusier* stands at an upstairs window of his cottage and controls the operation from this point by radio.

The locks to the east of the summit level are prefixed as Mediterranean locks, while

those on the west are prefixed as Atlantic locks. After Naurouze, the canal begins its long descent to Toulouse, still bordered by the regimented plane trees. In the early springtime, their scaly bark stands out in the morning mists. The towpaths are wide and normally tarred, making cycling ahead of the boat a pleasant option. Cherry blossom may overhang and there are orchids to be found in the grassy borders.

As Toulouse is approached, the canal is populated by many residential boats and a main road swings across to join it. The canal strides through the very centre of the city – one lock lies directly outside the main railway station. The junction with the Canal Latéral à la Garonne is made in a basin, where a 270 degree turn is recommended to get under the exit bridge! On glancing back, the basin wall is decorated with white marble bas-relief between the entrances of the two canals.

Leaving Toulouse, the 'Latéral' is characterised by long, straight pounds. At first, the canal is accompanied by a busy railway line, but eventually it reaches open country and a more wandering course.

Several of the locks have been automated. On approaching the lock, you grasp and rotate a pole suspended over the water. Then, as if by magic, red and green lights show that the lock is being prepared. When the gates open the green light invites you to

