

Long way home

After a busy summers cruising around the Mediterranean, Morvyn Phillips returned to the UK through the French waterways. His route was so circuitous that he even strayed into Germany and Luxembourg on the way.



Despite the pitying looks we received on our departure from the Mediterranean, I was not downhearted as we left Port St Louis and headed northwards up the River Rhone.

Karen and I were setting out on an inland voyage that would take us all the way to Calais, on a circuitous route via the eastern part of France, along a newly opened navigation into Germany and through diminutive Luxembourg. And then we would make the short Channel hop to Dover and home.

Darius needed to come home. After four years cruising, our Moonraker 36 was, as one Frenchman diplomatically put it, 'getting tired'. She wanted some serious attention, especially to her faithful Perkins engines.

Lyon tamers

The lock-keeper at Port St Louis insisted that all the crew wear lifejackets. "It is now obligatory on the Rhone and the Saone," he said.

Our first port of call upriver was Aries because here, at the offices of the VNF (Voies Navigables de France), at 1 Quai Gare Maritime, we had our first opportunity to purchase our vignette licence. We were to be on the canal system for at least 60 days, so the cheapest option was to purchase an annual licence. But first we had to find a cash dispenser; credit cards were not acceptable.

The dry, windy weather we had experienced in the Med was also affecting the hinterland and forest fires were breaking out in the hills surrounding the river.

Suddenly, on a particularly wide stretch, we saw two flying boats heading straight at us, just skimming the water. Missing Darius by a few feet, they dropped to water level behind us and then took off again without stopping, having scooped up water to bomb the burning forest in the mountains.

We made good progress, thanks to a weak current and through always calling ahead to the next lock on the VHF. Stopping at Avignon, St-Etienne-des-Sorts, Valence, and Les-Roches-deCondrieu, we arrived at Lyon four days later, and entered the River Saone beside a disused lock, La Moutaliere. Prior to the taming of the Rhone, this was the last lock before the descent of the river in free flow, a passage requiring an experienced pilot.

Lyon, surprisingly, has little accommodation for cruisers; although there are long quays on either side of the river they are not recommended, except perhaps as a temporary halt, and even then the boat should not be left unattended.

Fast moving

Whilst the Rhone is indeed a masculine river, the Saone lives up to her feminine name. Even in July the former can run fast, especially if the hydroelectric stations have opened their sluices, whereas the Saone is a gentler river with hardly any flow in summer because the gradient is so much less, as indicated by the long distances between locks.

At Port de Belleville, some 55km north of Lyon, the local council has landscaped an old sand quay and provided a pontoon, against which we moored. It had only recently been installed and neither

water nor electricity were connected, but it made a pleasant alternative to the crowded pontoon at Montmerle-sur-Saone, and the nearby town of Belleville offered all facilities.

At the famous wine town of Macon a bypass for large barges has been built, thereby avoiding the 14th Century low bridge, Pont St-Laurent, with its statue of St Nicholas set in a niche in one of the arches. We had visited Macon on previous occasions, and knew that the marina here is some distance from the town centre, so we continued on to Tournus, where we stopped at the halte nautique in the centre of the town.

For us St Jean-de-Losne and the thriving H2O Marina in the Gare d'Eau basin (see MBM Aug 01 p72) is a mandatory stop. We also took on diesel from the fuel barge moored on the river as this would be our last chance to fill up before reaching Strasbourg, but we were surprised to find that its diesel was the most expensive we had bought all summer.

Loads and locks

At St-Symphorien, we gave a long blast on the horn to tell the lockkeeper of our intention to enter the Canal du Rhone au Rhin, which would carry us to the River Rhine.

After long stretches of lock-free cruising we were to have a rude awakening, with locks on average every couple of kilometres, and all of Freycinet standard, considerably smaller than those on the Saone and Rhone.

Much of the waterway is the canalised River Doubs, prone to flooding at certain times of the year, so one has to be very careful to avoid the unprotected weirs, especially if travelling downstream. Even in tranquil August we sometimes found them hard to see, but as we were going upstream this was no problem.

Between St-Symphorien and Dole we encountered the complete range of lock operations: mechanised, manual and automatic. Dole is a delightful town, well worth the day we spent exploring it, visiting the birthplace of Louis Pasteur and having an excellent lunch at the nearby restaurant, the Demi-Lune.

The scenery from Dole onwards is magnificent. The river runs between tree-covered hills with occasional rocky outcrops. Kingfishers darted from bankside bushes as we cruised past, whilst kites, buzzards and marsh harriers wheeled above us. At Ecluse (Lock) 62 we were handed a zapper, like a television remote control, to use on locks 59 to 33.

At Besancon, birthplace of Victor Hugo, there are two ways to go, either via a short tunnel or keeping to the river, skirting the ramparts of this old but thriving city. We chose the latter route which, although generally shallow, has a deeper, buoyed channel leading to the small marina of Port St Paul, with easy access to the city centre.

We stayed for a couple of days, visiting the huge citadelle overlooking the city. There's a splendid view from here, over Besancon and the surrounding countryside, or at least there would be in good weather; it rained incessantly during our visit and a mist hung over the valley.

Beg to Niffer

The scenery northwards from Besancon is dramatic with high, tree-covered cliffs tumbling down to the river's edge.

The biggest problem here was finding deep water close to the bank to stop overnight; we were forced to tie up immediately above Laissey lock as the locks ahead would shortly close for the night.

We knew we would have to leave before the waterway reopened in the morning as we were blocking access to the lock chamber. Locks normally open at 0830, unless a working peniche (barge) has special permission to work through earlier.

Needless to say, at 0745 we heard the whirring of the lock machinery and on crawling out of bed I saw a peniche ascending the lock. Mad panic! Still in my pyjamas, I started the engine and let go the ropes, and we pushed off into the river, where we waited until the peniche passed us by before returning to the mooring we had just vacated.

After handing in our zapper, we were faced by a long series of manual locks, which were tiring work with only two of us on board; even though there is usually a keeper, boat crews are expected to operate the gates and sluices on one side of the chamber. But eventually we passed through the last lock before the summit level, and stopped at probably the only spot to moor before the descent to Mulhouse.

Passage through the 15 locks down to Dannemarie has to be booked in advance, so having committed ourselves to negotiating them all in one go there was no time to stop until we reached the village,

where the capitainerie of the small port had been warned of our arrival and a very helpful lady was waiting to take our ropes.

From here to Mulhouse the locks are further apart but again passage must be booked in advance, before 4pm on the previous day at the capitainerie.

We were advised not to stop in Mulhouse because vandalism was common there, so we continued all the way to Niffer, where the canal joins the Grand Canal d'Alsace, a canalised section of the River Rhine. However, in the centre of Mulhouse we saw a marina basin which appeared secure with fencing and a high gate, and I wished we had ignored the advice and stopped to explore the city.

At Niffer we moored for the night in a small marina to brace ourselves for the change from a cosy Freycinet canal to a large, busy waterway used by 2000-tonne barges. All night we could hear the rumble of barge engines ploughing their way towards Switzerland and that country's only port at Basel.

Rhine routings

I had assumed that the Grand Canal d'Alsace would have no current, but I was wrong, for hydroelectric stations are built alongside the locks using Rhine waters to feed them. For us this was a great help, as we sped downriver on a 3-knot current, making 10 knots over the ground.

With the exception of one lock where we had to wait for a pusher-tug and its barges to exit, there were no hold-ups and although the canal is featureless it made a pleasant change to cruise on long lock-free stretches.

We could have continued downstream to Strasbourg on this canal, but there is another way via a truncated part of the Rhone au Rhin from Friesenheim, and it was this that we decided to enter at the junction just below Rhinau Lock, not least because we could moor up easily there for the night.

The following day we entered Strasbourg, where we had hoped to enter the River Ill, but Oarius' draught was too deep. Instead, we turned to starboard and, twisting the dangling pole to operate an automatic lock, entered the Bassin Dusuzeau.

We moored for the night at Koejac Yachting, a friendly place with all facilities, including diesel and petrol fuelling.

Hurrah for the Saar

Strasbourg is a beautiful city but we had been here on several previous occasions and decided to push on, heading west along the Canal de la Marne au Rhin.

As far as the Roman town of Saverne the canal runs through open country, but beyond follows the valley cut by the River Zorn. Here the canal is hemmed in by the Vosges Mountains, covered in trees and guarded by ancient hilltop castles, one of which was reputed to be a school for witches!

Beyond Lutzelbourg we came to what must be one of the seven wonders of the waterways. The St-Louis-Arzviller inclined plane was built to bypass the 17 locks running up to the summit level, an 850-tonne transverse caisson being hauled up and lowered down a 41 % slope.

The caisson is big enough to hold a peniche and we entered with two other cruising boats. The operator checked our papers as we were hauled sideways up the mountainside, and we watched the huge counterbalancing weights passing underneath us as they descended.

The summit level took us through two tunnels, the Arzviller (nearly 2.5km long) and the Niderviller, to arrive at a large basin where there are pontoon moorings with electricity and showers.

From here it was but a short run to Hesse where we stopped to pick up our old friend, the author Hugh McKnight, before turning at Gondrexange into the Canal des Houilleres de la Sarre (Sarre Coalfields). Beside being excellent company, Hugh would take some of the crewing workload from Karen, who had negotiated nearly 200 locks since we left the Med, and had 250 still to go before we would arrive at Calais.

The Sarre Coalfields Canal is nothing like as dreary as the name suggests. It passes through forests, lakes and villages on its descent to Sarreguemines and across the German border to the River Saar, as the Sarre is called in Germany.

As on many other canals, we had to book a 'flying' lock-keeper service to descend the 13 locks to Mittelsheim, where we stopped for the night. At Lock 15 we were handed another zapper, to be returned at Lock 30, beyond Sarreguemines, where we stopped for the night in a port de plaisance.

Merry Gerries

Below Lock 30 the Franco/German border runs down the centre of the Saar, to Bubingen, after which you are fully in Germany. We soon reached Saarbrücken, which I had envisaged as a dust-laden mi-

ning town, but again my preconceived notion was wrong. Fringed by parkland, the river meanders through the town centre and under a many-arched bridge dating from 1546.

The new locks on the Saar can take 2000-tonne barges, but, as with all modern lock chambers, ascent and descent are much gentler than in those built in the 19th Century. Passage through them is further eased by the floating bollards set into the walls.

We passed several commercial ports and yacht marinas but stopping places were hard to find. Eventually we moored at Anleger Oreisbach for a lunch break, and were told that the scenic part of the Saar was from there to the junction with the Mosel. And so it was; from dull, open surroundings we passed into a steep, wooded gorge as we cruised through Oreisbach. At Saarschleife the river does a complete U-turn as it heads for the lock at Mettlach.

At Saarburg, a pretty town of gaily painted houses, we saw what looked like a convenient mooring. A sign indicated we could stop there and so we did, only to be told without explanation that we couldn't! A little disconcerted by this unusually belligerent attitude, we continued downstream to a marina, which according to our chart had visitors' moorings.

WSC Saarburg was run by a miserable-looking man who immediately swooped upon us demanding to know how long we were staying, and wanting DM2 (60p) for us to take on water. We were glad to leave an hour later.

A Moselle spell

Our journey down the Saar ended just downstream of Konz, where we joined the River Moser, turning hard to port, upstream, towards the first lock at Grevenmacher. The Mosellocks are duplicated, with separate locks for small cruisers; at just 3.3m wide they were too narrow for Darius, so we had to use the main chambers. If we entered with a barge we got through free, if alone we were charged DM9 (£2.70).

At Wasserbillig we passed into Luxembourg and stopped for the night at Ahn. The quay at the tourist resort of Remich beckoned, so we stopped to restock our larder and look around this pleasant town. Diesel is much cheaper in Luxembourg so we refuelled in the marina at Schwebsange.

At Apach Lock we re-entered France, and on what was now the Moselle stopped at the new halte nautique at Thionville. Here Hugh left us to return to England, while we carried on to Metz.

To reach the city we had to turn off the main river onto a lake, keeping to a buoyed channel leading to some free moorings on the far side. The old city centre is near enough to explore on foot.

Back on the Moselle, we continued south through an industrialised area serviced by 1300-tonne barges and above the lock at Ars turned off the canalised part of the river and followed its original course back downstream for a short way. We moored against a grassy bank near the village of Jouy-aux-Arches, just upstream of a magnificent Roman aqueduct.

Turning off the Moselle at Toul we returned to the Marne au Rhin, mooring in the port de plaisance for a couple of days. Here we stocked up with provisions as we were about to head into an area with few villages and even fewer shops.

Above the deep top lock we plunged into the 866m Foug tunnel, which has a one-way system controlled by lights operated from the lock. At Troussey we could have turned onto the Canal de l'Est Branche Nord, but I wanted to go through the 5km-long Mauvages Tunnel, so we stayed on the Marne au Rhin.

The lock-keeper at the bottom of the flight of locks leading up to the canal's second summit level told us that little traffic now passed this way; it was not favoured by hire boats because of the numerous locks. We were told to arrive at the tunnel mouth for 1030 the following day.

Tunnel vision

Boats used to be towed through the tunnel by tug, to avoid the build up of noxious fumes, but with the light volume of traffic, and improvements to the tunnel's ventilation, they are now allowed to go through under their own power. The tunnel keeper signalled us to enter before racing ahead along the towpath on his small motorbike. Strapped to his waist was a small box used to monitor air pollution in the tunnel; if it reaches a certain level he stops all traffic.

The passage through took us an hour. The tunnel is lit throughout and because the water ahead was totally still we seemed to be gliding along on air. The surface of the water perfectly reflected the roof, making the tunnel seem like a round pipe.

Just beyond the tunnel is a huge basin and we rested here for a day, to gather our strength for the descent of 70 locks in 88km to Vitry-le-Francois. The first 17 are zapper-operated, the remaining 53

all manual with one keeper serving several locks. We broke the journey with an overnight stop at pontoon moorings in Ligny-enBarrois, between locks 21 and 22.

Commercial traffic was heavier now, with barges loading at grain silos along the route, but they did not delay us as we continued our descent to Bar-le-Due to moor at the halte nautique there. The old town, high on the hill, made for a pleasant evening visit, its clock tower and ramparts forming the remains of a castle built in 974AD.

In Vitry-le-Francois, a canal town with a barge repairyard, complete with dry dock, I decided to change the oil in Darius's two Perkins diesels and take on more fuel.

Tucked in opposite the barge yard is a small marina where we were welcomed by the lady harbour-master. She organised a road tanker for us, but we had to take a minimum of 200lt, which turned out to be a good move because a few days later France was hit by a fuel strike.

Bargee banter

From Vitry we joined the Canal Lateral a la Marne, heading west into Champagne country. Commercial traffic was even heavier here, and on the Canal de l'Aisne a la Marne, which we joined at Condesur-Marne. After a series of automatic locks we negotiated yet another tunnel, the 2302m Mont-de-Billy, and then ran along a narrow wooded cut to the village of Sept-Saulx.

In the ancient city of Reims we stopped at an excellent relais nautique, which cost us FF65 (£5.90) per night, including the use of a washing machine and dryer. The city centre is just a few streets away, as is the Gothic cathedral where, for a thousand years, the Kings of France were crowned.

Berry-au-Bac, where we turned onto the Canal Lateral a l'Aisne, is another of those waterway junction towns popular as resting places for barges, where their family crews can exchange gossip and news. A barge chandlery-cumgrocery-cum-bar, established many years ago, is now one of the last places still catering specifically for bateliers (bargees).

We now headed east along the Lateral a l'Aisne to the Canal de l'Oise a l'Aisne at Bourg-et-Comin. It took well over an hour to run through the 2363m Braye Tunnel, behind two barges whose exhausts would certainly not meet the Bodensee emissions standards.

Route canal work

The fuel strike was now in full swing and the bateliers had decided to join it, blocking some of the waterways. One such blockage was near Pont l'Eveque, closing our planned passage to the Canal du Nord, so at Abbecourt, where we joined the Canal Lateral a l'Oise, we turned right for the short run to Chauny and the alternative northward route along the Canal de St-Quentin.

There are two tunnels on this canal, including one, the Bony, which at 5670m is the longest in France. Boats and barges are towed through by an electric tug, hauling itself along on a chain lying on the canal bed.

Having paid our towage fee of FF123 (£11.20) at St-Quentin Lock, we reached the entrance to the tunnel in the early afternoon and moored behind eight barges. Boats have to take up station behind any commercial traffic so we secured two bow ropes to a laden sand barge. At 1500 the tug set off with its train in tow, at 2km per hour. It was quite eerie in the tunnel; all we could hear was the clank of the chain, and the occasional boom as a barge nudged the tunnel wall.

At Cambrai we turned into a port de plaisance, a popular spot for all types of pleasure craft, from converted barges to seagoing yachts and small runabouts, many sporting red ensigns. From here we ran down the River Escaut and then turned eastward along the Grand Gabarit Canal. Most of the lock work was now over as we joined this busy waterway, where barges rumbled on throughout the night. There are few peaceful moorings, but one, at Pont a Vendin, has the oddity of a pair of sprung gates which you have to push open with your bow to enter.

The best, and most interesting, stopping place is on the old canal above the deep lock of Fontinettes. From here you can visit the 'ascenseur' barge lift, where peniches used to be raised and lowered in counterbalancing caissons. Replaced by the 13m deep lock in 1967, it operated on the same principle as the Anderton Lift, which connects the Trent & Mersey Canal with the River Weaver in the UK.

Dover at last

Branching off the Grand Gabarit at Watten, we entered the Canal de Calais, on which I always seem to have problems, usually from duckweed clogging the water intakes. On this occasion, in mid-September, we encountered little weed and it was at Henuin Lock where the difficulty lay.

The lock was built to be automatic and has moorings above and below where one can pull in to operate the mechanism. But it didn't work, and from the look of things hadn't done so for some time. Instead, we had to call the lock-keeper to let us through.

After repeated calls on VHF Ch18 without reply, I was forced to resort to my mobile phone, ringing first the land line number given in the canal guide, only to get an answerphone, and then another mobile number, at last with success. The keeper said he would come in 10 minutes, but it was a further 30 before he arrived and let us through the lock and the accompanying lift bridge.

But now Lady Luck smiled upon us, as if to compensate for all the frustrations I have had on this canal over the years. The greatest problem in Calais is one of timing: passing through the Ecluse de la Batellerie, leading into the Bassin Carnot, and then the sea lock, and arriving in time for the opening of the swing bridge giving access to the marina in the Bassin Ouest. And on the way you have to negotiate several lift bridges controlled by a mobile keeper. But we sailed through without a hitch and had only a short wait in the Avant Port before entering the marina with sighs of relief.

Three days later, in perfect weather, we crossed the Channel to Dover, where Darius hibernated for the winter in the Wellington Dock. Her summer cruising had taken in just under 700 sea miles and 2000km of inland waterway, in addition to nearly 450 locks and 10 tunnels.

Factfile

Chart guides

Navicartes 16 The Rhone; 10 The Saone; 32 Canal du Rhone au Rhin; 17 Canal de la Marne au Rhin; 8 Champagne-Ardenne; 24 Picardie; 14 Nord-Pas-de-Calais (available in the UK through Imray).

Further reading

'Cruising French Waterways', by Hugh McKnight (Adlard Coles Nautical). 'French & Belgian Waterways Infopak' (Cruising Association).

Paperwork

Essential: International Certificate of Competence with CEVNI endorsement. Voies Navigables de France vignette (waterway licence). Part 1 registration (or SSR). Insurance certificate. Passports. Ship radio licence. Short range (VHF) certificate.

Advisable: E111 EU emergency medical treatment form. Personal health insurance document.

Also carried: RYA/DoT Coastal Skipper Certificate.

Fuel costs

Average diesel price in France was FF5.73/litre (52p/litre). In Luxembourg diesel cost LF12.4/litre (19p/litre).

Moorings fees

As often as possible Darius overnighted at 'wild moorings', free of charge, but in ports de plaisance or haltes nautiques the cost averaged about FF50 (£4.55), except on the Rhone and Saone, where it ranged from FF69 to FF97 (£6.30 to £8.30).

Cost of living

Morvyn and Karen Phillips usually ate on board; on average the cost of provisioning the boat proved to be slightly less than in the UK.

Distances/locks/tunnels

Port St-Louis to Lyon (Rhone) 310km/12 locks. Lyon to St-Symphorien (Saone) 213km/410cks. St-Symphorien to Niffer (Rhone au Rhin) 23,6km/11410cks/2 tunnels. Niffer to Strasbourg (d'Alsace, Marne au Rhin) 108km/17 locks. Strasbourg to Sarreguemines (Marne au Rhin, Houilleres de la Sarre) 146km/61 locks/2tunnels. Sarreguiminesto Toul (Saar/Sarre, Mosel/Moselle) 271 km/25 locks. Toul to Chauny (Marne au Rhin, Lateral a la Marne, Aisne a la Marne, l'Oise a l'Aisne) 323km/152 locks/4 tunnels. Chauny to Calais (St-Quentin, Grand Gabarit, de Calais) 260km/49 locks/2 tunnels, Calais to Dover 24 miles.

Total 1911 km (1032 miles)/434 locks/ 10tunnels.

Fuel

Except on the big rivers; Darius ran on one engine only, alternating every three hours. The total amount of diesel consumed was 1400 lt. (1.36 l / mile)

Useful contacts

Voies Navigables de France Tel: +33 (0)4 90 96 00 8545 (Aries); Tel: +33 (0) 3 21342558 (Calais); Tel: +33 (0) 3 21 632442 (Bethune).

Radiocommunications Agency (radio licences) Tel: 020 7211 0215.

Registry of Shipping & Seamen Tel: 029 2074 7333.

Royal Yachting Association (training & certificates) Tel: 023 8062 7400.

Cruising Association Tel: 020 7537 2828. Imray Tel: 01480 462114.