

# river-boating gallic-style

In the past year, we have written about yachting and pleasure boating at many locations, both home and abroad. The options for a vacation spent on water are numerous, including The Norfolk Broads, The English Lakes and the British canals network but **Peter Lewsey** decided to try the French alternative and declared it most restful.

Our boating adventure began when we arrived at the Nicol's European holiday specialist base at Brienon sur Armançon. It was from this picturesque and seldom travelled part of north-central France that we would collect the boat that would be our home for the next seven days of cruising down a French canal. While the prospect of tackling a completely alien waterway (de Bourgogne), at the controls of an unfamiliar vessel, could have been daunting, Nicol's does a very good job of quelling any pre-cruise nerves and assuring vacationers that there is truly little of which to be worried.

Before boarding our boat for the week, we stocked up on essential provisions at the convenience supermarket, directly across the road from the boatyard. With such a 'captive market', you might have expected the shopkeeper to take a small advantage, yet his prices were all but identical to any other canal-side shops and retail emporia we tried during our break.

We also took the opportunity to purchase fishing licences from the local bar (it would be illegal for us not to), which was admittedly an unusual place to acquire them, however, it did allow us to enjoy a small drink and gain some fishing tips from the delightfully friendly locals. We took a little time out to explore Brienon, which is a typical French small town, and were impressed by its 13th and 16th Century churches, as well as the oval wash-house that dates back to 1792.

Nicol's exceptionally helpful and friendly staff soon had us boarded and ready for some much-needed instructions. It was vital that all of us paid attention, just in case anything untoward should occur. While I have previous boating experience, to be frank, I had never driven a canal vessel of this size before. Fortunately, I was reassured by the simple and intuitive controls that are required to operate it and the inevitable Health & Safety details, while slightly unnerving, are essential to making the holiday more relaxing.

We were truly impressed at the size and facilities aboard the Estivale Quattro. As a group of four adults,

space would be important and the Quattro offered us two berths, each with en-suite shower and toilet facilities. The spacious living area, which incorporated a large dining table, a well-equipped galley area, with oven, hob, a large fridge-freezer and a full range of kitchen utensils, crockery and cutlery, meant that we were fully catered for. There was plenty of space for the captain to sit and pilot the boat, with room beside for the navigator. The only difficulty might arise from which of us wanted to perform those tasks.

On warm and dry days the sundeck offered an additional place for the tiller and we made good use of it. The boat's exterior incorporated a second sun deck at the prow, complete with integral table and seating area, while a large sun deck occupied the rear, which was perfect for taking in the scenery, at the same time allowing us private space, should we need it and a great choice of on-board spaces where we could enjoy a glass, or few, of local wines. For our trip, we had arranged the hire of bicycles, for those occasional off-boat forays, and they were easily stored on the back deck.

Once clear about the vessel operations, our next challenge was to negotiate the locks, an inevitable hazard of canal-boating and, when planning our trip, we realised that we would pass through no less than 48 of them, before reaching our destination at Venarey-les-Laumes, where Nicol's operate another of its offices. Needless to say, we approached the first one with a degree of

■ The 16th Century Renaissance chateau at Ancy le Franc is a another restful beauty spot off de Bourgogne



■ A lockkeeper's cat typically begs for snacks



trepidation. Yet, we were relieved to see that there was a lockkeeper present to help us.

We soon mastered the process and, by the end of the trip, one member of our party had assumed the role of an honorary lockkeeper, helping wherever he could to navigate both our boat and also to help other canal adventurers... Each lock had a keeper's cottage and most were highly individual in their style and beauty. We were particularly impressed with the cats and dogs that came out to greet us, as we approached the locks. Naturally, they were expecting treats from the passing boat-people and were clearly very familiar with receiving tasty morsels.

Our week spent on the canal de Bourgogne was incredibly relaxing, which allowed each of us to switch off from our busy working and social lives, to concentrate on the amazing tranquillity and sheer loveliness of the canal and the surrounding countryside. We stopped at several towns, villages and chateaux, all of which were packed with character and outstandingly redolent of the historic region of Burgundy.

Incidentally, we made really good use of our fishing licences, hooking fish each evening, once we had moored for the night. Mind you, we were slightly disappointed with the overall quality of the fish landed that was until our last evening in Venarey, when a member of our group netted an enormous carp, so big, in fact, that we caused quite a stir at the boatyard, which provided additional entertainment for the guests on a nearby hotel barge. At least we left a positive impression.


During our planning for the trip we had identified key stops to make along the way, which would help us to explore this historical region in more detail. It was the right decision to make and our first stop at St Florentin, revealed that, as well as the canal, the town is surrounded

by a pair of rivers, the Armance and the Armançon. We walked up the steep hill, through streets framed by medieval buildings that take in the panoramic views of the old town, as well as the surrounding countryside.

Our next significant stop, at Tonnerre, was not only to explore the town and its surrounding countryside but also to undertake the essential task of recharging our on-boards electricity supply from the mains. Unfortunately, we encountered a little problem, when we discovered that the correct plug-in adaptor was not on-board the boat. However, a quick telephone call to Nicol's resolved the issue and, within half an hour, we were reconnected.

We took the opportunity to explore the historic old town, with its 'Fosse Dionne', a circular basin fed by a natural spring that was used as a public washing place, while a walk up to the Church St Pierre, built high on a rock terrace, proved fascinating.

We were particularly impressed with the chateau, at Ancy-le-Franc, the 16th Century building being a fine example of Renaissance architecture, which had been restored recently, complete with original furnishings. At Ravieres, we consumed a delicious, hearty and cost-effective meal at Le Convivial, a canal-side restaurant, usefully close to where we had moored.

Stopping at Montbard, we explored the Buffon park and museum, dedicated to the celebrated naturalist, Georges-Louis Leclerc, the Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), who was born and resided in the town. However, all too soon we reached our destination of Venarey, which denoted the end of our journey and a week cruising on the canal de Bourgogne. On reflection, our boating week was most enjoyable, thanks largely to the natural and historical beauty of Burgundy and the professionalism and support of Nicol's. 

■ Early preconceptions about the locks were totally unfounded

## french canal facts:

Peter travelled with boating holiday specialist, Nicol's. River boats can be hired for crews of between two and twelve people, with prices starting from 645 Euros for a three-nights short-break, or 993 Euros for a week-long holiday based on a boat sleeping six people. Neither previous boating experience, nor a special licence is needed (apart from the fishing alternative). In addition to the Burgundy region, Nicol's boasts 17 other bases throughout France, with one in Portugal and two in Germany. For more information, call 02392-401320 or visit [www.boat-renting-nicols.co.uk](http://www.boat-renting-nicols.co.uk).