

CRUISING COGNAC COUNTRY

Steeped in brandy-making history, the clear waters of France's Charente River provide heavenly cruising – as **Bobby Cowling** experienced on a hire-boat trip to Cognac

It was on a hire-boat exploration of the Canal du Midi in 2015 that my wife Becki and I had our first taste of overseas cruising, and became such fans of the French waterways we've been holidaying afloat in the country every year since.

The appeal? Exactly the same qualities that entice millions of British holidaymakers across the Channel each summer: sunshine, fine cuisine, rich history, Continental culture, and the adventures and delights of a foreign land. But for boaters there is another significant draw: the sheer unspoilt nature of many of the country's waterways. With a

land mass so much greater than Britain, and a population of roughly the same size, many of its canals and rivers are almost entirely rural, running for mile after mile through landscapes untouched by drab suburbs, ugly industrial estates, busy roads and modern infrastructure. If you want true get-away-from-it-all cruising, it really is the place to go.

Such an experience was just what we needed in the summer of 2016 when we spent the week after the Brexit vote exploring the peaceful waterways of the north-east Alsace region, blissfully unaware of the political turmoil back home. And in June of this year – by pure coincidence, on the

day after the general election result was announced – we set out on the Charente River in the south-west hoping for similar escapism.

Sireuil

Isolated from other French waterways, the Charente is navigable for around 164km from Angoulême to the Atlantic just south of La Rochelle. Our starting point was Nicols' hire-base at the village of Sireuil, which is around 14km west of Angoulême. Here, among the line of large white cruisers, we found a much smaller boat, distinguished by its beige flash, that was very familiar to us. We had hired Nicols' four-berth Primo

The stunning view of St-Simeux from the river.





A hire-boat at St-Simeux.



One of the Charente's wheel-operated locks.



La Tonnellerie restaurant at Châteauneuf-sur-Charente.



The Nicols base at Sireuil.

model the previous year and found its easy handling, comfortable cabin and on board facilities so perfect for a crew of two that we requested it again. Stepping aboard the boat felt like being reunited with an old friend.

Before we could make ourselves at home, however, we were driven the short distance to the village lock for a demonstration of the Charente's workings. That's another thing about the French waterways – the huge variation in locks. On the Canal du Midi, they are all under the auspices of lock-keepers, while in Alsace they are electrified, being effortlessly operated by remote controls and sensors. On the Charente, however, the locks are manual, with the paddles and lock gates being opened and closed by wheels. The advantage of this is that boaters aren't constrained by closing times – cruising is permitted at any point during daylight hours, which, in high summer, means as late as 9pm or 10pm.

“We had the sensation of having the Charente all to ourselves”

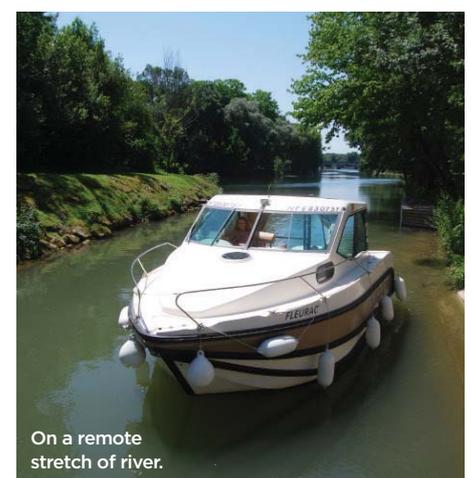
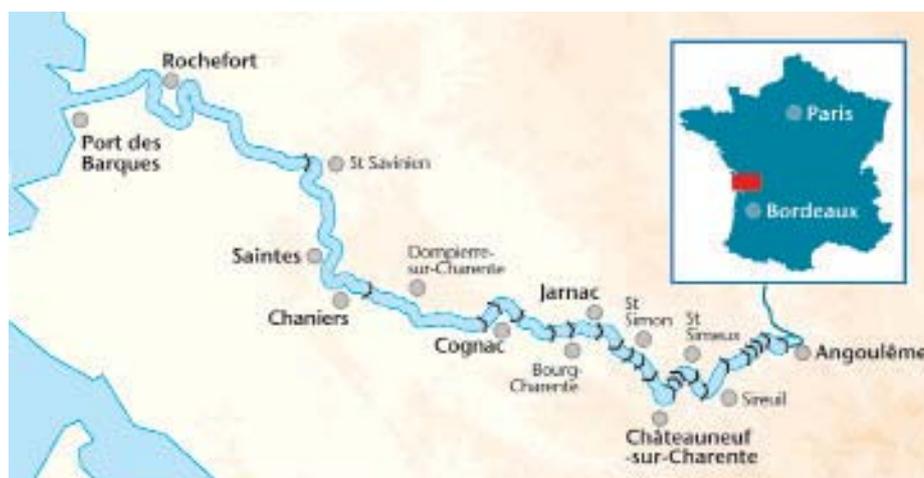
St-Simeux

Not that we were among the late evening boaters on our first day on the Charente. Tired from our travels to Sireuil, we covered around 5km and three locks to tie up at St-Simeux by late afternoon. The remnants of the village's old eel fishery are readily apparent from the river, where several islands and curious-looking huts are linked by weirs. The scene is capped by an elegant church to make this one of the iconic images of the river.

The moorings at the village are beside a restaurant/pub owned by an English couple. Although we had taken on supplies at the small supermarket at Sireuil, when we heard a rock band sound-checking inside the establishment, we decided to head over for our evening meal. Opting for regional

wine over the British beers on tap, we enjoyed a simple but delicious serving of *steak-frites*, though the group – a French-English trio all wearing black-and-white-striped T-shirts – weren't any great shakes.

With the sound of an erratic drummer still ringing in our ears, on Sunday morning we ventured into the village where we were surprised to find a busy car boot sale taking place. It seems the modern obsession with all things vintage hasn't yet spread to this part of France and, were it not for luggage allowance restrictions, we would have come away with armfuls of bargains. The view from the church to the sparkling waters of the river below proved just as stunning from the opposite perspective.



On a remote stretch of river.

Right: A recreation of a *gabare* – the type of cargo-carrying boat that once plied the river.
 Right middle: A model boat at St Simon's dedicated Maison des Gabariers.
 Below: Entering Châteauneuf Lock.



Cruising through Jarnac.



The quiet quayside at St Simon.



Châteauneuf-sur-Charente

Back on the river, and taking care to follow our guidebook to avoid the various meandering side channels, we didn't get too far before being lured by a fabulous-looking lockside restaurant called La Tonnellerie (translation: the cooperage) just before the small town of Châteauneuf-sur-Charente. Although another establishment owned by an English couple, the menu, the chef and the quality of cuisine were distinctly French. Our three-course meal included such delights as *camembert*, *filet de boeuf* and *crème brûlée au Cognac*, and was further appreciated when we remembered the 20 per cent discount voucher we'd been given at the Nicols base.

That afternoon we were blissfully content as we headed west along the river, enveloped in its green, tree-lined arms, and with the sun pouring down on us – as far as we were concerned, this was what French cruising was all about.

With little traffic to contend with (we didn't pass an oncoming boat until Jarnac) and the river's lack of a towpath, we often had the sensation of having the Charente all to ourselves. However, the river is clearly much-loved by locals, particularly as swimming is permitted in its waters. Throughout the afternoon, we passed fishermen and canoeists, and – almost like a throwback to a different era – large groups of children and teenagers

“The French waterways are our favourite holiday destination”

playing on rope swings and hurling themselves from bridges. It seemed that the presence of a floating audience always encouraged them to up the ante, and it was impossible not to get a vicarious kick out of seeing them somersault into the centre of the channel or climb up to the highest tree branch before letting themselves drop into the water.

St Simon

That second night we moored at St Simon, which, although now a sleepy settlement, formed the hub of the river's boating activity from the 17th century onwards. It was here that flat-bottomed sailing barges called *gabares* were produced, which were capable of carrying between 80 and 200 tonnes of salt, wine, cognac and other cargoes. This rich heritage is signposted around the town, and is the subject of a dedicated museum, where tools, model boats and photographs trace the evolution of the craft, and recall this once bustling commercial waterway's past.

Setting out from the quayside the following morning, and now able to picture a period when blacksmiths, carpenters

and woodcutters premises occupied the whole of this stretch, just a short way upstream we had the opportunity to see a real-life *gabare* – or, at least, a faithful reproduction of one – which carries passengers throughout the summer.

Timeless cruising

With my head filled with Charente history, and soon heading along another remote stretch of river, my imagination began to fly. Would this landscape, made up of wide, shallow waters enclosed by mature trees, have been so different one, two or three centuries ago? Would the bargeman of old, who would surely have known every curve and side channel of the route, recognise where we were?

The only interruptions to such musings were the occasional riverside settlements such as Gondeville, a lovely village of around 500 inhabitants that's known for its old watermill and impressive municipal hall housed in an 18th-century château. With a dedicated visitor pontoon and a small supermarket in its centre, it was a perfect spot to tie up and replenish our supplies.



Swimming in the river is permitted.



Tied up at Gondeville, which proved a handy place to get supplies.



Heading through Jarnac lock to arrive at the town.

Jarnac

The town of Jarnac is approached through a waterside park, where the river narrows and is hemmed in by trees. As such, the sight of Jarnac lock, and the wider channel, tall buildings and five-arch road-bridge beyond, came as something of a surprise. This is also the point where the region's brandy-making industry becomes visible, as the town is home to two famous distilleries, the Royer company and Courvoisier, both of which have commanding riverside premises between the lock and bridge. The imposing dwellings further along the river give an idea of the former prosperity of the town, and it is possible to tie up almost anywhere along this salubrious stretch.

The town is also famous as the birth and burial place of former French president, François Mitterrand, and a small museum showcases a collection of gifts offered to him by heads of state from around the world.

Paying a nominal fee for water and electric, we moored on the quayside and passed a balmy evening on deck, drinking wine and watching members of the local rowing club heading up and down the river until nightfall.

En route to Cognac the next morning, we passed the inviting port of Bourg-Charente, vowing to pay a visit on our return. Close by, divers recently discovered a canoe cut out of a tree trunk dating from 4,500BC, which

is the oldest evidence of navigation on the river. Unfortunately, I wasn't quite able to put myself in the mindset of a Stone Age boater as easily as a 17th-century bargeman, but it is a reminder of the primal appeal of river cruising.

Cognac

The approach to Cognac feels much like the approach to Jarnac: the river narrows and becomes densely tree-lined, before a lock takes you up into a wide channel and under a five-arched bridge. Having already tackled 12 of the Charente's wheel-operated locks, Becki and I had developed a pretty effective system, which entailed her handling the craft, while I did much of the grunt work. At Cognac Lock, however, we were surprised to find a curious young gentleman who insisted on 'helping' us through, though, it has to be said, his advice actually hindered us. At first, we took him to be the town's dedicated lock-keeper, though his ill-clad appearance and habit of swigging from a litre bottle of cola suggested he probably wasn't in employment. He was also at great pains to try to communicate something to us that we just couldn't understand – it seemed, like us, he wasn't a natural French speaker. Feeling somewhat embarrassed we thanked him and continued into town, where we moored up at the old commercial port of Cognac, now the *port de plaisance*.

Unbelievably, we saw the 'lock-keeper' twice that night, bombing around the town on a scooter that was too small for him, and each time he shouted hello.

Brandy continues to be big business in Cognac, as the town is home to a range of distillers, with Hennessy having particularly commanding riverside headquarters and even a fleet of trip-boats on the water. Pride of place on the riverside, though, goes to the House of Otard, or Château Royal de Cognac, which has been housed in the prominent castle here since 1795. On an excellent one-hour tour, conducted in English, we learned about the tumultuous history of the building, as well as the local grape varieties used to make the wine that becomes cognac, and the complex distilling process. The tour concluded with a tasting session, though the vintage bottle costing €3,720 remained locked away in its glass cabinet.

Unfortunately, the early consumption of alcohol meant that our Cognac explorations culminated in a rather wine-soaked meal at the Chez Aristed restaurant in town that evening. Thankfully, we remained *compos mentis* enough to enjoy the delicious food, even if I did leave my camera on the table when we left, forcing us to run back to retrieve it! Fortunately, it was still there, and I received a loud cheer from a group of French diners who were even more merry than us.



St-Simeux.

Return journey

With two museums, a glassworks and barrelworks – not to mention a host of inviting bars and restaurants – we could have spent much longer in Cognac, but, conscious of our schedule, we had to turn back towards Sireuil. This was also regrettable, as beyond the town there is a long lock-less stretch taking in the fabulous-looking town of Saintes with its many Roman remains; if only we'd had a few days longer.

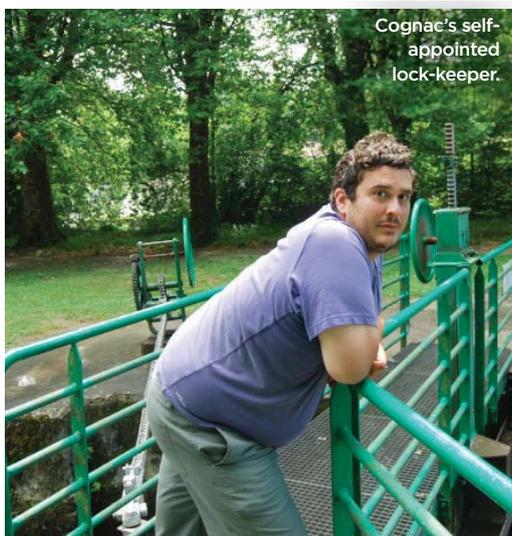
Heading up the town lock, we met the unofficial *éclusier* again, who finally managed to make clear what he had been asking for all along: a tip! I gave him a €5 note and he agreed to pose for a photograph, before helping us through and waving us off as though we were his oldest, dearest friends.

The return journey proved no less enjoyable, as we took the opportunity to visit the Bourg-Charente, and further explore Châteauneuf-sur-Charente, both of which handsomely repaid the time we'd given them. At the latter town's moorings on the final evening of our cruise, we resolved to do something we had intended to every day throughout the trip: take a dip in the river. Lowering ourselves gently into the water from our boat, and swimming out to the centre of the channel, we felt like we were being wonderfully adventurous. That was until a couple of youths arrived and began throwing themselves from the road bridge above, and diving down to touch the river bed.

But that's the thing we discovered about the Charente, whether you approach it spiritedly or steadily, it provides infinite adventure. We left Sireuil the next day even more convinced that the French waterways are our favourite holiday destination – there was even pie-in-the-sky talk of buying a boat over there.



Looking back on Cognac, with the Château de Royal Cognac and the Hennessy headquarters both visible.



Cognac's self-appointed lock-keeper.

Information

- Our boat was the four-berth Primo model, which is ideally suited for a couple.
- Prices for our trip start at €463 for a two-night short break or €925 for a week. Discounts are available for bookings before the end of December 2017
- We arrived at Sireuil, having taken a two-hour train journey from Paris to Angoulême. From the town's railway station, a taxi to the hire-base is around €30.
- The closest airport to the Charente's hire-bases is at Bordeaux.
- Call 02392 401320, or visit boat-renting-nicols.co.uk.