

# On the straight and narrow in Aquitaine

**SARAH MERSON** and family go with the flow during a canal cruise along the waterways of south-west France

LOUIS, aka First Mate, stood up front binoculars in hand. The sightings came thick and fast: a brilliant-blue kingfisher, soaring black kites and even a turtle on the canal banks.

My husband Josh and I along with our children Louis, nine, Olivia, six, and four-year-old Jude were on a narrowboating break in France's beautiful Aquitaine region.

The Canal de Garonne connects Bordeaux and Toulouse where it links with the better-known Canal du Midi. Opened in 1856 the Canal de Garonne is 110 miles long and during the course of our seven-day holiday we were to navigate three-quarters of it.

Arriving at Meilhan-sur-Garonne boat base, an hour's drive from Bordeaux, we spent the first night on board four-berth "Marmande". With just a handful of boats moored on the pontoon and a small shed-like building marked Capitainerie (port office) the base was basic but inviting. Despite it being late in the evening, manager Mike was there to welcome us.

Marmande was compact but cosy with a bathroom and shower, a kitchen with a full-size cooker and plenty of wooden veneer.

The following morning after a thorough briefing we were off.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Olivia asked as we approached the first lock. "Of course. We'll be fine," I responded. And fine we were.

The automatic locks, 30 in total, turned out to be family highlights with Josh at the helm and Louis in position at the front of the boat twisting the yellow hose suspended in the middle of the canal from a wire which signalled to the mechanised system to set everything in train.

The water emptied or filled, the gates opened and Josh carefully steered the boat into the high-sided lock. Lockside, Olivia and Jude pressed a button to complete the locking process and watched while the gates closed.

Running the length of the canal, the immaculately maintained towpath is a popular walking and cycle route.

We'd attract quite a crowd at each lock (some even taking photographs of our efforts) giving the children plenty of opportunity to practise their bonjours.

The surrounding countryside was green and undulating, vineyards jostling with rolling fields dotted with creamy Charolais cattle. The stillness was punctuated only by the occasional distant tractor or, in the evenings, a serenading by frogs.

We couldn't help but sit



NAVIGATORS: Josh, Louis, Olivia and Jude make their way along the Canal de Garonne

back and relax as we gently wound our way along. The settlements where we stopped for supplies or just an amble were equally sleepy.

We visited the small but charming town of Mas d'Anglais with its covered market square and Romanesque church housing a painting of the crucifixion by Rembrandt. Further on we explored the ancient fortified town of Damazan with its pretty whitewashed houses and blossoming wisteria.

Back on the water we arrived at Le Passage, a flight of four locks leading to the canal's pièce de résistance – the magnificent aqueduct at Agen. The bridge nearby passes over the Garonne river and is 2,000ft long with 23 arches.

Gliding over the aqueduct we had views across Agen, including of the city's vaunted rugby team in training. Also of fanatical value in Agen are its

prunes, which we bought in various forms including covered in chocolate, made into a liquor and even pickled.

After a stroll around the city we boarded Marmande and made our way back down the canal.

Relieved that we'd managed the miles without losing any of the children overboard but also saddened that our adventure was coming to an end, we revelled in the last couple of days of peace and quiet.

Waking up on the last morning I knew I'd miss the canal-based dawn chorus but this trip had given us just what we needed; a chance to stop for a while in a sort of meditative bubble.

As for the First Mate, he was rewarded for his diligence with a wonderful final sighting. A wild deer swimming across the canal up ahead. Everyone was happy.



CHARMS: Aquitaine's towns are made for gentle exploring

## THE KNOWLEDGE

Minervois Cruisers (01926 811842/www.minervois-cruisers.com) offers seven nights on a four-berth narrowboat (up to six people) from £969. Express readers can take advantage of a £300 discount on any boat, any week (subject to availability) from Minervois Cruisers' two French bases by quoting "Express Minervois Cruisers 2012 French Holiday Offer". Aquitaine Tourism: www.tourisme-aquitaine.fr/en