

South France's BEST-KEPT SECRET

A lock-free stretch of canal through an untouched Mediterranean landscape, replete with wild horses, black bulls, pink flamingos and historic towns – **Fiona Webster** recalls a mesmerising hire holiday in the Camargue region



We last cruised through southern France on the Canal du Midi, heading towards Toulouse, but that was many years ago. Determined to renew our boating skills, this spring we chose to explore a region we hadn't visited before. Hiring a boat in Europe means you get to visit pockets of the country and culture you may miss on traditional holidays. And the Camargue region is a great example, being rich in history, landscapes and nature but still slightly off the tourist trail. The area is bisected by the Rhône-Sète Canal, a vital artery in southern France that stretches almost 100km, connecting the Rhône River at Beaucaire to the Mediterranean port of Sète.



Collecting the boat at Bellegarde.



Carson steering from the boat's roof.



Relaxing on the forward deck.

The Rhône-Sète is part of a broader network linking the Rhône to the Canal du Midi and has played a role in trade, transport and tourism for centuries. Its construction reflects the ingenuity and adaptability of French engineering and today the Rhône-Sète Canal demonstrates that some waterways get better with age. There's still plenty of working traffic on it: grain boats, wine barges and the occasional vessel laden with building materials.

It's also perfect for leisure cruising. The pace is unhurried – ideal for a holiday where you have time to soak it all in – moorings are plentiful, the locks are well-maintained and the towpaths make brilliant walking and cycling routes.

Our hire company, Nicols, offers bikes for a small fee and if we go again we'd take them as we saw so many happy cyclists along the banks. There's stunning wildlife and a lack of locks too – at least on the stretch of water we explored.

DAY 1

SETTING OFF Bellegarde to St Gilles 14km, 1hr 30mins

From the UK we flew in to Marseille for two days' sightseeing, then hopped on a train to Nîmes (€22 each) followed by a short taxi ride to Bellegarde to meet our boat, St Louis. An Estivale Quattro S, the model was updated in 2018 with two additions: a bimini on the upper deck for shade and air conditioning for hot evenings.

Feeling nervous but excited, we nosed out of the Nicols' base and onto the river at Bellegarde. The tranquillity was immediate – birds called above and the gentle purr of the engine was the only sound as we cruised for over an hour. Fishermen waved as we passed but we saw no other boats.

We were keen to get to our first port of call, St Gilles. This lively market town at the heart of the Camargue region dates back to the 7th century and was named after



Boats moored below the town walls of Aigues-Mortes.



Evening mooring at Aigues-Mortes.



A refreshing beer in St Gilles.

ALL PICTURES BY CARSON BLACK



the hermit who founded a Benedictine monastery there. By the 11th century it had become one of the major pilgrimage stops on the route to Santiago de Compostela.

Our first mooring challenge came when we arrived there and found most berthing slots occupied. We then spotted a tight space between two large motor cruisers. My husband Carson's first attempt at reversing in saw us nearly hit a neighbouring boat. But with guidance from a kind crew on the right – two couples who took our rope – we docked successfully. This waterway camaraderie became a hallmark of our trip – we met boaters of all levels of experience, from novices like us to those who spend summers on the water and some who live there permanently. After tying up, we shared beers with our helpful neighbours and later enjoyed a short stroll through the peaceful streets of St Gilles.

TIP: Stock up at the Bellegarde supermarket, about a kilometre from the boatyard, to cover the first couple of days, as you can replenish at riverside markets and shops along the way. We grabbed essentials like cheese, bread, pasta, milk, tea, washing-up liquid and bin bags. Casual libraries along the way let you swap books.

DAY 2

Exploring St Gilles

We woke at 7.30am to cool air and sunlight filtering through the curtains. I clambered to the bow and watched nature awaken. A modest breakfast on deck felt like a feast in such a serene setting.

We then tracked down the *capitainerie*, who manages moorings for boaters on rivers and canals in France. Similar to the UK's harbourmasters at marinas or ports, they also provide services like water

and electricity. Their office is usually canalside but, note, in France they often shut for lunch for a couple of hours. They will tell you the rate for overnight mooring, which is usually around €25.

We left the *capitainerie*'s to further explore St Gilles, and we soon stumbled upon a vibrant street market. We left with tomatoes, aubergine, garlic pâté, eggs, nuts, olives and potatoes. Over a leisurely coffee in a square near the centre we watched churchgoers amble past in their Sunday best and locals chatting.

The town's abbey church, with its Romanesque façade, is spectacular – built between 1120 and 1160, it has three portals with intricate sculptures that are considered masterpieces of southern French stonework. The town is also known for its unique bullfighting tradition, a less violent contest than in Spain in which participants attempt to snatch an object from the creature's horns.

That evening, we chose a local restaurant by the water, savouring the sounds and smells of the day and enjoying fresh fish, a bottle of local rosé, a colourful salad and coffee for €50 for two.

TIP: Pack light: we always do, but even we found we had more clothes than needed. Shorts and T-shirts are all you require for boating in good weather, with maybe a linen shirt, trousers, sandals and trainers.

DAY 3

St Gilles to Gallician

16km, 1hr 45mins

The next morning a friendly hire-company worker helped us with a water connection issue, accepting a can of beer as thanks. Then we set sail for the village of Gallician, spotting the famous wild white horses of Camargue grazing along the riverbank,



A great street market at St Gilles.



Wild white horses.



OFFICE DE TOURISME ARLES CAMARGUE

goats roaming freely near a bridge and herons flying low over the water.

Camargue is one of Europe's most protected natural treasures – 85,000 hectares of marshes, salt flats and lagoons safeguarded within the Camargue Regional Nature Park with a large UNESCO-designated biosphere reserve. Its protected wetland sanctuary is off-limits to development, which means boaters can cruise through one of the Med's last untouched natural landscapes. You see flocks of flamingos alongside the famous white horses and black bulls among the salt marshes, reed beds and shallow *étangs*.

Arriving at Gallician we faced a mooring between concrete pillars. On the third attempt, and with the help of a young boater, we managed to reverse in to the space. Tired but triumphant we headed to the village for a well-earned beer.

That evening we visited a local wine cooperative housed in a beautiful courtyard, taking a tour and buying its produce.

i TIP: Ensure you have a canal guide. Nicols lent us its own, with places of interest and journey times between locations marked – it became our bible.

DAY 4

Gallician to Aigues-Mortes

23km, 2hrs 15mins

Before we left Gallician we took advantage of the spacious shower block, which also offered coin-operated washing machines. Our boat's shower facilities were good, but the huge cubicles and fierce jets of water on land felt like a real treat.



Exploring Aigues-Mortes.

We set off for Aigues-Mortes, apprehensive about its busy docking area. A boater who moored in Gallician all year, called Katy, reassured us we'd be fine. As we headed south, we saw cyclists and boaters waving, and a flock of at least 20 herons – an unforgettable highlight.

As we arrived at the busy Aigues-Mortes marina, wide tourist boats moved in and out, and we spotted one vacant docking space. Hurrah! This time our docking abilities were pitch perfect. Safely moored, we visited the *capitainerie* – a young woman who gave us local information and showed us a small library with English novels.

Aigues-Mortes was a revelation, its 13th-century walls enclose a maze of shops, cafés and restaurants. The town was built by Louis IX (Saint Louis) in 1240 as France's gateway to the Med and launching point for crusaders from across Europe, including Britain. The 13th-century fortifications are among Europe's best-preserved medieval city walls and you can walk the circuit of ramparts for views across Camargue's salt marshes. For canal boaters like us, mooring within the shadow of those massive walls is a real treat.

We explored a gallery in an ancient stone building with modern glass



A busy scene in the centre of Aigues-Mortes.



Flamingos are another species of wildlife to look out for.

DETAILS

Fiona travelled on board the spacious two-cabin Quattro S from the Nicols base at Bellegarde in the Camargue region. Nicols offers boating holidays on board a range of self-drive cruisers for parties of 2–12 people, with no previous boating experience required.

In addition to Camargue, Nicols' boating holidays cover popular regions of France such as Alsace, Aquitaine, Burgundy, the Loire Valley, Brittany, as well as the Canal du Midi. It also has bases in Germany, Portugal, the Netherlands, Ireland and Hungary. For more information, visit boat-renting-nicols.co.uk. You can also order a copy of the Nicols brochure on the website.



Fiona at the Aigues-Mortes mooring.



Fresh fish in Nîmes.



A Roman amphitheatre in Nîmes.

“CAMARGUE IS ONE OF EUROPE'S MOST PROTECTED NATURAL TREASURES”

windows, bought goat's milk soap and lavender products and passed restaurants serving steaming *moules* in wine, fresh bread and affordable menus (€20 for two courses at some). The joy of boating was never so evident: our 'home' was just a short walk from the town centre, allowing us to pop back for a rest on deck. That evening, we relaxed in a bar, marvelling at the independence boating brings, with your accommodation right in the heart of a historic town.

i TIP: Keep your ropes neat and boat's pole handy for arriving and departing, untethering all four

ropes as we left Gallician was a challenge, but we were learning.

DAY 5

Morning in Aigues-Mortes and return to St Gilles

Cruising back up the canal felt more relaxed, as we recognised landmarks and took turns steering, mostly on the top deck. A cuckoo's call and constant birdsong accompanied us as we passed only one boat and a few cyclists and anglers, all waving cheerfully. More fields of roaming white horses, some with foals, was another highlight.

Back in St Gilles we dined at a quayside restaurant, sipping beer and rosé. I ordered what I thought was fish but it turned out to be a basket of small creatures – tasty but bony. I later learned via Google Translate that I'd eaten frogs – a shock for an animal lover like me, though, I admit they were delicious.

i TIP: Small supermarkets may close from 12noon to 1pm or 4pm to 7pm, so plan shopping accordingly.

DAY 6

St Gilles and market

After breakfast on the boat, we walked to a scenic spot overlooking St Gilles' harbour and countryside. The market tempted us again and we bought white fish for supper, though we overestimated and paid €17

for a large portion. Cooked on board with butter, olive oil and garlic, it was heavenly when paired with apéritifs and rosé. The day was filled with simple pleasures: reading, relaxing and appreciating the slow pace.

i TIP: Buy gifts for back home in the markets, easily the best value and we'd recommend the honey and olives. But remember, if you're flying back rather than travelling by train or car (both do-able), buy liquids only in small pots.

DAY 7

Back to Bellegarde

Our final day began with a feisty Mistral wind, challenging Carson's steering abilities. At one point, a gust nearly blew the computer off his lap and later sent St Louis into the bank. Reversing to correct our course, we headed to the opposite bank, and I was covered in branches.

We spent the day exploring Bellegarde, with its cafés and small shops. Then it was time for tidying and packing, sad to leave our bobbing home for the week. Just as we had got the hang of cruising, it was time to go.

We ended our trip with a weekend in Nîmes, just a 20-minute, €2 bus ride from Bellegarde. Nîmes is a beautiful town with so much Roman history, offering a fitting finale to a holiday that enabled us to see new places, learn new skills, make new friends and rediscover the wonder of cruising the waterways.

i TIP: Beware the Mistral wind on the top deck; wear sunscreen, as Carson's legs turned as pink as the region's flamingos.

