

A hire-boat break **IN BRITTANY**

Last summer **Bobby Cowling** explored the waterways of North-West France on a short break with his mother

It was a new puppy that put paid to the Brittany hire-boat jaunt that my partner Rosy and I had booked last June. It turned out that we had been misinformed about his age and he was too young to have his jabs in order to travel abroad. Rosy would have to stay behind with him, while I needed to find a cruising companion at very short notice.

Thankfully, my mother was free and more than happy to join me. To be honest, she was a good candidate for the role, having experience of both the UK and French waterways, and being a fully fledged Francophile with a grasp of the language.



Our boat at the Glénac hire-base at the start of our trip.



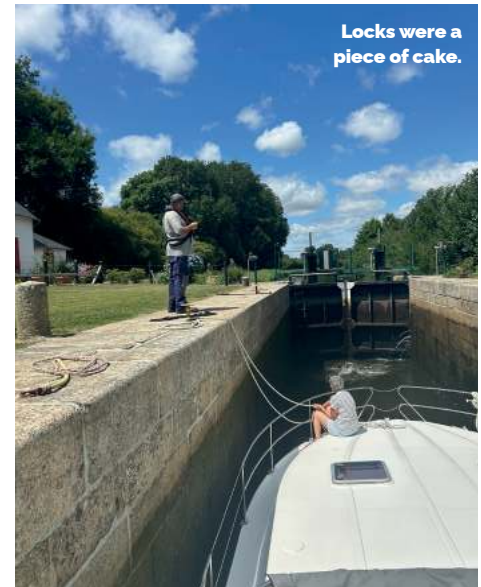
Cruising through Malestroit.



A tree-lined stretch of the Nantes-Brest Canal.



Mum assumes the role of navigator on the top deck.



Locks were a piece of cake.



Brigitte and Jacques aboard their English-built wide-beam home.

(She is also, incidentally, an avid reader of WW and a fan of Robbie Cumming.)

The change in plans had one benefit: rather than a ten-hour overland journey with the dog, it was a two-hour flight to Nantes airport, and from there around a 75-minute Uber journey (at a cost of €130) to the Nicols hire-base in the tiny rural commune of Glénac. Along the way, we stocked up with a couple of days' worth of food and drink at a supermarket, which is always advisable before you arrive at your boat in France. The country's waterways are so much more remote and rural than our own that provisions can be difficult to come by.

As you often find, our rusty French was met with good English at the boatyard. And our craft, the new Quattro C, was perfectly suited to our needs, with two separate, equally sized cabins below the front deck, each with an en suite wet room. In high season, though, the best features of this boat are on the top deck. Not only is the most advantageous steering position up here, there's also a shaded dining area, a sun deck and, the *pièce de résistance*, an integral barbecue with an adjacent hand-sink.

Getting underway

Heading off from the base, we were on a short arm connecting the navigable River

L'Aff with the Nantes-Brest Canal. After following the marked-out centre channel and dodging a large party of canoeists, we made the tight turn onto the Nantes-Brest proper and immediately came to our first lock.

Ahead of the trip, I had been slightly concerned about the locks along this route. My mother is 76 and, while a committed jogger and badminton player, I wasn't quite sure how physically demanding the locking process would be. I needn't have worried, for not only are all the locks keeper-operated along this stretch, they only have a gentle rise and fall – no nasty lock ladder climbs or throwing ropes down to the boat from a giddy height. In fact, the only thing to send the heart beating was the occasional bridge crossing which required us to duck down very low.

An English boat

On any of France's lock-keeper-operated waterways, you have to factor in an hour-long lunch break. This is no hardship – just tie up and enjoy your own extended meal. On the Nantes-Brest Canal, it's only possible to stop at dedicated moorings, and we found what looked like a good spot called L'Oust on the map. Yet when we arrived we were surprised to find the majority of the spaces

filled, mostly with hire-craft similar to our own. As we slowed to weigh up whether we'd be able to squeeze into a tight gap, a lady on a private boat read our intentions and told us we could tie up alongside her.

On closer inspection, it turned out that this boat was a 49ft-by-12ft wide-beam that had been built in England in 1980 and somehow ended up on the French waterways. It has served as the permanent home of its current owners, Brigitte and Jacques, for nine years, and the couple were delighted to show us around. It may have English origins and a home on the French waterways, but the interior of the boat is distinctly Australian-themed – as is its name, *Kookaburra*, which is one of the country's native species of birds.

After enjoying a hearty lunch on the top deck of our boat – bread, camembert cheese, wine etc – we waved farewell to Brigitte and Jacques and continued our westwards journey.

On to Malestroit

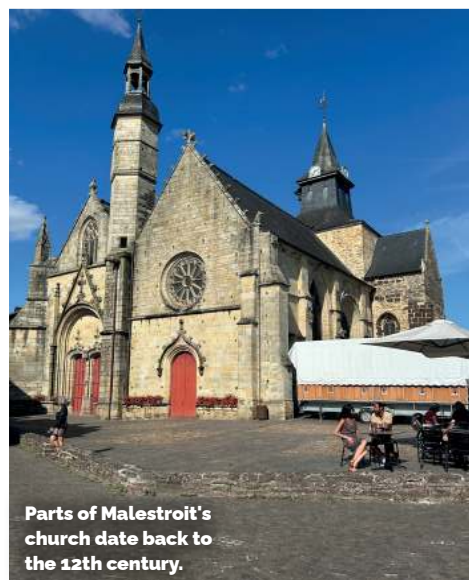
In spite of the busy moorings, we encountered few other boats on our journey and we seemingly had this beautiful, tree-lined route to ourselves. I sat on the roof steering, Mum sat beside me talking, and with only rope-managing duties to perform at locks, the relaxing hours melted away in the warm sun until we found ourselves approaching the town of Malestroit.

"Je voudrais rester ici," I managed to blurt out to the lock-keeper at the town's central lock. I had been rather dismayed to see that the mooring spaces ahead of the lock were full.

"La," he responded, pointing to a water point mooring right beside the lock.

"La?" I questioned. He responded in the affirmative and I wasn't going to argue. I guess his reasoning was that, as it was now evening, few boats would be coming along (we didn't see another). We were grateful because this spot put us within an easy stroll of the centre of Malestroit, which proved a lovely place to explore.

Known as *'la Perle de l'Oust'* (the Pearl of the Oust) because it lies along the Oust River, the town once had a flourishing river trade – as its luxurious houses testify, some of which are half-timbered, others covered in slate. It's officially classified among Brittany's *'Petites Cités de Caractère'*, a recognition given



Parts of Malestroit's church date back to the 12th century.



A relaxing evening in Malestroit.



Historic architecture in Malestroit.

to small towns that preserve strong historic architecture, narrow medieval streets and an authentic, traditional atmosphere. After imbibing just these aspects of the town, we headed to a café in the centre square for our evening meal before returning to the boat just as the sun was setting.

Back along the canal

Conscious that our water point mooring could prove an inconvenience to fellow boaters, we were up and away early the next morning – though not without the obligatory trip to the nearest *pâtisserie*. Where else can you eat a *pain au chocolat* first thing in the morning and tell yourself you're being cultured?

As we were keen to explore the L'Aff river, we made the turn at Malestroit and headed back along the canal. It was just as nice seeing it all over again: the lush green countryside, the occasional distant settlement, people fishing from small boats, the odd cyclist whizzing by, often with a wave.

For lunch, we stopped at the dedicated pontoon moorings of St-Laurent-sur-Oust. After eating, we took a stroll into this tiny settlement, where we were surprised to find the pleasant L'Hermine de L'Oust restaurant. It looked a fine place for an evening meal, but in the event we only stopped for a drink – we needed to press on.

Echoes of the past

On the move again, the afternoon passed as serenely as the morning, the canal and its surrounds in most parts seeming little changed from the days when flat-bottomed wooden *gabares* carried goods along its length.



Gongoozlers galore at Malestroit.

The Canal de Nantes à Brest was conceived under Napoleon Bonaparte as a secure inland route linking the Atlantic ports of Nantes and Brest away from the risk of sea blockades. Opened in stages between 1804 and 1842, the nearly 240-mile, 218-lock waterway was to transform inland Brittany by enabling trade and cargo transport.

The canal's decline in the face of road and rail competition very much echoes that of our own inland waterways. A real blow came in the 1920s, when construction of the Guerlédan hydroelectric dam resulted in a central stretch being submerged and the loss of many locks. Traffic collapsed and by the 1950s much of this fine feat of French engineering had fallen into disuse.

It wasn't until the late 20th century that the historic value of the canal began to be recognised, with restoration and tourism development gathering pace over the following decades. Today, navigation is possible on three main sections – the stretch we were on, from Nantes to Pontivy, is the largest at around 128 miles with 105 locks.

St-Martin-sur-Oust

Our next port of call was St-Martin-sur-Oust. We had planned a meal out here, and had even spotted a suitable restaurant overlooking the water on our outbound journey. Alas, it was a Monday night, and everything in the village was closed.

But we did spot a *boulangerie*, which, while also closed, had something that I had heard about and desperately wanted to try: a baguette-dispensing machine. With some anticipation (just what would the quality of bread be like?), I loaded the requisite €1.30

into the slot, pressed an illuminated button and the money dropped out. I tried again; same result. Then Mum pointed out the sign saying that it wasn't stocked up on Mondays. "What's the point in that, then?" I sulked.

So, really, we had the feeling that we didn't get to see the best of St-Martin-sur-Oust. But, never mind, our overnight mooring spot was lovely. And extra authenticity was added by a couple of locals playing boules a hundred yards or so away, who were not only blasting out traditional French music (waltz time, lots of accordion) but seemingly very drunk. And happy too.

A wild river

St-Martin-sur-Oust isn't far from our starting point of Glénac, so we passed within view of the hire-base the next day, as we headed off to explore the L'Aff – a stretch of navigable river that terminates after around 5 miles at the commune of La Gacilly, which we had been advised to take in.

The river immediately felt a very different proposition from the canal. A wild watercourse, with tree branches reaching out over the water, and thick undergrowth and tree stumps on its banks. We were forced to take the centre channel and slow to a crawl. So narrow was the navigation that I really don't know what we would have done if we'd met another boat coming the other way. Thankfully, we never got to find out.

Certainly there was a real charm in exploring the river, which, enclosed by its green, overgrown banks and overhanging trees, felt completely cut off from the world beyond. After cruising for about an hour-and-a-half, we reached the flower-decorated port



Up on the roof, we had to be aware of low bridges.



On the L'Aff River.

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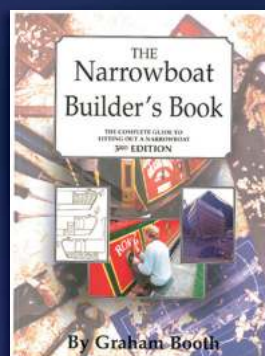
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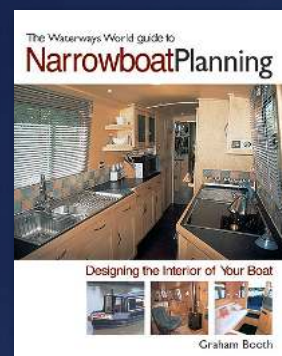
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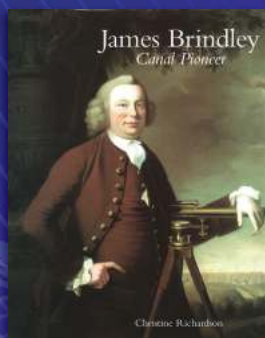
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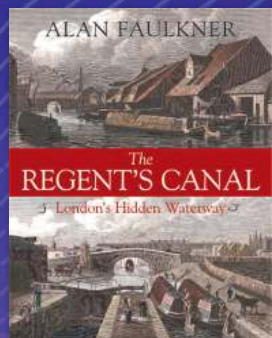
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Roundabout artwork in St-Martin-sur-Oust.



The port of La Gacilly.



Cruising through Malestroit.



Part of the So British! photo exhibition in La Gacilly.

of La Gacilly, right in the heart of this lovely town. It was mid-afternoon, so we had lots of opportunity to explore – and I'm glad we did.

La Gacilly

La Gacilly felt different from the other places we stopped at, with a much stronger tourist flavour. Part of the reason is that it's a genuine crafts centre, home to more than 25 artisans who live and work here, selling everything from sculpture and glasswork to copper pieces, furniture and paintings. It is also home to the headquarters of the perfume-maker Yves Rocher.

It has a good choice of restaurants and cafés to cater for visitors (all open, thankfully), and each summer it hosts an open-air photography festival. The theme for the 2025 event was So British! – featuring the work of ten British photographers, blown up to a large scale and displayed in the park just across from the port. Fascinating viewing for us.

It was curious seeing your own country depicted in this way, and I'm not entirely sure I liked it – despite the clear talent behind the images. According to this interpretation, Britain is a land of horse racing, fading seaside towns, royal reverence and Union flags. Nevertheless, we enjoyed the gallery of images capturing the Beatles and Rolling Stones in all their glory, both of which Mum saw live back in their heyday. She also jumped on stage with the Kinks but that's another story...



A classic image of the Beatles at the La Gacilly exhibition.

Following the previous evening's disappointment, we found a lovely restaurant in the town and made some lavish selections from the menu. Of course, the food was marvellous – it nearly always is.

Reflections

The next day it was only a short cruise back to the Nicols base to hand back the boat, take an Uber to the airport and conclude our sojourn in Brittany.

Of the hire-boat routes available in France, this stretch of the Nantes-Brest Canal must be among the easiest to navigate, with straightforward locks, good moorings and – certainly during our visit in June – modest amounts of traffic. The lock-free L'Aff was a real pleasure too, providing a rich contrast from the canal, as well as the superlative destination of La Gacilly.

As well as excellent 'cruiseability', the region's waterways also provide a wealth of lovely little settlements that are well spaced apart for boat-borne travel and full of interest. Altogether then, I'd say that Brittany is a pretty perfect destination for a short (or long) break on the French waterways.

And boating with a parent (or parents) is something I'd recommend wholeheartedly too. There's a rare pleasure in drifting through peaceful scenery with no schedule beyond locks and lunchtime, and plenty of space for long conversations. And Mum loved every minute of the trip too.

COSTS

Nicols boat-hire prices start from €459 for a weekend break of three days, or €706 for a one-week trip. Nicols offers both one-way and return self-drive trips for parties of between 2 to 12 people, and no previous boating experience is required. Added to our costs was the fuel for the trip, which came to around €200.

As well as Brittany, Nicols has bases in the popular French regions of Alsace, Burgundy, the Loire Valley, the Canal du Midi and Camargue, as well as in Ireland, Germany, Portugal, Hungary and the Netherlands.

For more information, visit boat-renting-nicols.co.uk.