



TIPS FOR CRUISING THE FRENCH INLAND WATERWAYS



By Julian & Vanessa Dussek

We took our Southerly 115 across France from Gravelines to the Mediterranean, about 1,000 miles. We have since returned via the Rhone to Burgundy and thence to Calais. Listed here are the items we found essential or desirable to make the journey as enjoyable as it was.

ESSENTIAL

Paperwork

In addition to the documents normally required for cruising in France you will need a French Inland Waterways Licence (Péage or Vignette). This is obtained from VNF, Voies Navigables de France, the body that is responsible for the French Inland Waterways. The fee is now based on the **waterline** length of the boat and the length of time required. It is best purchased in advance of your trip on line from VNF.

In addition to the International Certificate of Competence you will need to have passed the CEVNI exam. (Code Européen des Voies de Navigation Intérieure, to give it its full name). This is the equivalent of the Highway Code for inland waterways. It can be arranged through the RYA, and you need to carry the certificate along with a copy of the European Waterways Regulations.

Ropes

Don't stint on these. You will need more and longer lines than you would normally require sailing in England. Remember that in the locks your warps need to reach up to bollards which may be set well back from the edge. Mooring bollards or rings on quays are often designed for barges and may be a long way apart. However you don't necessarily need to spend a fortune on them, we bought ours from boat jumbles and as 'offcuts' at the boat show. Even so we did become accomplished at emergency sheet bends when caught out!

A rope-cutting knife

When going up or down in a lock there is always the potential for a warp to get jammed, often due to an

overriding turn. The tension on it rapidly becomes frightening as your boat is either being dragged underwater or suspended from the lockside. It is essential to have a good rope-cutting knife immediately available. We have seen this happen twice and on each occasion prompt intervention saved a very nasty situation.

Fenders

You can't have too many. Concrete quays and lock sides are very unforgiving and abrasive. Sailing boats with their elliptical sides need big fat round ones fore and aft with a row of cylindrical ones along the side. The stern is particularly vulnerable when leaving a concrete quay. Rubber tyres are frowned upon because if they break free and sink they may jam lock gates. They are permitted though if they are made to float and are attached at two points.

Fenderboard

Some boaters use a stout plank to hang outside the fenders along the side of the boat, since in many locks the water rises almost flush with the top of their sides. This means that the fenders float above the lock edge leading to direct contact between your fibreglass and the stone edge. Ouch! (We have four small fenders which float semi-submerged in an attempt to overcome this problem.) It is also well worth hanging the fender board over the side when going up or down in nearly all locks to minimise the abrasion on the fenders. A length of scaffold plank is ideal. You will need to cut a notch to prevent the ropes from being worn away. The plank can be retained for use in the Mediterranean as a gangplank when moored stern-to. However, other boaters feel that they are an unnecessary complication as they can get caught up, for example on projections in locks.

A long boathook

By long I mean about six to eight feet. It is not intended for pushing or pulling the boat but as a means of handling warps so it can be quite slender and can be made very cheaply using a 1 inch (2.5cm) pole from a DIY shop and a boat hook end. It will be needed under two circumstances.

1. In many locks if you are ascending the keepers will take your lines and having taken a turn round a bollard drop the free end back down. They do not like you throwing your lines at them! The correct method is to loop the warp over the end of the boathook and pass it up to the keeper. Sometimes this is a long way up.
2. Again, by looping a warp over the end of the boathook you can reach bollards some distance from the boat. Jumping ashore with lines is unnecessary, potentially dangerous and sometimes impossible.

You will also need a shorter stouter one for pushing and pulling, and probably a spare for when you drop one in the water and lose it! They are cheaper and easier to find over here.

Lifejackets

In many of the big locks, and in all the Rhone ones, it is mandatory to wear and be seen to wear a lifejacket.

VHF radio

The large locks on the Seine and Rhone require you to contact them by radio, the frequencies are given in the guides or pilot books. Because the lockkeepers may be juggling with several ascending and descending barges it is essential to be able to listen for their instructions. We have however found that recently lock keepers can be contacted by 'phone.

Steel Spikes

You will need a couple of stout steel spikes (and a hefty hammer) to moor to if stopping at the riverside away from quays and pontoons. Beware that even if they are well sunk in they are likely to pull out if a barge passes close to, the suction created is enormous. We found that the number of idyllic rural halts was less than we had anticipated because of underwater rocks and debris plus brambles, bushes and other obstacles on the bank.

STRONGLY RECOMMENDED

A Bimini or other form of shelter from the sun

If you are heading to or from the Mediterranean you will probably already have a bimini or something similar. Remember though that you will not have your mast up and you may need to reconsider how you fix your sun shade. Make sure it will not obstruct you in the locks. The sun in the middle of France can be fierce. In Decize in June the temperature was 36° C (97° F).

Binoculars

Almost essential, they are invaluable when trying to see lock lights from a distance. Also they are very useful when trying to read notices on the river bank. Plus of course you can observe bird and animal life much better.

Water strainer, filter and alarm

One of the main hazards of cruising the inland waterways is an obstruction to the engine water intake, often by weed or polythene bags. We fitted an external strainer and inside the boat a Vetus filter above the water line so the top could be unscrewed in a hurry. Regular attention is still needed to the exhaust water flow (usually a change in the engine note is an immediate giveaway), as traditional exhaust-overheat alarms of course only go off after the damage has begun. Paradoxically we never had an obstruction in over 1,000 miles.

Midships cleat

Inland waterway cruising involves a lot of temporary mooring, particularly in locks and waiting for locks. It is a major activity and it pays to have a simple and safe system. Our technique is to approach our preferred bollard which will be on the side to which the stern will kick when reverse is selected. As the boat comes to a halt we drop a bight from the midships cleat over the bollard, at this point the prop should be dragging the boat into the quay. If we have misjudged our distance off we motor gently ahead against the warp and as long as it is firmly cleated off the boat will inevitably come to rest against the bank or quay. Leaving the engine running gently in gear with the helm appropriately positioned will hold the boat safely as long as one wants, the so-called running moor. Remember, you can use your long boathook to grab a bollard some distance away. If you do not have a substantial cleat midships it is well worth exploring the possibility of having one fitted.

Books & Maps

It is possible to travel the length of France with just a road map or mobile phone but the more information you have the easier and more pleasant it is. We found the 'Guides' (charts or maps really) invaluable for navigation showing as they do locks, navigable channels, and canalside facilities but Hugh McKnight's 'Cruising the French Waterways' is the most informative book about the surrounding area, culture, history as well as giving information about the navigation. A gem we wouldn't be without. Unfortunately the latest edition was in 2005.

Mast

We had our mast removed and sent ahead by road and believe that it really is well worth the expense. However, you may then need to make up a small one for the courtesy flag, burgees etc. plus perhaps a spotlight and steaming light if there is nowhere else to mount them. You may also need to fit a wireless aerial.

Bicycles

Shops and other attractions are frequently a distance from the waterways and bicycles make shopping, eating ashore and exploring much easier. We had folding bikes (Seasure) which can be stored in bags and ten years on they are still in quite good shape. An alternative is to buy cheap tatty second hand bikes that can be abandoned at the end of the trip.

Little Hooks

It's the small things that count. Living on a boat as a home is different to the usual two weeks summer holiday. You can never have too many little hooks, for clothes, keys, binoculars, anything; the most cost effective improvement we made to the boat.

A form of heating

Even in May we needed our oil fired heater and hot water bottles in Northern France. An electric fan heater is useful if you have shore power.

A Form of Cooling

Assuming you don't have air conditioning electric fans are almost essential. The middle of France can be particularly airless and the heat stifling.

A Knowledge of French

Almost without exception we found the French charming and helpful but they do appreciate it if you can speak, or at least make a good attempt at speaking their language. Effort in preparing linguistic skills as well as the boat will be rewarded. Understanding some of the lockkeepers on VHF however can be testing even for fluent French speakers.

Time, time, time

Too many people treat their transit across France as a quick route to the Mediterranean. You should allow as much time as you can possibly spare. When again will you have the chance to traverse the whole of France at walking pace, through major towns, villages, farms, vineyards? All of French life is there. There is one very important caveat. Canals and rivers can be blocked suddenly or unexpectedly. VNF publish a list of planned closures, do check these before planning your route. Additionally waterways can be closed for a variety of reasons, lock failure or damage, bank slippages, floods, droughts, even strikes are just some of the potential problems. Sometimes these blockages can last for months necessitating an alternative route.

CONCLUSION

Most of these recommendations require time or some expense but this really can be the journey of a life time. As always, the more you put into something the more you'll get out. After five years in the Mediterranean we were very happy to return to the French inland waterways.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Websites

www.vnf.fr The official site for Voies Navigables de France. Apart from buying your permit here you should check on planned closures (chomages) of sections of waterways.

<https://www.theca.org.uk/sections/eiw> The Cruising Association has a separate inland waterways section where you can get advice and answers to your questions. The CA is a fund of information from very experienced people.

www.french-waterways.com An excellent and very informative site by a couple who have been to the Med and back.

www.vigicrues.gouv.fr You can find the water levels of all the French waterways here. Particularly useful at times of flooding.

www.meteofrance.com This is the French weather site. Rainfall is really your major concern. Heavy rain in the North may for example lead to flood conditions later on the Saône and Rhône. Local flooding will close locks.

Books

- ***RYA European Waterways Regulations*** by Tam Murrell published by the Royal Yachting Association Second edition.
- ***Cruising the Inland Waterways of France and Belgium*** Published by the Cruising Association. Now in its 29th edition. Used with the appropriate charts this book is essential as it is updated annually by members of the CA. It also has an excellent section on routes through France and equipment needed.
- ***Inland Waterways of France*** by David Edwards-May published by Imray. Ninth edition (2021). In three volumes covering North and Centre; Northeast and Southeast and South and West. If you are not going to buy the Guides or Cartes this is an excellent alternative as it has detailed mapping of every waterway and junction and could save you a lot of money.
- ***Cruising French Waterways*** by Hugh McKnight published by Adlard Coles Nautical. Fourth edition (2005). Full of information about the waterways, the surrounding area, the history and culture. It will add to your enjoyment on the trip hugely. There is a revised 2010 edition but I think it may be an eBook. I do not know whether the content has changed.

Guides

- ***Breil Pilot Books*** (Guides Fluvial) are the newest on the market and would probably be my first choice. The mapping is very clear and the information on surrounding facilities seems good. £17.
- ***Navicarte or Fluvicarte*** (new name) used to be the oldest established guides. We found them easy to use and informative; however, they are no longer published, though may be available on the internet.

Navigation apps

- ***Navi app*** This free VNF app acts as a chart plotter and shows vessels on AIS. Up to date information is usually available on canal closures and works. It also enables route planning.
- ***Waterkaarten*** Originally limited to the Netherlands but now extended into France Waterkaarten is a chart plotter showing up to date navigation information and enables route planning as well as showing AIS information.
- ***Captain's Mate (CM)*** Not exactly a chart plotter though the mapping is excellent, CM, an app exclusive to members of the Cruising Association has information about hundreds of locations throughout France. It is constantly updated by members with information and pictures not available anywhere else.
- ***PC Navigo*** enables you to plan a journey in detail and gives information about locks, blockages etc. However, users describe it as 'clunky'.

We suggest you don't rely on any one source of information. We used the printed guides in conjunction with the electronic systems for navigating and planning but the Cruising Association publication ***Cruising the inland waterways of France and Belgium*** is indispensable as it is updated every year with fresh information from members. We combine this with the CA app, ***Captain's Mate***, which has reports on hundreds of locations throughout France. All entries are moderated by editors.

Note: please send any suggested updates or corrections to eiws-editor@theca.org.uk.

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