



Six friends in a boat

Cruising along the waterways of eastern France is a pleasure best shared among friends, as **Zoë McIntyre** explains

We rose surprisingly early, when the light flickering through the trees was soft and wood-scented dew still coated the ground. Our host, the river, was cloaked in a hazy band of morning mist that hid a shock of blue sky. As sleepy bodies emerged from each cabin of our boat, morning greetings were exchanged in hushed tones so as not to disturb the magical morning silence.

I crept out on deck to witness the mist rise and life on the waterway beginning to stir. Herons sidled out from the shade of the reeds, fish sent ripples across the waters; a woodpecker drummed a waking call on a nearby tree. Scanning the horizon I spotted a trace of civilisation; the distant outline of a church spire framed by a patchwork of lush meadows.

It was quite a change of pace from the previous evening, I must admit. Our al fresco dining table was littered with crimson-rimmed wine glasses, breadcrumbs and a damp set of playing cards; the leftovers of a summer's evening spent drinking wine and breaking bread between friends.

It had been our first night aboard *Deluz*, a dazzling-white, 13.5-metre-long luxury cruiser that comfortably

accommodated my five merry boating companions and me. It had four spacious sleeping cabins, a well-equipped galley and ample outside living space, which included an upper and lower deck, and bow seating area. We were a crew of old school chums, a once-inseparable team before adult life split us up and scattered us across the UK. Now we were reunited for one glorious week in rural isolation, à la *recherche du temps perdu* along the remote waterways of eastern France.

We began our expedition in the Franche-Comté region, where the fairy-tale idyll of *la France profonde* lives on in all its timeless charm. Yet it was surprisingly easy to reach such unfamiliar terrain. A short train journey from Paris took us to Dole, a lovely waterside town between Dijon and Besançon in the Jura *département*, where boating holiday company Nicols has a base. From there, we mapped out an *aller-retour* cruise itinerary, heading west along the Canal du Rhône au Rhin into Burgundy and then going north up the River Saône past Auxonne, which would take us back into Franche-Comté, where we would continue to the town ▶



TOP: An evening toast beside the River Saône
ABOVE: An idyllic lunch stop on the Saône

PHOTOGRAPHS: ZOË MCINTYRE

of Gray. There was an alternative course towards Besançon, but with tricky navigation and a high density of locks, it was not recommended for boating beginners.

Beginners we certainly were. Eschewing an organised tour in favour of an independent boat rental appealed to our sense of adventure and desire for self-sufficiency, but we had given little serious consideration to cruising credentials and only one of us had any boating experience.

Yet, despite being nautical novices, we soon slipped into a laidback life on the water. With early-morning starts, long, idyllic days stretched ahead, marked only by a few rituals that quickly became routine. Each day began with a volunteer fetching a medley of oven-warm *pâtisseries* from the nearest settlement, which we would gorge during breakfast on the sun-filled deck. Once fortified with coffee and croissants, our one boating buff, now designated captain, took his place behind the wheel while the rest of us prepared to cast off.

Once under way, we could indulge in the pleasure of life in the slow lane; a chance to get stuck into a good book, enjoy music, chat, sunbathe, do a little wildlife spotting, wave at every passerby (an unwritten rule of the waterways, we discovered), or simply sit back and be mesmerised by the French countryside displayed in all its ravishing beauty *rive gauche et droite*.

It wasn't all happy hedonism; there were those locks to negotiate. Rather shamefully, my knowledge of the theory and practice of lock operation was distinctly hazy. I had hoped to assume the role of head sunbather, far removed from any rope, knot or nautical duties, but it became clear that manoeuvring our way through the locks needed all hands on deck.

Leaving Dole behind at a modest 5km/h, we found the waterway much narrower than anticipated; smoothly slipping into the first lock without bouncing

off the sides was trickier than it looked. Thankfully, all the canal's locks were automatically activated by a hand-held remote control. When the green light signalled, our captain would yell

Our captain would yell some incomprehensible jargon while we amateurs grappled with tangled ropes

some incomprehensible boating jargon ("belay on the portside", for example) while we amateurs grappled frantically with tangled ropes, and tried some Western-style lassoing in the hope of securing the boat to the bollards on the towpath. Once bow and stern were finally steady, we could open the levy and watch with satisfaction as the water came rushing in.

After negotiating a 12-kilometre straight punctuated with nine locks in quick succession, we left Franche-Comté unvanquished sailors all. Here, the narrow canal joined the Saône and we headed upriver on a stretch known as Petite Saône. It belied its name by being wide and open with only the occasional lock, making navigation much easier. This allowed our captain some respite from the wheel and offered us rookies a chance

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Making a stop at Choisey; The bridge over the River Saône at Gray; The deck of *Deluz*; The centre of Dole; Waiting to go through a lock





PHOTOGRAPHS: ZOË MCINTYRE, NICOLS

to zigzag the boat across the river without much risk of mishaps. In this stretch of river, the locks are still operated by keepers, who chatted to us through the pastel-painted shutters of their pretty stone houses.

The scenery, too, evolved around us. Leaving behind the well-kept borders of the canal, we discovered a snaking river, wild and exotic, teeming with wildlife. In some parts, green foliage spilled into the water, guarding dense woodland, chest-high cornfields and remote walking trails.

After a morning making good headway, we moored and enjoyed

a simple picnic lunch of bread, Comté cheese and charcuterie on the riverbank. The anglers among us were keen to spend the early afternoon trying to catch carp,

while the rest of us went exploring on dry land.

Being well off the tourist trail, there was little pressure to stick to a sightseeing itinerary. We walked, followed the towpaths on bicycles, or visited nearby settlements as we pleased. It is not grand châteaux or well-known monuments that make this part of France so appealing, but the softer beauty of authentic rural life. In sleepy villages, colourful local characters preserve a rhythm of life little affected by the passage of time or the sight of a bunch of boisterous Brits descending on them. We received slightly bemused but always warm greetings that made us almost believe that we were the first strangers to have uncovered this secret piece of unspoilt France.

Apéritif with the locals

Re-entering Franche-Comté and the *département* of Haute-Saône, we cruised into Mantoche, a village with rutted lanes flanked by humble farmhouses. The community's showpiece is the church, with its varnished tiled roof typical of the area. The tower holds four large bells, named Juliette, Angélique, Marie-Anne and Mélanie, according to the locals we met over an apéritif in the Deux Virages café-bar. After stopping by the *épicerie* for our evening rations and buying a pot of home-made honey from the local beekeepers, we were on our way again.

The rest of the day slipped by in a pleasurable blur, and by the time the locks closed (at 7pm on the river, but 6.30pm on the canal) we were ready to hammer the stakes into the riverbank and prepare for the evening. In everyday life, the transition from day to night can pass by almost unnoticed. On a boat, in comparison, dusk is a time to be savoured. We sat out on the bow, poured our first glasses of wine and gloried in every stage of changing light as the sun melted into the water. As supper simmered on the stove, we whetted our appetites with chunks of cheese and juicy olives, while reliving our day's exploits. When darkness finally fell and we were forced inside, the television remained off; instead ▶

Lock-keepers chatted to us through the pastel-painted shutters of their pretty stone houses

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Having breakfast on *Deluz*; Boat firm Nicols' base in Dole; Captain and crew members; Dusk on the river; Market day in Dole



RIGHT: The medieval Église Notre-Dame in Auxonne

we put on some music and reached for the deck of cards to begin our competitive rounds of rummy.

After three days of blissful boating, we arrived at the heritage town of Gray, the largest we came across on our voyage. We moored by the campsite and spent a happy afternoon sauntering around the shops and seeing the sights. The town is dominated by the *hôtel de ville*, a splendid Renaissance building with pink marble Corinthian colonnades and a traditional varnished roof. Nearby are the Basilique Notre-Dame and the remains of

a 14th-century fortress that look out over the town. Exploring the ramparts, we came across the Musée Baron Martin, with its rich collection of ancient art and archaeological finds. That evening, we enjoyed dinner in town and found a bar for a few games of pool before returning to *Deluz*, to be rocked to sleep by the gentle swell of the river.

The next morning, the early risers among us took the bikes to explore the towpaths, visiting Château de Saint-Loup Les Gray, while the rest picked up some tasty local produce at Gray's morning market. When we reconvened late that morning, our mood was subdued; it was time to turn around and make the return journey to Dole.

On our final evening together, our group dined out in a waterside restaurant in the elegant heart of Dole. We had recaptured that easy familiarity that only comes from spending lengths of uninterrupted time together and re-cemented our friendships that hopefully will last until the next adventure. A recuperative week on the water in the midst of rural beauty had been the perfect antidote to the high-speed pace of 'real life', and we felt strangely unaccustomed to the hustle and bustle we encountered on the railway journey home. With a stockpile of memories, a new boating prowess and a warm holiday afterglow, we were well-equipped to face the urban sprawl that awaited us on the other side of *la Manche*. 📍

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FRANCOFILE

Explore the waterways of Franche-Comté

GETTING THERE

By rail: Zoë and her friends travelled by Eurostar from London St Pancras to Paris, and then by TGV from Gare de Lyon to Dole, courtesy of Rail Europe. Tel: 0844 848 4064 www.raileurope.co.uk

By road: Dole is six hours from the northern ferry ports.

By air: The nearest airport is Geneva, 150km away.

BOAT RENTAL

Zoë travelled with boat rental company Nicols on board its four-cabin Octo from the luxury Estivale range. One week's boat hire starts from €2,261. A range of

Nicols boats is based at Dole with prices starting from €921 a week. The company offers self-drive boating holidays from 18 bases in France and has boats suitable for parties of two to ten people. Tel: (Fr) 2 41 56 46 56 www.boat-renting-nicols.co.uk

WHERE TO EAT

Relais de la Prévôté
6 Rue du Marché
70100 Gray
Tel: (Fr) 3 84 65 10 08
www.relaisdelaprevote.com

An ivy-covered stone building conceals a pretty restaurant with a courtyard. Evening menus €19.50 to €45.

Restaurant de la Plage

Rue de la Plage
70100 Gray
Tel: (Fr) 3 84 65 46 77
Overlooking the River Sâone, the restaurant specialises in fish dishes. Meals from €20.

Le Moulin

1 Rue du Prêlot
39100 Dole
Tel: (Fr) 3 84 79 17 30
Restaurant with a waterside terrace serving *comtois* cuisine in a relaxed atmosphere. Meals €15 to €30.

WHERE TO VISIT

Musée Pasteur
Société des Amis de Pasteur
43 Rue Pasteur

39100 Dole
Tel: (Fr) 03 84 72 20 61
www.musee-pasteur.com
Museum devoted to the scientist Louis Pasteur in the town of his birth.

Musée Baron Martin

6 Rue Edmond Pigalle
70100 Gray
Tel: (Fr) 3 84 65 69 10
www.musee-baronmartin.fr

Château de Saint-Loup Les Gray

70100 Saint-Loup Nantouard
Tel: (Fr) 3 84 32 75 69
www.chateau-saintloup.com
Open to the public in the afternoons from May to September.



TOURIST INFORMATION Franche-Comté tourist board

Tel: (Fr) 3 81 25 08 00
www.franche-comte.org