



*At last... The Canal de Bourgogne...
(Part 1)*



If you take the big picture, the Canal de Bourgogne actually links the Atlantic Ocean with the Mediterranean with a little help from the Seine, Yonne, Saone and Rhone Rivers. It opened started construction in 1777 (was interrupted by the French Revolution), is 242 km. long, has a tunnel and 189 locks between 2.5 - 3 metres deep with room for 2 smaller boats max. They are old, manually operated, choked in places with so much pineapple weed (wild camomile) that it impassable for some boats. Hardly any supermarkets along the route , or water supply, or electricity and very few other boats. But the narrow, tree- lined canals are green and gorgeous and it is so very peaceful, with lovely little villages that time forgot and the lovely River Ouse which criss-crosses it's path. As Sheila put it "It's very RURAL!" Tthe canal crosses the agricultural and wooded area, not the rich vineyards we had imagined which are just out of sight over the hills.



We became pals with 4 or 5 lovely hotel boats who take max. 8 guests and are the last word in canal luxury. They *just* fit the locks -which, of course, were built for barge,s and always tooted and waved to little "Otter" (said with a sexy French accent).



Unusual and touching and often very personal war graves in almost every village churchyard.

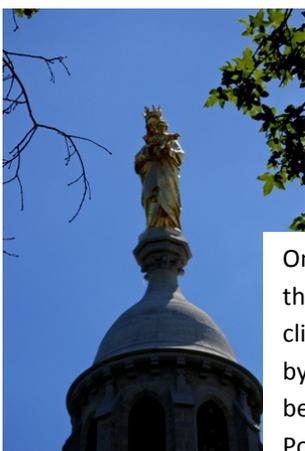
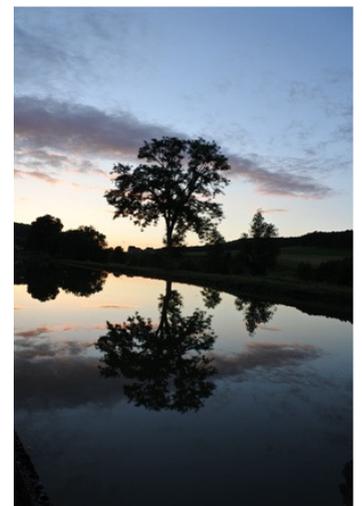
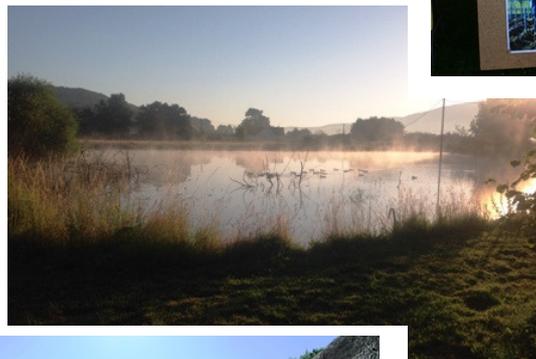
Each ecluse (lock) has a lock-keeper's cottage and garden and here they were particularly beautiful, as were the lovely, old stone cottages of towns like Bligny-sur-Ouche where I also went out for a spin on the little steam railway back to Pont d'Ōuche and our luxury stop (a toilet, 2 showers and water and electricity!!) and its "Bistro de la Port" which provided great regional specialities and great service!



At the "Bistro de Port"... a speciality of Burgogne- escargots dripping in garlic butter!!! The tunnel (3333m. long) at Pouilly-en-Auxois is 378 m. above sea level and it was there we turned around to go back and met Peter ("Chief Lock Master and Medical Consultant", especially to the lock girls...just kidding, Annie!) who joined us for 2 weeks to cruise back to Dijon. Amusingly, at the tunnel we were equipped by VNF (Canal Authorities) with an ancient VNF radio and had our lamp and life jackets inspected very seriously. By the way, you pay for a "pass" to cruise the canals for a set amount of months - everything free except for a few euros for mooring here and there but usually free. Excellent value.



The local Sunday market at another lovely spot, Vendennes...an interesting local wine producer has gone back to traditional methods of ploughing using a shire horse. His stall was very popular with the locals who stayed for hours and seemed to drink his entire stock. Local soft cheeses with a variety of coatings, excellent pates and bread, too. We had a good dinner that night...supporting the local economy.



One of the most beautiful things about the canals are the reflections created, especially early evening in the still waters. All along the canal, we were flanked by wooded hills. At Velars-sur-Ouche, Peter and I climbed 545 m up through the woods to the gilded landmark- Our Lady Pond- an octagonal chapel topped by a colossal lantern room and the statue of Madonna and child. Since 1372, when the Duke of Burgundy began the tradition, it has been a mecca for pilgrims. In 1912, 25,000 people attended with the then Pope, but it is down to 200 today for the twice annual processions. Many miracles such as cessation of epidemics and droughts have been attributed to her. A hot and exhausting climb, but worth it for the stupendous views across Dijon and the whole of Burgundy.