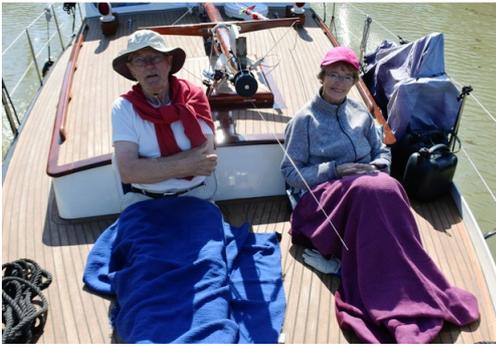


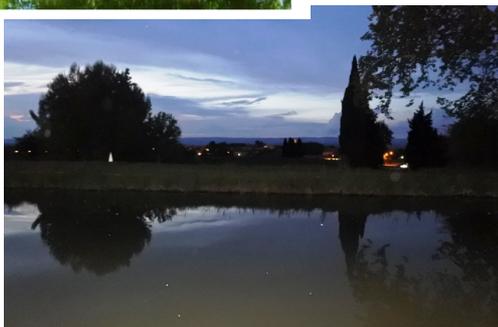


We had a lovely week with our two new crew, Wilhelm and Annie who joined us for two weeks cruising at Carcassonne – one of the highlights of the Canal du Midi. The “new” old town is very handsome with its long straight boulevards laid out American style in a grid, but it is the double-walled medieval city the 2 million visitors a year come to see. Perched upon the hill, impregnable, it is everyone’s image of a storybook castle with its 52 “witch hat” roofed turrets. It has a long and turbulent history for this was the land of the Gauls, Romans, Visigoths, Moors, Franks and Cathars. For 300 years, this royal, fortified bastion kept the peace here between France and Spain. Inside the ramparts are another castle and a cathedral and, today, the maze of cobbled streets are mostly filled with shops and restaurants, crowded and over-commercialised for sure, but in the quiet spots and perhaps in the wonderful clear light that so often fills the evenings here, you can still imagine how it must have been in its days of great wealth and, later, great poverty. In the Middle Ages, it was a great textile-producing centre, the best in France, sending its famed woollen cloth to the Middle East. Restoration started in 1855 after the town had been crumbling into decay for years. Last year, on the 20th anniversary of it being a UNESCO World Heritage Site, somewhat puzzling areas of yellow foil were spread out on some of the walls – an artistic endeavour which even the tourist office could only answer with a shrug. It also has a fascinating churchyard just outside the walls. When I was a teenager, Dad and I did a road trip to visit this place – one of his dreams – and it was a lot quieter then. I never thought I’d be back one day on “Otter”!



Never let it be said that the crew don't do their bit! But they do get time off, too! One of the delights of canal cruising is when you find a lovely little restaurant along the way. Otherwise, it's pretty quiet, just meandering along through the tiny market towns, stopping occasionally right out along a bank somewhere to BBQ and overnight with only the frogs for company. At one stop, Annie and I came across a metre-long dead snake and were warned by joggers of vipers in the area. Just what I need to hear as I jump into the long grassy riverbank!

Quite a few charter boats in the canal especially near Carcassonne. The most we have been in a lock is three at one time, but generally we were on our own. The locks on this canal are bowed or rounded which throws you a bit at first. But they are old, and it was to provide a stronger construction. Most locks are operated by pushing a button, though when going upstream you have to go into the bank and get off, run up to the lock, push a button to open the gates and then again to start the whole thing in motion.





Most of the small towns are pretty, but some really stand out like the lovely Castelnaudary which seemed to get lovelier each evening with the special light. Much to our astonishment when we arrived, the streets were full of young men from the French Foreign Legion – such cool uniforms and blinding white caps! Wanted to take a pic but apparently some still join the Legion to become anonymous, so maybe not a good idea. They looked great though – so stylish - how typically French! A wonderful ceramics market was on with very good local artists.



Castenaudary is also famous for its “cassoulet”. In fact, this dish was invented here to feed the soldiers during the religious wars. It is now renowned throughout France. It is a simple casserole of white beans baked in the oven with pork and sausage or duck, cooked in goose fat and it is very delicious. A lovely end to a lovely visit. Thanks again, Annie and Wilhelm for visiting and being such a good crew ! We enjoyed every minute!