

ME & MY BOATS



Sharing the joy



Eight years ago a group of keen boaters bought *Amethyst* which they refurbished and shipped to the Canal du Midi. They're still enjoying narrowboating in the south of France

TEXT **ALAN TREVARTON** PICTURES **STEVE PARKINS**

Narrowboat *Amethyst*, which now sits on the Canal du Midi in France, was built in 1996 by Ken Bonokowski, as his own boat.

Ken, a long-standing and popular member of Douglas Valley Cruising Club, based at Appley Bridge, near Wigan, built 70 narrowboats plus an ocean-going steel catamaran. He sailed the English and Welsh canals extensively until his death in 2001.

After his death club members, relatives and friends, a total of seven, bought *Amethyst* from his widow and set about refurbishing and repainting it in Wigan dry dock.

Amethyst is a 46ft by 6ft 10in cruiser stern and now has a Mitsubishi Vetus engine fitted new in 2008. The cooling system was modified in 2010.

When we first started one major job was adapting the toilet to the French system. A new double bed was built in, together with new wardrobes, wooden floors were laid throughout and a 230-volt electric system was installed in addition to an upgrade of the 12-volt set up.

All of the paperwork was sorted out: small ships' registration, a French waterways licence obtained and a number of the group took the RYA certificate of competence (CEVNI), a requirement in France for private boats (although I've never been asked for it in eight years!).

The partners then had meetings and drew up a set of rules loosely based on a commercial boat share scheme.

We agreed a rota which gave each member two periods of two weeks between April and

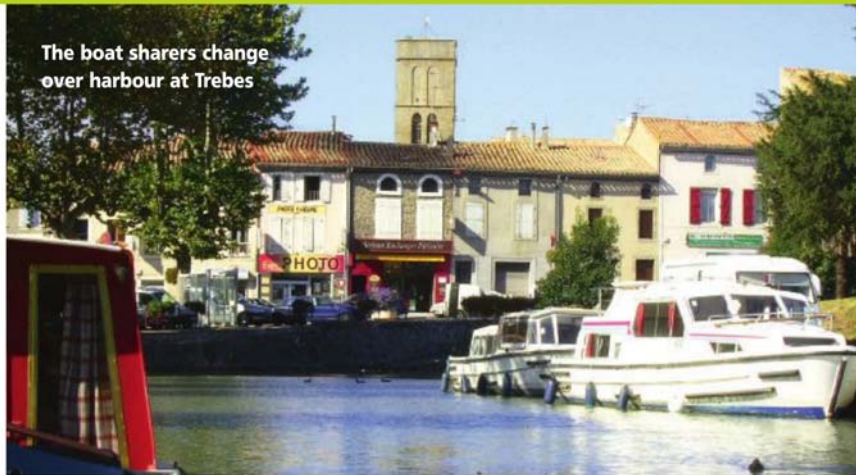
***Amethyst* moored in the dappled shade of a sunny canalside in the south of France. Inset: the quintessentially French tree-lined Canal du Midi**

October and two weeks in the winter months when the locks are closed. *Amethyst* was then sailed to Lymm Marina, craned onto a curtain-sided French truck, which had a sliding roof, and taken to Homps on the Canal du Midi in the south of France.

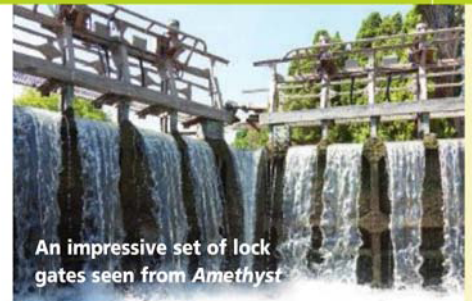
She has now been there for eight years, with winter moorings agreed once it is clear which moorings will be available. The favourite is Carcassonne which is the preferred choice for 2011. There the boat is on good mooring with electric hook-ups, shower, toilet and washing machine facilities.

We change over at Trebes, a small town close to Carcassonne, during the summer months. Other places to switch crews have been organised by members sailing one way to places such as Beziers and Toulouse, from where another member sails it back.

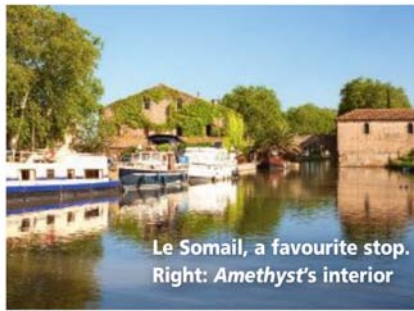
Another ingenious changeover was on the Garonne and was accomplished by one couple sailing from Trebes, and the next couple flying to Bergerac hiring a car and meeting up with



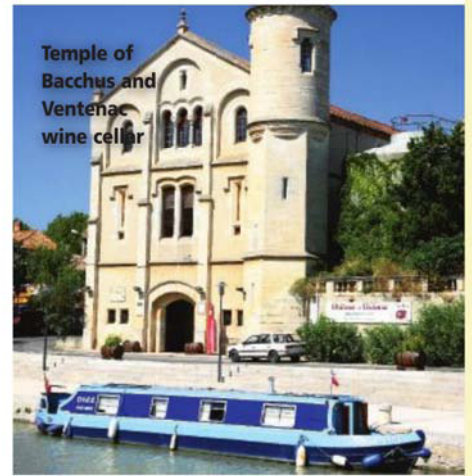
The boat sharers change over harbour at Trebes



An impressive set of lock gates seen from Amethyst



Le Somail, a favourite stop. Right: Amethyst's interior



Temple of Bacchus and Ventenac wine cellar

Amethyst near Agen. Both couples stayed on board for the night before the first couple took hire car back to return home by air, and the remaining couple sailed it back to Trebes.

Boating on the Canal du Midi is easier than in the UK because the majority of locks are worked by the lock-keepers and are electrically operated. The Narbonne section has a keypad system where you enter a number, which operates the lock.

All locks are shut from 12.30pm to 1.30pm for lunch. On one occasion we arrived at a lock on the Narbonne section, worked the keypad and nothing happened. We spoke to the control centre by pressing a button on the panel, and were amused to be told: "Monsieur, it is lunchtime." This also amused the locals who had come to watch.

Occasionally, lock-keepers will work some of their lunchtime, but if they know there will be no boats arriving from adjoining locks for some time this enables them to have a longer lunch.

There are plenty of restaurants and local shops en route. An initial shop can be organised by e-mail to our friends in France who put the goods on board prior to our arrival. We can order wine from their local co-operative, they also sort the laundry and pick us up from the airport.

Since the start members have kept a log

'Amethyst was sailed to Lymm Marina, craned on to a French truck, and taken to Homps on the Canal du Midi'

which gives details of favourite mooring places, shops and places to eat, and where you can replace gas bottles etc, so there is lots of useful information on board.

Maintenance of the boat is carried out by the members. *Amethyst* has been in dry dock once and at the time of writing was scheduled for dry docking again this year. A group of members were due to carry out the bottom blacking and repainting along with other jobs which cannot be done in the sailing period; some travel by car

and are happy to take spare parts and other essentials with them.

All members make a monthly payment which is currently £30 per share and covers the annual licence, insurance and winter moorings, etc; this fund also pays towards some expenses incurred by dry docking. There are no management fees to pay because everything to do with the boat is carried out by the members.

Getting to *Amethyst* for a trip really isn't difficult; there are flights to Carcassonne with Ryanair on Tuesdays and Saturdays, plus flights to other airports. A very good train service also runs close to the Canal du Midi and you can get there by train from Paris.

We have even travelled from Alicante to Carcassonne, and quite a few members drive the 600 or so miles on the very good autoroutes and make the journey part of their holiday, stopping at places of interest along the way. **CB**

**WIN
£100**

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TELL US ABOUT the boats – or just the boat – in your life. Your story should be about 1000 words and must

have suitable photos. They can be prints, transparencies or high quality digital (that means at least a 5 megapixel camera set on its highest resolution).

Write in or email to editor@canalboat.co.uk. All photos will be returned. What's more, we pay £100 for every story used.