

Cruising in Brittany – Adrian Long

The germ of the idea was formed during Shrimper week at Milford Haven in 2017, when we heard that tackling the French canals from St-Malo to the Bay of Quiberon was practical. I started researching the trip with the ‘fluviacarte’ Bretagne number 12, and the plan was sealed when Tim and Wendy Gray on *Lucy* (1001) agreed to join us.

The guide is a real bible, packed with useful information detailing the canal through every lock and village and with a plethora of detail including shops, moorings, water, fuel availability, showers and a host of ‘what to see’ information it also includes detailed large-scale charts of every sector of the entire route.

In total the canal route is 243 kms long with 61 locks. It starts with the River Rance out of St-Malo, becomes canalised at Lyvet, then over the watershed to the Ille, down to Rennes where it joins the Vilaine, to Arzal with a lock back into the sea. A 25nm sail across to the Baie de Quiberon would allow us to explore the Golfe du Morbihan.

The canals are truly beautiful so we felt it worth taking time to enjoy them; there are many low bridges, so dropping the mast is essential. With this in mind we allowed two weeks for the canal journey and another week to explore Morbihan so three weeks on the water plus travel made the trip almost four weeks.



Launching at St-Malo

Deciding on May/June to avoid clashing with Shrimper Week, we took the overnight ferry from Portsmouth to St-Malo, arriving fresh and ready to launch nice and early the following morning with the marina being right next to the ferry terminal.

We had booked in for a couple of nights and the Marina staff couldn't have been more helpful, with a huge slipway to use freely (and crane if you prefer), good berths and facilities, thus we were soon rigged and into the water and able to enjoy a few hours in St Malo.

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The following day Tim and I took the cars and trailers to Vannes on the Morbihan while the girls did St-Malo, with a plan to catch the train back. This went reasonably well, with a slight hitch parking the cars safely; in the end we left the trailers with a boat yard and the cars in a car park used by those visiting the islands, and in the event they were quite safe at no charge for three weeks parking. The train back took three hours.



We enter the Rance Barrage lock

producing quite a stream, which we didn't bargain for as it swept against the tide making it necessary to use our engines to get there in time. The lock is huge and we were in the company of about 20 boats of all sizes; thankfully most were berthed in the calm waters above the lock so our onward trip was very peaceful.

The weather was getting better with lots of sunshine, but initially low temperatures made the nights quite cold. Little did we know that we had caught the beginning of a heat wave that would give us idyllic conditions for the entire duration of the trip.

The next day we set off for the Rance Dam on the flood tide to catch the lock opening. The barrage is huge, generating 5-600 million KWh per year and



On and under the Pont Saint-Hubert

After leaving the lock it wasn't long before we were passing under the Pont Saint-Hubert and into the river channel proper, which narrowed between mud banks and strange fishing huts on stilts to the Chatelier lock and Lyvet. This took us into the canal proper and another few kms found us in Dinan, a beautiful medieval town and the limit of our canal trip with the mast up.

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We arrived quite late in the evening so it was the following morning before the harbour master showed us the excellent facilities nestling in a 14th century house. With super restaurants and cafes, we spent two nights relaxing, dropped the masts ready for the low bridges to come, and enjoyed some great sight seeing and exploring.



Rig down and enjoying an evening drink on board

The lock keeper made contact with us and we agreed a start time for the first lock. This was to become something of a pattern, with very helpful lock keepers who seemed to be monitoring our progress throughout our trip.

We set off for the 9.30 agreed time for the first lock, which was open and ready. The friendly lock keeper looked

after the next two locks as well and cycled merrily along to make everything ready at each lock along the way. From Dinan we followed the canal, negotiating over 40 locks, spending nights in sleepy French villages and enjoying fresh croissants and free moorings, including mostly excellent showers and loos.

The lock keepers continued to help throughout. Tim got weed in the outboard on one section, but within minutes he was in a workshop with a compressor to blow out the water intake, which made the motor better than ever!

The 11 lock 'ladder' at Hédé took us up the summit channel; in the middle of the lock flight is the canal museum at La Madeleine. This made an interesting lunch stop learning how it took 60 years of work and ingenuity to bring the canal this far.



We leave Dinan and pass under our first low, picturesque and very old bridge.

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The canals are truly beautiful

After this we were in the Ille and all locks were now ‘downhill’, making for easier and quicker progress, and so we were soon at Rennes.

On our way we spent a memorable night at Guipel, mooring by the riverbank seemingly in the middle of nowhere with only a composting loo. Using our schoolboy French we learnt from the locals that the nearest

shop was 15 kms away, so, fearing an evening on emergency rations, we were about to give up. But they looked at our ‘très jolie bateau’ and put Dot and I in their car and drove us to the supermarket, which was not only an opportunity to stock up on wine, beer and food but, wonder of wonders, there was a pizza van in the car park complete with a log burning pizza oven!

Instantly a disastrous evening was turned into one of wine and fresh (amazing) pizza takeaway in the most idyllic spot in the middle of nowhere; not only that but once again, when we were tied up to the bank, the lock-keeper from the next lock came looking for us to see what time we would be at his lock the next morning, such was the level of service and friendliness of everyone!



Dot enjoys market day in Rennes

Rennes is a large university town and with over 60,000 students it is very lively. We were also lucky enough to be there for the market, one of the largest and most colourful I have ever seen. Produce of every nature was beautifully laid out, with hundreds of people milling around and street performers keeping all amused.

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Once again the French were helpful. I needed a new fan belt, requiring a long walk to an auto electricians, but from there a friendly gendarme drove me back to the boat - although he didn't switch on the blue lights!

From Rennes most of the locks were behind us and we were now on La Vilaine, a much larger canal with steel automated lock gates and far less charm than the oak gates and small canal we had become accustomed to. It was still very picturesque, however, as we passed ancient mills and villages. With fewer locks we made good progress, including a night in a marina at Messac (home of 'Le Boat' hire company) with all the usual excellent marina facilities, and we were soon at Redon where the rigs could go back up and sailing proper could begin. Redon has a reasonable marina and is a good town to restock.



At La Roche Bernard

We were soon re-rigged and finally unfurled our sails to find our way south down the lovely wide canal to La Roche Bernard. This is a beautiful spot with a large marina, being close to the sea and navigable by all but the very largest of yachts so it is very popular. We obtained two berths in the small boat zone and settled down to two days of relaxation in a perfect location and superb weather before tackling the crossing to Morbihan.



Once again it was market day, so sitting in the sun enjoying a coffee and croissant and watching the market was one of those moments you wish could go on forever!

All too quickly we were on our way again, spending a night at Arzal before locking out early in the morning to sail down the channel and to the sea.

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It was a wet crossing initially with a thunderstorm passing through, but with a south easterly Force 3 we had a flat sea and good breeze to make good time, and with clearing weather and sunshine in the afternoon we enjoyed idyllic sailing conditions to the marina at Port du Crouesty. The whole of this area is full of huge marinas with thousands of boats in each (including the huge ocean-going catamarans at La Trinité-sur-Mer), giving an idea of the popularity of the area for sailing. One night in the massive marina at La Crouesty was enough, so with local advice we set off at low water to enter the Morbihan.

Surprisingly we experienced strong adverse currents despite getting low-water advice (we later discovered that we should have worked on LW plus 2 hrs as it takes that long to empty the Gulf), but by following local boats and finding back eddies we worked our way into the Gulf and up the Auray River to St Goustan, another delightful medieval town.



Wendy controls the haul-out at Vannes

Our week in Morbihan took us to the Île aux Moins, Arradon, and the Île d'Arz, swimming, cycling and generally enjoying this beautiful area, which is absolutely ideal for Shrimper sailing.

The weather was hot throughout punctuated by the occasional thunderstorm, which finally sent us scurrying into Vannes marina where we enjoyed a last couple of days before hauling out at the superb public slip.

A luxurious night in a hotel, followed by the drive back to St-Malo and the ferry home, brought our trip to an end. With glorious weather from start to finish, this cruise in rural Brittany will remain in our memories for ever.

Adrian & Dot Long - *Longustine* (1062) and **Tim & Wendy Gray** - *Lucy* (1001)