



MANCHESTER CRUISING ASSOCIATION
CRUISING THROUGH FRANCE
BRENDA DAVISON
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Brenda gave us a straightforward and detailed run down the French canals from St Valery to the Med and Greece in a (sailing) catamaran. As always the locks and barges were the villains and the countryside, tranquillity and food the heroes.

The French are apparently building commercial canals with a new one between Paris and Belgium which could carry sea-going vessels coming up. Pâté de foie gras one way and chips and mayonnaise the other no doubt. We, of course, are still digging out the ones we already have just to let Jim and Mabel get to Eccles Union for the annual booze up. The continental canals are a serious business, as you appreciated from the photos of giant French barges appearing round corners with hardly enough room for an emaciated stickleback to squeeze by let alone a boat. John advised against running into the bank in these tight situations because your stern swings out into the path of the unwavering peniche.

Brenda and husband John liked the Med. From Port Napoleon they went to the Corsica, down the west coast of Italy and round the bottom across to Greece. On the way they encountered a violent katabatic storm, a restaurateur who charged them twice for the same meal and saw Mussolini's Steps. These led from the sea to nowhere, looked magnificent but were abandoned – a bit like the man himself. They saw a swordfish fishing boat which had a bowsprit several times the length of the boat. Apparently swordfish sleep quite a lot near the surface and a man perched on the top of the mast can see them way off. He then directs the boat to creep quietly towards them and, as they dream of whatever swordfish dream of, a harpoonist perched on the very end of the enormous bowsprit plunges his harpoon into the dozing fish. It didn't seem completely sporting to me. The Treasurer's boat sports a substantial bowsprit (when it's not up in the rigging) so he showed a keen interest in this bit.

They also saw the famous Charybdis whirlpool which looked a bit tame given all the hype. Brenda explained that the sea bottom had been changed by an earthquake and quietened it down. They didn't see Scylla, the sea-monster alleged to haunt the other side of the Straits of Messina. It led some of the older members to lament the decline of sea-monsters in recent years, the only time they see them these days is printed on their charts.

Brenda and John switched from sailing to a Dutch motorboats a few years ago and they are cruising the canals of France with their locks, tunnels and, appropriately, guillotine bridges. We could see that they are enjoying themselves no end. Brenda has written a book about their travels in France. It's called "Floating Through France" (and there's Floating Through Holland" . There's a website: www.brenda-davison.org.uk.

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