

Biking in France: It's a way to eat without guilt

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Diane Covington-Carter

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The late afternoon sun sparkled on the river Aude as we stopped at the bridge to admire the medieval walled city of Carcassonne, on the hill in the distance. We'd done it! Carcassonne was the final stop on our seven-day bicycle tour in southern France, cycling 25 to 30 miles a day.

My husband and I took a few moments to savor our sense of accomplishment and to congratulate each other before cycling the last few kilometers up the hill to our hotel. We looked forward to a celebratory dinner that night in the medieval city.

The previous fall

We'd talked about doing a bicycle trip in France for six years, and since we weren't getting any younger, we realized we'd better get on with it. The challenges were to find a tour that fit several criteria: our available dates, my desire to avoid roads with cars whizzing by and a cycling distance of about 30 miles a day.

After searching the Internet, we settled on a tour along the Canal du Midi, cycling along the old towpath, with minimal time on roads. We'd be passing through villages and riding past boats cruising along the canal. And since I'm also a Francophile and speak French, it sounded perfect.

The Canal du Midi, completed in 1681, was a masterpiece of both hydraulic and structural engineering. It is reported to have taken 12,000 laborers to build and was used to transport goods. Now, vacationers in rented boats, leisurely cruising along, create the main activity.

We flew into Marseilles and took the train to Sete, on the Mediterranean, where our tour began. The first evening, after an orientation, we tried out our bicycles and were given a map and directions to follow each day. We'd booked through Freewheel Holidays, an English company, so were the only Americans among the 12 participants. Two women took the electric bike option.

The bikes had saddlebags on each side for water and snacks, also providing a place to stash layers of clothing. We brought our own helmets (or you could rent a helmet for the tour).

The next morning, after breakfast, we set out from Sete, following the map and directions. The tour company, which had handled all the hotel reservations, would move our luggage each day. Our job was to pedal to the next city.

On our way to the Canal du Midi, our path took us along the Mediterranean, past walkers, joggers, beach clubs, and a group in wet-suits walking together through the waist high water that looked like a many-headed sea monster.

Each day was an adventure, following the map and directions as we pedaled through villages where church bells rang out the hour. The tour company had little signs on lampposts and street signs, which meant, 'this way' and we were always relieved to see them, reassuring us we were on track.

Most of our time, we cycled along the Canal du Midi, peaceful and shaded from the September sun by huge plane trees. We watched boats navigating some of the many locks, and waved to the cruisers as we sometimes moved at a faster pace than they did.

When we booked the tour, breakfast was included each morning, but we chose the option that did not include dinner. We wanted the fun and freedom of exploring each village and finding a restaurant on our own.

Most evenings we each chose *le menu*, a three-course option for between 17-20 euros (\$20-24). A glass of wine was five euros. A typical dinner would begin with soup or salad, include an entrée of steak and frites or chicken and vegetables, ending with chocolate mousse, crème brûlée or a lemon or apple tart. Luckily, after bicycling all day, I could indulge without guilt.

For lunch, we discovered that bakeries offered a *formule*, which consisted of a sandwich or quiche, drink and dessert (lemon tart was my favorite) for eight euros (\$9.40). We'd stash that in our saddlebags and could stop wherever we wanted for a picnic and also for coffee, when we needed another break.

In Beziers, our third stop, our centrally located hotel opened onto a huge square, which, on the day we left, held a market of antiques. No place for fragile purchases on a bicycle though, so I had to pedal by.

Between Beziers and Narbonne, our fourth stop, we cycled through Villeneuve-lès-Béziers, which looked so much like a quintessential charming French village that I thought I'd fallen into a postcard.

As we took a break on a park bench munching snacks and drinking water, I told my husband, "I've never spent this much consecutive time on a bicycle seat in my life!"

But I was relishing the adventure and enjoying the challenge. That evening in Narbonne, to our delight, our hotel room included a Jacuzzi tub, the perfect remedy for our tired muscles.

By this time in the tour, I felt confident and happy doing the mileage each day. One day, the wind pushed back at us, slowing our progress to less than eight miles an hour. But other days, we cruised along at 10 to 12 miles per hour. At a relaxed pace, with a stop for coffee and for lunch, we arrived at our next hotel mid to late afternoon.

Between Narbonne and Olonzac, we found ourselves lost in a vineyard. Somehow we found our way back to the route, but it was a pleasant detour. It happened to be grape harvest time and in the village of La Redorte, we watched as giant truckloads of grapes poured their contents into crushing machines. I breathed in the rich fragrance of ripe, red grapes as we pedaled past.

This area of France, the Languedoc Occitanie region, though less known than nearby Bordeaux, has earned an excellent reputation for its wine. We sampled the various delicious *Vin de Pays d'Oc* wines with our dinners each night.

At the end of our tour, we took the TGV/fast train to Paris for a few days before heading home. We loved the trip so much that we're planning our next one, possibly for 10 days. There are so many choices: the Loire Valley in France, Greece, Croatia.

We're not sure yet. But we know that it will be a fun adventure-filled journey.

Diane Covington-Carter is an award-winning writer who writes frequently for the Napa Valley Register. www.dianecovingtoncarter.com