



Idling through Anjou

There's something magical about the rivers and canals of France. Giselle Whiteaker dons a captain's hat and navigates a Nicols boat along the waterways of Anjou.



Top: The Abbaye Saint-Pierre in Solesmes.
Above: The Octo moored at Chenillé-Changé.

“Turn the key, push this button in half way, then 10 seconds later, push it all the way,” says Guillaume, as the boat’s engine hums to life. I’m in the port of Grez-Neuville in the Anjou region of France, along with three friends, learning all we need to know to cruise the Sarthe and Mayenne rivers for a week on a boat from Nicols.

I’ve been told these are the perfect rivers for novice cruisers, but I’m still nervous when Guillaume slides from the captain’s seat and ushers me in. Taking a deep breath, I turn the key and press the ignition, perhaps a tad too enthusiastically, but Guillaume smiles and urges me onwards. We putter slowly up the river and under a bridge, after which Guillaume tells me to up the speed and do a U-turn. Although I’d like to take him along for reassurance, he needs to get back to work, so once we’re through the first lock, he guides me in to the mooring dock and jumps off, leaving us to our own devices.

The boat’s a beauty. She’s an Octo, from the Estivale range, with four cabins, two of which can be converted into double or twin beds, and two bathrooms. There are two steering positions – one inside, and one on the upper deck – and a spacious combined living/dining/kitchen, complete with a full-sized fridge, which will fit all the fromage and

saucisson we intend to buy at the local markets. There’s an outdoor table on the back deck and a seating space on her bow that looks perfect for a coffee break. Best of all, she has bow thrusters, which simplifies manoeuvring, reducing my fears of crash landing into the side of a lock.

We’ve opted to start with a short cruise of just 13 kilometres along the Mayenne to Chenillé-Changé, so I can get comfortable with the idea that the Octo is under my control. It isn’t long before I’ve booted her up to full speed – which isn’t very fast – and the others have enough confidence to leave me at the helm. The navigation notes clearly show where I should be on the river, whether the bridges are one way, which arch to go through, and where the locks are placed. I can feel myself relaxing as we chug along the waterway, flanked by deep green banks. We slow down for fishermen, some wave as we drift pass, and glide into the locks, making use of the bow thrusters to adjust our position.

At Chenillé-Changé, we moor at a wooden dock near an old mill, now a museum. We dine on the back deck as the sky slowly darkens, moving from pale blue to pink to inky black. It’s incredibly peaceful – we are the only boat at the dock – and it isn’t long before we retire, the soft lap of the water providing a lullaby. >>



Above left: The captain’s helm.
Above right: Château de la Guyonnière at Montreuil-Juigné.



Our trial run over, the next day we head back from whence we came, stopping wherever whim dictates. Quaint villages filled with houses with steep-pitched roofs, chateaux, churches and gardens are reason enough to pause. A trio of geese circles the boat in hopes of sharing our al fresco lunch, but paddle away disappointed. Mid-afternoon, having long since proved our proficiency at locks, we moor opposite the castle and cathedral in the centre of Angers. Ten minutes later, we moor again, this time at the public moorings rather than the private ones, performing a complicated reverse parking manoeuvre with a little help from some friendly French boaters.

Angers is bustling. There's a festival on and people throng the streets and the harbour, admiring the plethora of half-timbered houses, the twin 75-metre spires of Cathédrale St-Maurice, and the Château d'Angers, a vast fortress that houses the Tapestry of the Apocalypse, a major piece of medieval art. We stay overnight, admiring the sights and sipping beer on the waterfront. We consider extending our stay here, but instead stock up at the Sunday market and head for more idyllic climes along the River Sarthe.

We find these at Cheffes, where we moor for the afternoon, exploring the town before moving on to Châteauneuf-sur-Sarthe. The days quickly fall into a pattern. We take a morning stroll, buy fresh bread from the local boulangerie and perhaps stop for a coffee, before setting off to see where the flow of the river takes us. It strikes me that boating is akin to travelling in a caravan, but in France at least, somewhat more picturesque. Motoring past tiny villages hugging the riverbank, it feels like we've stepped into a place where life is simpler, demands fewer, and mobile phones never ring.

The highlight is possibly Solesmes; we moor with views of the Abbaye Saint-Pierre, a Benedictine monastery where the monks perform Gregorian chants, singing the psalms and prayers of the sacred liturgy seven times a day. Or it could be Asnières-sur-Vègre, officially labelled a "Small Town of Character", with its Romanesque Old Bridge and the Church of St. Hilary. Remarkable listed frescoes adorn the church walls and trees wear knitted coats outside.

Our week ends all too soon in Sable-sur-Sarthe, where blue and white Nicols boats form neat rows along from Sable's Notre-Dame. We buy bags of buttery Sable biscuits, products of the town, and dine on fresh seafood at La Terrasse, overlooking the river. "To our last night," we toast, clinking glasses. Inside my head, I add "...and to doing this again." ■

Nicols offers river and canal holidays onboard a range of self-drive cruisers suitable for parties of between 2-12 people. No previous boating experience is required. Boat hire prices start from 360 Euros for a two-night break or 659 Euros for a one-week trip. In addition to Anjou, Nicols offers boating holidays in France from 18 different bases in popular regions such as Burgundy, Franche Comte, the Loire Valley, Brittany, the Canal du Midi and Camargue, plus bases in Portugal and Germany.

For more information visit www.boat-renting-nicols.co.uk or contact 02392 401320.



Top to bottom: A view of the river from the upper deck of the Octo; the mill museum at Chenillé-Changé; Notre-Dame at Sable-sur-Sarthe.

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