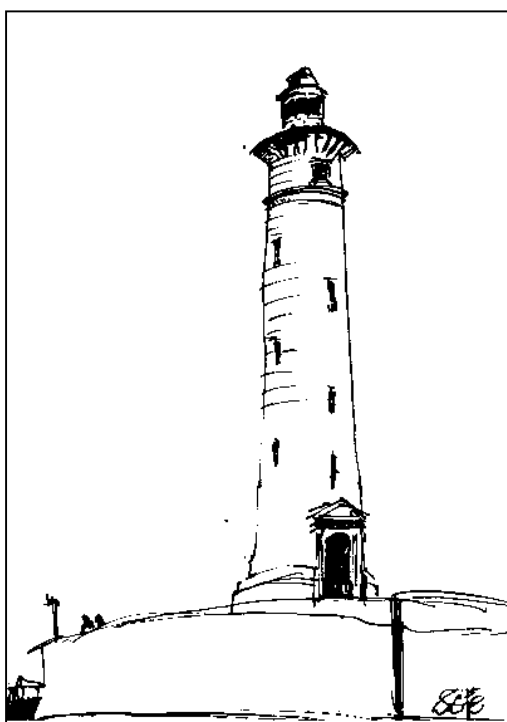


A Family Adventure in Aliz Motte

The anxiety of many months of planning and preparation fell away as we dropped our lines at Levington and motored down the Orwell into a light Easterly. By Kentish Knock the wind had freshened and we had settled into a fine reach with Aliz Motte, our Rival 34, making a steady 6 knots through the water. The night was cool but starlit with sufficient moon to send a shimmer across the water. The two children and Sue slumbered peacefully below. The navigation lights of other vessels twinkled a comfortable distance off. This was the start of our long awaited family adventure and I wouldn't have changed a thing.



The thought of long-term cruising is an often tempting but rarely realistic option for those with a young family. We felt that, given sufficient planning we could probably manage 5 months without either my small business failing or Sue getting the sack from her job as a Landscape Architect with Suffolk County Council. Thus it was that we planned to take Elspeth (age 7) out of school for one summer term freeing us for a period between the beginning of the Easter holidays and the end of the summer hols. To minimise disruption to schooling we planned this for just before our younger daughter, Peta (age 4) started school.

Our choice of route was to Calais and south through the French inland waterways via Paris to Port St Louis on the

Mediterranean. This would make the most of our allotted time with the advantage of avoiding sea passages during tricky spring weather and conditioning us to life as a live-aboard family in the relative security and comfort of inland waterways. A little research revealed that the best sailing would then be found if we turned east along the French Riviera and explored the islands of Corsica and Sardinia. We could then turn back and make some way up the Canal du Midi leaving the boat at the end of the Summer to continue the trip via the Atlantic coast of France in shorter passages the following year.

As our planned departure date approached we watched the weather closely. A low threatened from the west so we decided to leave 12 hours early to avoid the uncomfortable and strong headwinds that would surely come with it. The engine assisted us across the Traffic Separation Scheme as we made our crossing just south of the Goodwin Sands. We picked up a mooring outside the lock gates at Calais at 06.40. A passage of 14 hours.

In Calais, bright sunshine helped us to feel we were really on our way as we laboured to prepare a gantry to carry the mast as deck cargo and hung out fenders and planks to protect Aliz Motte's tender topsides against the rough walls of the 350 locks to

come. The business of crossing France has been well covered in this journal so I'll not dwell on it for too long. Just the highs and lows.

We start, unfortunately, with a low. I have tried hard to forget our experience coming out of the first lock of the trip. Misunderstanding the Eclusiere's confusing instructions and unsure of the inland waterways protocol we attempted to pass below a swing bridge beneath which, even with our new low stature, we would not fit. It was touch and go and we touched. The mast gantry was a couple of inches too tall and caught the bridge sending the mast crashing to deck level.

It was a poor start to the trip frightening Elspeth and giving a severe knock to the skippers confidence. However, having checked boat and crew for damage we passed through the next lock without incident and within three hours were on our way again with the much neater Mk2 gantry which served us well right across France.

The first high point on our journey south was our arrival in Paris. We have of course visited previously, though by more traditional means of transport, so we were familiar with the many great buildings and landmarks that we passed as we worked our way along the Seine. To be arriving in the great city, bouncing in the wash of the Bateaux Mouche aboard our own dear Aliz Motte, was truly thrilling and has certainly given us a taste for waterborne arrivals in other great European cities. Of course there is only one place to stay when visiting Paris by boat and that is the superbly located and very welcoming Paris Arsenal.

After five weeks without meeting any English speaking children we passed a boatyard that was accommodating an unusually high proportion of boats flying a red ensign. We would normally avoid such a situation but knowing the fuss that English couples (mostly retired) made of the children when we met them we turned around and headed in. We were delighted to discover that the yard was operated by an English family with two children. Sam aged 7yrs was already fluent to the point that French natives regularly mistake him for French. He spoke not a word of French when the family settled in Montchanin only nine months previously. His sister Claire aged 11yrs was also fluent though her accent was less convincing. We stayed for two days. Elspeth was impressed to learn that the French schools offer a 5 course lunch, and have Wednesdays off for market day. In her enthusiasm she seemed to gloss over the fact that they also have to go to schools on Saturdays.

It was with some trepidation that we had approached Elspeth's school to ask for a term off. Places at her school are much in demand, would they hold her place open? We needn't have worried, the Head Teacher was as enthusiastic as 'She'll learn more from this than ever she would in a term at school' he said. The school supplied us with a list of topics that her class would be covering while we were away and a pack of teaching resources and old reading books. Sue was teacher and did an excellent job aiming for between one and two hours schooling a day. Classes received a tremendous boost when my brother, an experienced teacher, joined us at Lyon. He found ways of making the classes so much more interesting than we could and he was able to be far more persistent than we seemed to be capable of.

Our only real navigational difficulty was experienced on Rob's first day and our first day on the Rhone. Typically, the day he arrived, the weather changed from glorious sunshine to overcast with a strong southerly wind. With two knots of south flowing river under us we encountered a long wide stretch which ran directly north/south. The wind built rapidly to a near gale producing some steep standing waves. At sea, Aliz Motte would take these easily in her stride, but with the mast lashed on deck it was a different story. As Aliz Motte bucked in the standing waves we struggled to apply

additional fore and aft lashings – the difficulty being to find suitable anchor points on deck to secure to.

Arrival at Port St Louis on the Mediterranean was an enormous high and superbly timed to coincide with my 40th birthday. As we locked through from river to harbour the sea really did turn from the muddy river brown of the Rhone to the silky blue of the Mediterranean. It was so refreshing to be amongst sailing boats and to feel a salty breeze in our hair once again. At was the end of May. Including a week in Paris we had been underway for seven weeks.

The week that followed was a frustrating one. We were keen to get the mast up and get sailing but I had stupidly dropped a bottlescrew in the water when we lowered the mast in Calais. Knowing of the excellent facilities we would find in Port St Louis I hadn't worried about finding a replacement. How wrong I was. Apparently France is one of the few countries in the world that use only metric threads on their rigging screws. Promises were daily renewed by the local chandler but it was no good. This was to be our first encounter of the Mediterranean pace of life. We made the most of it by spending a total of 18 hours in the local playgrounds.

Eventually we did managed to get the mast up and escape Port St Louis.

'Daddy, the water really is blue – its getting bluer' was the cry from Elspeth as we made our first sail together as a family on the Mediterranean sea. Though the scenery was nothing to write home about as we made our way across the Golfe du Fos, it was great to be sailing again and we were just delighted to be on the Med.

A panoramic view of Marseilles lay to the east of us and the rocky island of Ile Pomargue behind. We enjoyed a couple of forays ashore walking up to a derelict fort and exploring the island which is carpeted in low flowering plants. At the anchorage the children enjoyed watching the shoals of fish feasting beneath the boat on the bread crumbs which we tossed over the side. Occasionally one would swim up aiming for a particularly juicy morsel only to clear the surface almost completely.

We weighed anchor the following afternoon and an hour or so's sail brought us to the busy harbour of Marseilles. Here the trick is to avoid the expensive club and marina moorings and instead to turn in to the Port Capitainerie directly to starboard as you enter the inner harbour. Although the throng of boats coming in and out of the harbour entrance make this spot a little lively, it does calm down at night and the saving is significant. The saving was particularly significant for us as it turned out that French public service workers were on strike that day so nobody came to collect any money.

As the lights of Marseilles came on we took it in turn to wander along the quay while the children slept. The port was alive with restaurants full to bursting, African street sellers and the Marseilles out enjoying the sultry summer evening. A vibrant and exotic harbour, we much enjoyed the atmosphere. Sitting in the cockpit we watched a constant stream of day trippers returning late into the evening, hundreds of them. dayboats, superyachts – all manner of craft.

We motored out of the harbour into benign sea conditions & clear skies. At first we sailed, heading south and then east but with the wind dropping away virtually to nothing the engine was soon back at work. The coast was of rocky cliff and scrub. Our destination was the clanques, a group of quarried inlets just to the west of Cassis.

On the recommendation of Rod Heikeill's comprehensive Pilot for Mediterranean France we chose Port Miu. The entrance was well camouflaged and had it not been for the constant trail of trip boats from nearby Cassis making their way in and out I think we should have had some difficulty picking it out.

We all swam in the crystal water and marvelled at the antics of the local lads (and occasionally lasses), who dived off the cliffs into the water from terrific heights. The following day we walked into Cassis. This was just what we had expected from the south coast of France. Lots of pretty boutiques and restaurants line the harbour where enormous, (by UK standards at least), motorboats vied for the attentions of huge numbers of beautiful people posed in the harbourside cafes.

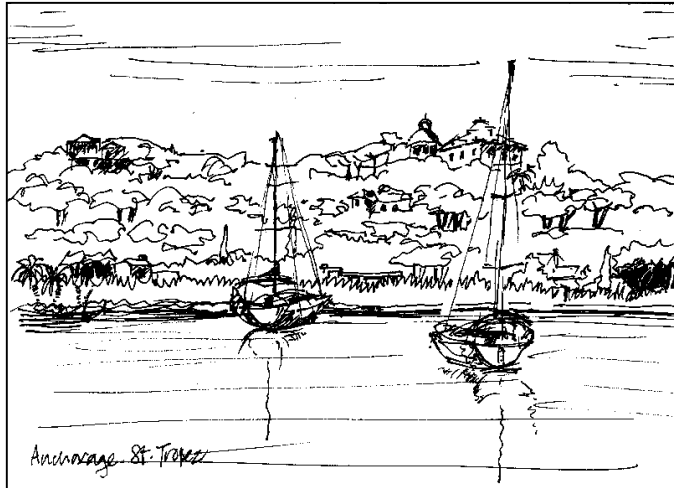
After two nights of Port Miu we left in a south easterly 3/4. By mid-afternoon the wind had veered and the cruising chute was deployed with the main to give nearly 4 knots. The log notes a shark's fin spotted off the starboard bow, but later when more informed we realised it was probably something more benign enjoying the warmth of the sunshine. In the distance, Navy frigates lurked while associated fighter aircraft roared low across the horizon.

By late afternoon we had reached our objective and lay at anchor tucked well inside a long sandy bay on the Ile de Porquerelles. As with many on this coast, this area is prone to crowding during high summer but this was early June and we had no difficulty picking a suitable sandy patch in which to settle for a stay of several days. Here was the turquoise water and pine fringed sandy beaches which the children had looked forward to as we laboured our way across France.

Ile Porquerelles is fringed with clear turquoise water and is a popular destination for daytrippers to its beautiful beaches. There are very few cars on the island so we followed the crowd and hired bicycles to explore the winding cycle tracks. Peta sat in a cycle seat on the back of Eric's hired mountain bike. Sue on a Euro saving initiative, used the ship's folding Brompton, she says probably an economy to far. It was a scorching hot day but we were rewarded with idyllic views as we climbed the winding tracks to the west and south parts of the island.

Our sail to Port Man on Ile Hieres was brisk with a SW 5. After only 2hrs and 15 mins we nosed our way into a long narrow inlet. It was Friday and the anchorage was crowded. At 15 to 20 metres it is quite deep until well inside and has patchy holding. It took several attempts to anchor in 10m. We have no electric windless and anchor handling is by hand, By the fourth attempt – letting out and hauling in a 35lb CQR and 40m of chain – I was thoroughly exhausted. When we finally looked up from our anchoring efforts we found ourselves in a strikingly attractive inlet surrounded by rocky outcrops and pine wood slopes. It provided a beautiful setting to swim in and by now the children were gaining in confidence. They would laugh out loud at the sheer joy of swimming from the boat.

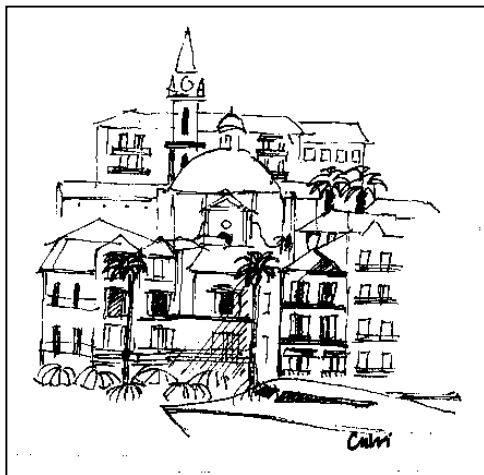
Late June found us anchored in the Baie de Canonbiers close to St Tropez. A wide long bay from which large villas could be seen on the wooded hillside. Peta and Sue used binoculars to scan the villas around the bay for signs of Bridget Bardot, Elton John and other famous residents. Trip boats came in and out of the bay to view the villas of the rich and infamous and occasionally a smartly crewed luxury motor boat arrived and stayed for a short time. When the trip boats finally stopped in the evenings it was a delightful anchorage with mostly good shelter. We stayed for several days awaiting a suitable forecast to make our way 100m south to Corsica.



At 0740 on 20th June we weighed anchor and sailed out of the bay into a north easterly breeze. We had good visibility and a smooth sea. It was going to be warm. We listened to the awful English 'Rivera Radio' for the last time. All the presenters sound like Tony Blackburn and every other advertisement is for luxury breakfasts, personal body guards, Lloyds investments or chic hairdressers.

We had an excellent and swift crossing. Dolphins visited but didn't stay for long, The wind gave a beautiful beam reach and a steady 6 knots through the water. Having lost Rivera Radio the crew requested their favourite CD's (Oh no! Not Atomic Kitten again!). The girls occupied themselves building dens in surprising locations around the boat to shelter from the hot sunshine.

By 1800 land was sighted, a bluish silhouette in the distance topped off by fluffy cumulous clouds. It was astonishing to find you could see the high peaks from a good 35 miles off. As we made our approach the wind freshened and seas became choppy giving occasional spray on deck and a less comfortable motion. Elspeth, Peta and Sue retired below dosed up with anti-sickness pills. Luckily the children drifted off to sleep. The log entry for 2200 reads "La Revellata light just where expected, stars but no moon".



Sue joined me on deck as we entered the sheltered water of the outer harbour of Calvi at midnight. The smell of a different land hung in the air. A confusion of lights on shore made it difficult to distinguish the navigation lights. Lasers pierced skywards and we could make out flashes of light high above the harbour. Soon we were able to pick out boats in the area marked in our Pilot as an anchorage. We prepared to anchor ourselves only to find that the anchorage is now populated by visitor buoys (10 Euros per night). Our safe arrival in Corsica was celebrated with the traditional beer before we headed to our bunks.

"Daddy? You know you asked me to tip something over the side? Well, its not quite gone over!" We had enjoyed a wonderful few days in Calvi with its broad sandy beach, exciting evening street life and interesting Genoese fortifications but the time had come to leave and we were making our way south down the west coast of Corsica. Our last act before leaving had been to buy fresh fish from the market – I had just completed the gutting and had handed the spoils to Peta to dispose of over the side. My swimming costume pegged out to dry on the guard rails was never quite the same but had its uses when trying to find a space on the beach.

Our next stop was Girolata – this is a charming village which is accessible only by mountain path or by sea. It is a popular stopping place though real shelter is only available for a few boats. Happily with Aliz Motte's relatively shallow draft we were able to get well inside. It was from Girolata that we discovered the delights of walking in Corsica. Though there was little shelter from the sun, the cliff top paths weave through some of the most stunning scenery. Sue and I made a pledge to return one day with walking boots and no kids!

The sun continued to shine and the wind was kind as we sailed and often motored our way south visiting Cargese (water only available in the Marina between 1830 and 1930), Ajaccio (very deep anchorage off the marina entrance with consequent difficulty finding sufficient room to swing) and Campomoro – (delightful village, wonderful beach and superb fort).

Bonifaccio, on the south west corner of the island was an absolute delight. With stronger winds forecast from the west we were anxious to find shelter for a few days. We found it in the clanque just opposite the ferry quay. It can be a little rolly with wash from craft coming and going from the town marina but we felt secure with the bower anchor well dug-in ahead and two lines run out from the stern to rings ashore. Here it was the business of the ancient port rather than clear water and sandy beaches that was the main attraction. An outstanding natural harbour, Bonifaccio is hewn by nature from solid rock and can have changed little since the time it was first used by seafarers of ancient times. It was a remarkable feeling just to be there. The spirits of bygone seafarers were almost tangible.

What is more, among the other cruising boats we found two young English families, both had given up life ashore for cruising aboard their catamarans and both with children the ages of Peta and Elspeth. These were the first English families we had met and the children spent hours playing together aboard the various boats. We have since heard Dolphin (two adults and FOUR children under 9yrs have made it to Martinique).

The wind abated sufficiently for us to make it through the notorious Straits of Bonifacio to the Maddelena islands off the North West coast of Sardinia. The area is a national park famed for its clear water and white beaches. A steep daily charge is levied by waterbourne park wardens just for being in the area. We were expecting another blow from the west so we sought out good shelter in the corner of a long sandy bay to the south of Caprera Island. The wind blew for a couple of days but at least this kept the tax collectors in their open RIBs well out of the way.

They did finally catch us in an anchorage at Spaltomoro to the north of Maddelena Island where we were charged nearly 20 Euros for a 16 hours stay. We were pretty angry when the coastguard turned up the next morning and advised us that regulations say we must anchor 200m off the shoreline. This would have put us in the open sea well outside the shelter of the bay which is in any case a well recognised anchorage. We had had enough and made sail in a brisk breeze for Porto Cervo.

Even had we wanted to, we could not possibly have afforded to stay at the Arga Kann's exclusive marina at Porto Cervo, however, anchoring is permitted in the bay without charge and we stayed for several days. During this time we managed to attend the prize-giving of the Farr 40's World Championships in the company of the Princess Aga Kann. Teams from countries from all over the world were competing and the excitement was infectious. An Italian team triumphed and the Brits did pretty well. We enjoyed the hospitality of sponsors Rolex and the girls were pretty impressed to see a real live Princess!

We sailed south down the east coast of Sardinia as far as Olbia. In an anchorage just to the north we found several Australian and English boats – real long term sailors who made us very welcome and gave us a good taste of life as one of the world wide cruising set with barbecues on the beach and technical problems shared and resolved.



It was mid-July and with huge sadness we turn around here to retrace our steps. We had booked flights home from Carcassonne at the end of August and wanted to make sure that we were well into the Canal du Midi in time to find a suitable place to leave Aliz Motte for the winter. A draft of 1.4m (more in freshwater) leaves Aliz Motte with little depth to spare in the Canal du Midi and France was experiencing one of its hottest and driest summers on record.

Working our way back north we visited some wonderful anchorages that we had missed on the way south and of course revisited some we had become particularly fond of on the way south. We took our departure from Cargèse at 1830 on 21 July and headed to Cavalaire-sur-Mer on the French mainland

arriving just after lunch the next day. After the magic of Corsica and Sardinia, the French coast seemed somehow less colourful and the people rather more self-serving.

This time heading west we made a visit to the French naval port of Toulon where we observed the forest fires in the hills around the town fanned from the west by a wind of gale force. The next morning the BBC World Service was broadcasting news of a regional emergency as fires – many started deliberately – burned out of control.

We entered the Canal du Midi at Sète on the 5th August. Our big anxiety was whether or not it would have sufficient depth. In general we found it okay at first. Of course it was usually impossible to get close in alongside when we stopped for the day but the rectangular section of the Selden boom made an excellent, if narrow, gang plank.

We found the Canal du Midi to be a delightful tree-lined waterway more akin to the English canals. It was completely free of commercial traffic but heavily occupied by powerful hire craft many not really under command. Many of the lock keepers were plainly on holiday jobs and lacked the experience of their counterparts on the more commercial waterways. This often made for a more uncomfortable ride. Worse still were the uphill staircases where Keepers would open two sets of gates and then flood the third causing a tidal wave to rush through from the top lock. This may have speeded the process up but it also caused us to rip a fairlead off Aliz Motte's bow.

Our abiding memory of the Canal du Midi, however, will be of the heat. These were the weeks of August 2003 when news reports were dominated by a death toll of thousands as an unprecedented heatwave hit France. Temperatures outside were regularly in the 40's C and in the cabin much higher.

This was how we came to overshoot by 250 miles. Being in the heat on the inland waterways was so much hotter than it would have been on the sea. We found it was cooler to keep moving. With its thick lay-up, the hull and deck acted like a heat cell and stored up heat during the day which it radiated well into early hours. This was why the whole family (except Peta who didn't seem to mind), would end up sleeping on deck until about 2am when we would move below to our bunks.

We could see from the banks that the level was low. What was worse, we could see it getting gradually lower each day. Being so beautifully tree lined it was the tree roots running under the canal that we found to be the most common obstacle. However, we found that with sufficient momentum we could pass over them rocking-horse style.

We thought that the trip was over when we became solidly stuck in Castelnaudary. However, after an hour of revving and hauling we felt a slight movement and we were soon off. Ironically, we found the summit pound to be deeper and thereafter, on the Canal de lateral a La Gironde we had few problems.

By now we were beginning to think about where we might lay up for the winter. Having heard a horror story of a keel boat that laid up in a canal only to find the pound was emptied for winter maintenance I was nervous about leaving her in the canal. We identified a yard at Bordeaux that would haul us out but arrived to find the crane driver on holiday for two weeks.

Worse, the marina offered little shelter from the fast flowing and sometimes turbulent river Gironde. We ended up leaving Aliz Motte in the water at a marina further downstream at Pauillac. A location that is far from perfect but where we found an excellent harbour master and a French family living aboard in the adjacent berth who both agreed to look after her.

What a shock it was to return home after such a trip. While we were away we had been the healthiest and happiest we have ever been and richer in every way. We became closer as a family and more complete as individuals. Roll on the next trip!

Pictures and a web log from the trip are available at www.audience.co.uk/adventure.htm

By Eric Orme with illustrations by Susie Orme