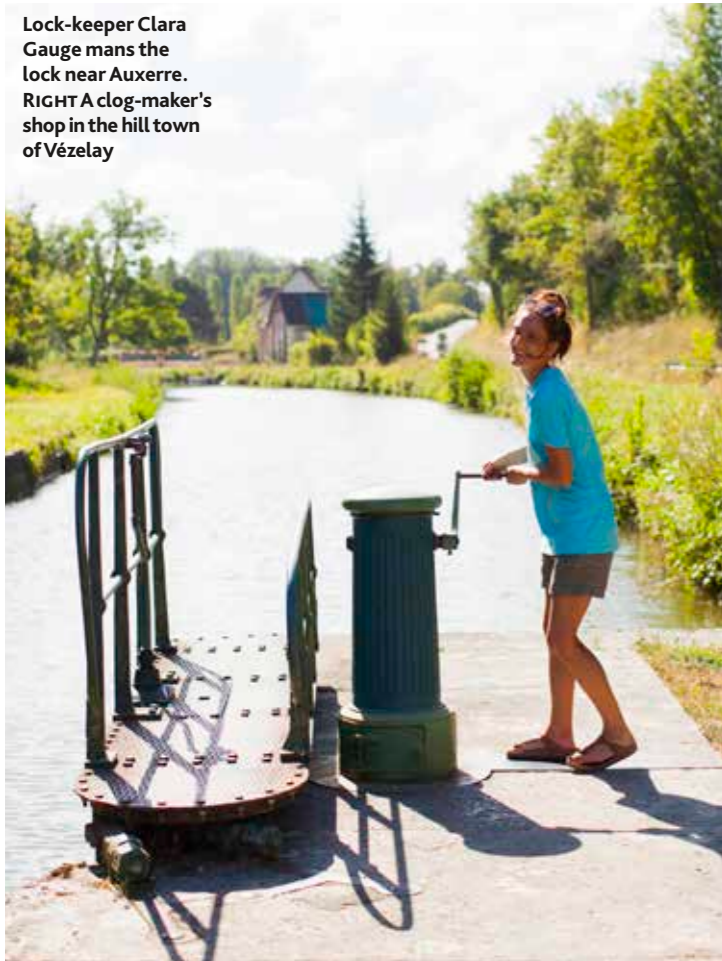




A man waters his geraniums in Mailly-le-Château, a village beside the Canal du Nivernais.
LEFT The Randle moored for lunch



Lock-keeper Clara Gauge mans the lock near Auxerre.
RIGHT A clog-maker's shop in the hill town of Vézelay



LA FRANCE *profonde*

Deep in rural Burgundy, a journey by canal boat reveals a landscape of medieval churches and vineyards, where traditional French life still flows at a gentler pace

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The journey begins and crew member Stéphane Perrone checks the ropes



FROM THE TOP OF THE LIMESTONE escarpment, the Canal du Nivernais appeared no wider than a ribbon, the stationary canal barge no bigger than a toy. The only sound was that of the wind in the treetops far below.

How strange to think that this forest was once an ancient seabed, and that sharks had slipped by at eye level. Because I was about as far inland as it was possible to be, halfway along the 110 miles of canalised river that bisected Burgundy, connecting the valley of the Seine in France's north with the valley of the Loire in the south.

My journey had begun a couple of days earlier in the Gallo-Roman city of Auxerre. 'Welcome to the *Randle*,' Captain Tim Harrold had said as I stepped aboard his barge and adjusted to the sensation of being afloat. I felt much as Mole must have done when he was first brought aboard a riverboat by Ratty. 'It's traditional to name your boat after your dearest love,' Tim was saying, 'but *Randle* named his barge after himself.' Tim explained how the original owner of the barge had sourced the ship's wheel, the portholes and the engine from an eclectic array of vessels, ranging from a Scottish herring boat to an ocean cruise liner that had seen action in the Falklands War. Tim had moored the *Randle* for the night, and yet there were still several hours till suppertime, so we returned to the quayside and set off to explore Auxerre.

Before long, the evening traffic noise was hushed within a complex lace of medieval streets. Pastel-coloured timber-framed homes reminded me of Hansel and Gretel's gingerbread house. Gardenias, wisteria and roses reached through cast-iron railings. Chocolate shops and patisseries reflected the confectionery nature of the architecture. A 9th-century abbey and a great Gothic cathedral dominated the skyline. An older Romanesque cathedral still crouched within the walls of the Gothic church. A third church, dedicated to St Pierre en Vallée, rivalled the cathedral with its flying buttresses and tower. As the heat of the day faded, and the daylight with it, the streets began to fill with townspeople. →



'It's traditional to name your boat after your dearest love'

The city of Auxerre, with the 9th-century Abbey of St-Germain rising over the river

The Canal du Nivernais runs beside the River Yonne on its way south to Vincelles



We dined in the tiny and appropriately named La P'tite Beursaude – one whitewashed, wood-beamed room with a red-terracotta tiled floor – and so small it would have been easy to miss but for the blue painted door and baskets of pink geraniums outside. A waitress wearing traditional Morvan dress, with wide lace sleeves, brought us an amuse bouche of oeufs en meurette – tiny quail's eggs cooked in bourguignon sauce, and a speciality of the house. Two identical twin men, wearing identical paisley shirts, were applauded by their companions as two identical bowls of steaming snails, cooked in Chablis wine, arrived in front of them.

On our way back to the *Randle* we stopped at a bar and ordered milky absinthe, while a band dressed in jellabas played French-Moroccan fusion, the bass line performed on a euphonium. As we returned to the quayside, the great cathedral of St Étienne blotted out the stars, its windows glittering with their reflections. The music was still audible from the riverbank, and a trace of cigarette smoke mixed with the improbable scent of candyfloss.

In the morning, I woke to the squeals of starlings as they turned in arcs above the quay. We were moving! The Canal du Nivernais was not a canal in the sense that I was used to. In 1784, the River Yonne's curves were modified by a system of locks and weir-like barrages to enable the river traffic to reach the higher ground upstream. As a result of this, the canal, for the most part, runs along one bank of the river. Its original function was to carry firewood to Paris, in a process known as flottage du bois, and in its heyday the river was clotted with timber bound into wooden rafts until there was no more wood left to cut. The great forests that surround the river today have sprung up from the stumps of thousands of acres of felled trees. In later years, grain, stone, wine and coal replaced the wood as cargo, although today the only traffic is that of leisure boats.

ONCE WE'D LEFT AUXERRE, THE lock-keepers and fellow barge dwellers were the only people we saw for hours at a time, although we enjoyed the companionship of grebes, mallards, herons, swans, Canada geese, butterflies and dragonflies.

The first three lock-keepers we met were students. This was the most sought-after holiday job in Burgundy. 'I like being in nature,' Elise told us, 'chatting, and not being stuck behind a till.' She was studying publishing and loved the opportunity to read that being a lock-keeper offered her. Her laughter bounced across the water as she wound the iron handle of the lock gate. Further upstream we met Laurent, an ex-security guard from Martinique. 'It's calm and beautiful here,' he said. 'People are good.' They were sentiments that we heard many times on the canal: the desire to be close to nature, the calming effect of the water, and the pleasure of providing a public service. When the lock-keepers stopped for lunch, closing the canal from noon till 1pm, we too moored the *Randle*.

There were few villages along the canal, and we ate lunch on the boat, enjoying goat's cheese and a local rosé. We were moored just a few miles from Chablis, where some of the finest white wine in all of France is made. As we were finishing the meal, Tim's friend Franck Chretien stepped into the wheelhouse. Franck had exchanged his job as a printer in Paris for the deep silence of Burgundy, and he made his living giving tours of the vineyards.

Franck drove us along an empty road through woods and arable land, until the farms gave way to vineyards. We reached Chitry, where our rosé had come from. We walked through a cool, quiet wood. When we emerged from the trees I could see the ancient village of Chablis. Below us the vineyards glowed like green silk. Franck pointed out the different slopes and described their various microclimates, the topography of each slope →

An olive tree. RIGHT Sylvie Barbet, waitress and wife of the owner of La P'tite Beursaude, in Auxerre



A woman fetches the bread in early morning, in Auxerre. BELOW Fishermen along the Canal du Nivernais

Contented lock-keeper Laurent Jupiter. BELOW A dozen snails at P'tite Beursaude



'We dined in a whitewashed, wood-beamed room with a red-terracotta tiled floor'



A rose-covered doorway in the sleepy village of Mailly-lé-Château. RIGHT Coffee aboard the *Randle*



'We swam in the river below the hilltop town of Mailly-le-Château'

Katharine and Tim swim in the lagoon below the fish ladder at Mailly-le-Château



A crisp Petit Chablis at lunchtime.
RIGHT Relaxing on the *Randle's* sun deck




defining the wine that each produced: Grand Cru, Premier Cru, Chablis and Petit Chablis. 'In early summer there was a frost,' he said, 'an alarm sounded to announce the temperature was falling, and everyone ran to the vines with oil lamps, they had to work so fast!' I tried to imagine the hillside covered in flaming torches, the image both magical and frightening: livelihoods were dependent on the outcome of the work. Franck picked up a lump of clay from the foot of a vine. It was full of flint and fossilised shells – the reminder of that ancient seabed again. 'This is why Chablis wine tastes of salt,' he said, 'and also a little bit of gunpowder – because of the ocean, and the flint!'

DAYS AND NIGHTS ON THE CANAL expanded, slowed down. We swam in the river below the hilltop town of Mailly-le-Château. We traced the constellations. One morning, I cycled ahead of the *Randle*, waiting to embark at one of the locks. A horse stepped out of the mist; roses scented the air. I saw school children waiting for a bus, attended by a family of geese. They were the largest group I had seen since leaving Auxerre. Just before reaching the village of Lucy-sur-Yonne we passed a flower-filled marina inhabited by a community of boat-dwellers. Mary had lived on a canal barge all her adult life and both her sons had been born on her boat. She reckoned her great Dutch barge was here for good. 'What would you do if you won the lottery?' I asked. 'Oh my goodness,' she said, but the pause was momentary. 'I'd buy a smaller boat! And then I'd sail the canals of Europe. All canals are wonderful to me.'

At Lucy we moored the barge and followed a zigzag road through arable land to Vézelay. A wide, cobbled street lead from a gateway up a conical hill where shops selling Burgundy wine and local sausages vied with

traders of religious artefacts. I stopped at a bar and enjoyed the murmur of voices. The magnet was the basilica at the top of the hill where remains said to be those of Mary Magdalene were stored in a glass reliquary. I arrived at the Romanesque church just as vespers was beginning. Young monks and nuns dressed in chalky blue habits kneeled before the altar, their unaccompanied voices rising in exquisite plainchant while the afternoon sun filled the nave. In the Middle Ages Vézelay was established as one of four starting points for the Camino de Santiago, and this 1,056-mile pilgrim route is still followed by thousands of people of every creed and none.

But while the pilgrims travelled onward to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, my own journey was ending in nearby Clamecy, a pretty town embraced by the rivers Yonne and Le Beuvron. Many parts of the town today date back to the 13th century, including the church of St Martin. Indeed, for 600 years – from the fall of Jerusalem in 1187 until the French Revolution – Clamecy was the unlikely home of the Bishop of Bethlehem. And for 400 years Clamecy was a centre for flottage du bois. It was curious to reflect that this was why the Canal du Nivernais had been brought into existence in the first place. To carry firewood to Paris: a journey of many days by river, and today just a few hours' drive away by car. I stepped ashore for the last time and glanced at a pair of fat brown trout, just below the waterline, nibbling at the hull of the *Randle*. It felt strange to be leaving the boat; it was astonishing how quickly I had made the water my home. 



KATHARINE NORBURY is the Wainwright Prize-shortlisted author of *The Fish Ladder*, out now (£9.99; Bloomsbury).