

A real head-turner if ever there was one, Randle looks like she has been plying her trade on the waterways for decades, but was in fact built just seven years ago by RW Davis and Son, of Gloucester.

The 70-footer was the basis of a dream project by a German-born venture capitalist, living in Shrewsbury, who planned to make a “grand voyage” across Europe and into the Black Sea, Russia and the Baltic.

But sadly, after sparing no expense to create the classic floating home – it took a carpenter and an electrical engineer two years to fit her out – her octogenarian owner became too unwell to attempt the journey.

By then, Randle had made the move across the Channel and travelled down through the French canal network to St Jean-de-Losne on the River Soane, which is where Tim found her on the market.

While she is, of course, principally an inland boat and rated at Category D as a result, inspectors nevertheless noted that she met most Category C requirements – and those requirements were certainly tested during her sea trials in 2003 prior to her cross-channel trip, when she confidently negotiated seas whipped up by Force 6 winds! She has a fishing boat style lifting bow which makes her very seaworthy – and also means she makes very little wash on the rivers.

Accompanied by a hostess, Tim offers an experience unique to the French canals: a truly bespoke cruise for couples or family parties.

Of course, there is a big self-drive charter fleet in France and also a number of hotel barges on which you can book a berth ... but with Randle, what you are getting is effectively your own boat to do with as you wish for a short break, week's cruise or longer.

Within the time restraints, you can ask to travel in any direction from your starting point and do anything you wish along the way.

In Tim's own words, it's a way to relive the golden years when cars, planes and boats were built by craftsmen and only available to the privileged few – to be part of a world of beauty, quality and a slower pace of life.

And a cruise aboard Randle certainly lives up to every aspect of that mantra.

We were met by Tim at Montbard, a one-hour hop on the TGV high-speed train from Paris, and driven in his seven-seater people carrier to Randle's mooring at the beautiful medieval city of Auxerre, to where Tim had gradually made his way from St Jean de Losne during six weeks of summer charters, principally on the Burgundy Canal.

Our four-day trip was going to be along a stretch of waterway new to all of us – the picturesque Canal du Nivernais, a 174km waterway built between 1784 and 1843 principally to enable timber from the Morvan forests to be transported to Paris and linking the rivers Loire and Yonne.

The section we would travel, from Auxerre to Vermonton, is actually a canalised river, with locks every mile or two along the 25-mile stretch.

But in common with much of the French canal network, the locks – or ecluses – are manned either by full-time employees of the Voies Navigables de France, which runs the waterways, or as seasonal jobs by students, so unless you choose to help, all you need to do is sail in and all the work is done for you.

Indeed, Tim is happy to perform the task single-handed, knocking Randle into neutral and trotting down the side deck to fling on a bow line over the mooring posts which brings her to a complete halt.

With the wheel hard over to keep the stern against the lock wall, he then applies a little throttle to hold Randle steady as the level changes, the engine acting as a spring in conjunction with the bowline.

Then, as the gates open, it's gently into forward gear to release the tension on the bowline which can then be flipped off and away we go.

It makes for remarkable smooth and efficient passage from one stretch of canal to another – although, being France, you have to remember that everything stops for *dejeuner* for an hour from Midi!

Of course, it didn't take long before my enthusiasm got the better of me and I was hopping on and off at locks to deploy the bowline and help the lockkeepers with the gates and sluices.

Most were very friendly and would be indulgent of the mangled tenses and verb usage of my schoolboy

French to chat away.

Indeed, at Augy lock, the lock-keeper is the organiser of Les Amies du Canal du Nivernais, the Friends of the Canal group which was pretty much entirely responsible for saving the canal from becoming derelict. They encouraged the development of hire fleets – the largest is based at Vermonton – and also stage a big river rally every two years. Appropriately, the organization is twinned with Britain's Kennet and Avon Trust.

At several locks I did a double take as the same face popped up again at the gates – until I realised that some keepers take care of two or even three locks, jumping in their cars or on to mopeds to zip up the towpath to the next one to await your arrival.

Most of the locks had individual and beautifully looked-after cottages attached, each with the name of the lock and its date proudly displayed, which added to the general ambience and scenic quality of the trip.

Being in Burgundy, you frequently rounded a bend in the river to be met by a hillside covered in vines for its famous wines, while by the time we visited, in early October, the leaves on the bankside trees had turned to create a dazzling palette of deep autumnal colours.

While the season was winding down – and indeed the locks close to traffic from November to March – this was arguably the finest time of year to visit the beautiful Nivernais.

We were certainly lucky with the weather, with barely a spot of rain during our stay, but it was wonderfully mild too, even early in the morning as we got up to enjoy elegantly -prepared breakfasts at the wheelhouse dining table.

Tim is dispatched first thing to pick up fresh baguettes and croissants at the nearest bakery, often riding into the town or village on one of the two bikes attached to the stern (and which are also available to charterers if they wish).

The Hostess then adds them to freshly-ground coffee, fruit, preserves and freshly-squeezed orange juice (or she would knock you up a full English breakfast if you wished), while Tim heads off to perform his daily nursemaiding of Randle's vintage Kelvin K4 engine.

The 1939 16-litre engine, registered with the Kelvin Engine Society, was removed from a Scottish fishing boat and given a major rebuild before being installed in Randle, where it thumps away at a tick-over 700rpm at river speeds – and Tim just loves it.

Its provenance is supported by the original wheel from the fishing boat and the brass-wheeled gear and throttle controls, which provide a real link with the past.

The sound is certainly distinctive, for Kelvin enthusiasts have spotted it even before Randle hoves into view!

Providing back-up is a 3.3-litre Beta engine powering two wing-props – which generates only 10hp less than the mighty Kelvin's 85hp – and a 20hp Sidepower bowthruster.

As this is very much YOUR holiday, Tim will get under way pretty much when you are ready and put in as many or as few miles as you wish ... but mostly he takes his breakfast at the helm as guests relax over theirs and watch the world go by. The windowed sides of the wheelhouse fold flat for that fresh-air feeling while leaving the roof in place for shade.

After a gentle morning, it's time for lunch, also included, which the hostess took pains to produce from the very best the local charcuteries, fromageries and boucheries had to offer.

Menus during our stay included trout, home-made quiches baked in the well-equipped galley, pates, prawns salads and a wide range of regional cheeses, all accompanied by fine local wines, particularly the

Accommodation aboard is as luxurious as the food, while still retaining the classic boat feel.

The whole interior is finished in Aformosia wood, its rich, dark colour offering real opulence to the surroundings. The brass portholes were originally aboard the cruise liner Canberra, there are leather-topped writing desks and full-depth wardrobes in the cabins and there is a great piece of whimsy in brass speaker-tubes between the bridge and the cabins!

Both the double and twin bunk guest cabin are en suite of course, with electric flush toilets, the former offering a full-sized bath with marbled washbasin, gold taps and shower fittings, while the latter is shower only.

The barge is fully air conditioned with separate controls in each cabin and elegant recessed lighting and free-standing lamps. There are also traditional skylights throughout.

Guests have complete privacy as there is an ensuite crew cabin with kitchenette forward so Tim can make his early sojourns to the engine room without disturbing anyone – and to which they can both retire if guests want to spend a quiet evening together below or around the table in the wheelhouse.

Evening meals are found in an abundant array of quality restaurants which never seem far from the water – although Tim will organise trips out to wine chateaux, or indeed to visitor attractions or nearby towns, in his car if guests so wish.

We took a trip into the pretty town of Beaune, the capital of the Bourgogne wine industry, with a positive labyrinth of wine cellars and caves, and also spent time in Auxerre itself, a town since the fifth century which is packed with buildings from just about every era since, but notably continues to embrace its medieval roots.

And we had one of the best meals I have ever eaten at Michelin-recognised Hostellerie de la Fontaine at Accolay, a restaurant created in a 17th century wine cave. Quite how somewhere so tucked away can have attracted and maintained a chef of the standard we encountered is a happy mystery – although I suspect that locals not relying on travelling at walking pace by river drive from many miles around to enjoy it.

If you ever go there, don't miss the cheeseboard, mine host's passion which he is rightly determined to share with you!

It has to be recorded that a cruise aboard Randle will provide one of the most unforgettable holidays you could possibly enjoy. Tim and host were the most accommodating, friendly and gracious hosts you could hope to find and the surroundings a haven of relaxation.

Of course, this level of individual and unique service comes at a price, but in my opinion you will not begrudge a single penny of it.

John Lawson,

Editor- Anglia Afloat