

Aster day 6

The rain has stopped, thank goodness because Aster does dribble rather. Through the windows, the decks, roof. We used the cardboard box from our recently purchased BBQ to cover a leaky hatch which was dripping down the stairs on to our First Mate's bed!

There was a delay this morning – the young lock-keeper arrived twenty minutes late, apologised, then said he would be even later because he had to go and get the key! Quite extraordinarily we had a full 48-hour period where we saw not a single other boat. This morning as we wait for the lock there is one in front and three behind – its is like coming back to the present having spend so much time alone in the wonderful countryside with our dear barge.

We had a near mechanical catastrophe today. Our rudder and attached tiller arm bounce and buck because the propeller is attached to the bottom of the rudder. When the tiller is hard over to one side (when manoeuvring for a lock for example) you may need to change from forward to reverse gear or change the speed of the engine. This may mean letting go of the tiller arm briefly. When one of our pilots did this earlier today, the rudder took on a life of its own and settled in a position at nearly 90 degrees to the stern of the boat. We were told while being instructed in the operation of the boat that 30 degrees is the limit because it puts too much pressure on the universal joint connecting the gearbox to the propeller. There were horrible grinding noises before the engine stalled and we all thought that our trip had come to an end there and then. But no, testament to the strength and resilience of the machinery (and stubbornness of our dear old boat), everything worked perfectly when the engine was re-started.

A gentleman approached us at a lock. He was a retired journalist who used to write about the Canal du Nivernais and Aster. He had heard about our adventure and come to offer some of his personal photographs for our archives. The more we travel, the more we realize how much Aster has touched peoples lives in one way or another.

We were all wearing our yellow and black 'wasp' t-shirts when we arrived at Fragnes. Yellow is not the colour to wear when travelling through the corn fields as we get covered in tiny black flies. Thankfully the metropolis of Fragnes was fly-free as we welcomed guests aboard, some friends, others strangers, all showing genuine interest in Aster. We are constantly reminded that to renovate and keep Aster, money will be needed. Sales of t-shirts in Fragnes were 'steady rather than stratospheric', but another few Euros went into the fund.

Down the 10-metre lock we entered the channel that gave us access to the Saone. Here our escort boat awaited. Bateau Cornelia Helena, skippered by Rudei Kung, was bedecked with colourful flags - a wonderful sight in the afternoon sun. Ruedi used to skipper steam passenger boats on the Swiss lakes, is an engine restorer and highly knowledgeable engineer – an ideal escort we are lucky to have with us. They would track us during the approximate 10-hour journey up river to Saint Jean – just in case anything went awry you understand.

We moored at Gurgey, roughly two hours up the river, and appreciated the boat-shuffling of those already there in order to enable us to tie for the night. Rudie came along side us and an eleven-hour day came to an end – at least it did three hours later after out 3rd consecutive BBQ!

We have travelled approximately 33 kilometres and 12 locks. Because the canal was twisty, the wind was difficult and there were many more boats about, we arrived at Gurgey 2-hours behind schedule.

Tomorrow will be our last day – regretfully.