

Blue Flag



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French adventures barging on the

Main bathroom toilet 'en panne'!

We had eight people on board including two special guests, Lindsay and Helen. Thank goodness for the second toilet - one that some partners wanted to remove.

The toilet is always a busy morning place and this day was the usual. Michael was the last person in for the 'after breakfast routine' and bam - the toilet would not empty. It just kept filling up to the brim with water and would not expel the contents. Mon dieu! A delicate issue for us all, especially with guests on board.



Our men thinking about the options

Lindsay measured up to the task remarkably well and with great chivalry pitched in to help our partner John. The job was to empty the toilet with buckets out through the saloon and overboard. This slow procedure took some time during which the kitchen brigade found other tasks to do, such as dishes, hanging out the washing, any job which was well away from the aforesaid activity.

What to do now? Well firstly, as the main bathroom toilet was out of action, we had to commission the rear toilet in the 'royal suite' - previously deemed by its occupants 'not to be used' - except for major emergencies!

This was a major emergency for us all. The main bathroom could not be used at all - neither the basin, the shower nor the washing machine in the laundry next door! We were quite devastated, especially with 8 people on board. We needed to give our mechanic Duncan a call but it was late on Sunday afternoon, so we decided to leave it until the next day.

All day, the men tried different possibilities - none worked. Lastly, the deck wash pump was considered as an option to flush out the blockage; so out with pump to

no avail as it did not solve the problem and was our last resort.

We passed Lagarde, a nice little port, the home base of Navig France, a hire boat company and where we have stopped on a few occasions now. Once to pick the sweet/sour cerise aigue on our first visit to Strasbourg, once to re-fuel and fill up with water and another time to enquire about a new captain's chair. We were sure the capitaine would know a plumber. So we moored just outside the port on the east side of the bridge and outside the lock so we would be ready to take off first thing in the morning. We met the co-owner of the port, the capitaine, Patrice, and asked him for help with a plumber. But sadly no, he did not know a plumber - and furthermore he said we could not moor so close to the marina and lock!

We had to barge onto the next lock. It was now late in the day and the guys were tired. At last we moored just outside the next lock as it was closed for the day.

We prepared for our daily aperitif, a relaxing champagne on the back deck with some nibbles of nuts and pretzels - what would it be? Our favourite, a vintage Château Boursault or a vintage Lanson? Or a bottle of both to savour and compare the flavours and to help us to forget our woes?

We relaxed, at last, with the lovely champagne after the day's catastrophe. The galley staff thought about dinner and started its preparation.

Tomorrow we would deal with possible remedies for the blocked toilet - and work

out what had caused the toilet to be blocked in the first place. That is another story in itself.

Then, for the final barge check of the day, John went down into the engine room. Chagrin! Horrors!

Engine room filling with water; are we sinking?

The engine room was filling with water; there was 30 cm already. Could we sink? Lindsay our guest donned a life buoy! Barges do sink and we have seen one almost sink in front of our eyes in our marina. Partner Michael knew that it was not possible on this barge and tried to reassure us. He knew that the engine room had a sealed bulkhead which would prevent the barge from sinking but it looked possible to me and there were some very concerned people on board. So we were all quickly back into action, champagne put aside!

The first job was to get the two bilge pumps working to pump out the water. They were put into action and the water started to flow back into the canal and out of the engine room; we started to feel we were going to be ok. What happened to cause this?

Now, we really did need to call for Duncan's help, despite it being late on a Sunday evening.

This precipitated an amazing chain of events. Duncan made some calls and said he would arrive in an hour or so, as Toul is about 100km away from Lagarde.

Our situation started to get back under control. The water was pumping out, so we



Trying to relax with Champagne and in fear of sinking. Lindsay dons a life buoy!

The Betty B

thought we were out of danger of sinking.

We could now resume our champagne and 'relaxation' and continue the discussion of just another day on this barge! After a short relaxation, while we were waiting for the firemen's arrival, we removed the champagne and glasses from the deck, as we were concerned that the authorities may not be impressed with us drinking whilst the barge was in jeopardy!

However, by the time the 'sapeurs pompiers' and all the others arrived, we had actually sorted out the reason for the flooding ourselves.

Our barge partner John, an engineering expert and deep thinker, had been considering what had changed from earlier in the afternoon to now. Answer: we had used the deck wash pump to try to clear the toilet blockage. Could this be involved with



Quite a crowd, plus the Water Police from Metz

the problem?

He climbed down into the engine room, walked through the dirty oily water, crawled over the engine and heard water gushing. He put his hand down under the water, felt about and found a valve which he turned off - that was it.

With the bilge pumps working and the water receding, John could see where the water had been entering. Using the deck wash pump earlier in the day had caused a bolt to blow.

Just as he thought, when the boat was winterised, a bolt from the deck wash pump - typically located at the bottom of the engine room, near the floor and below the outside water level of the barge - had not been tightened properly. On our first use of this pump today, trying to flush out the toilet blockage, this bolt had been blown out.

Water had flooded into the engine room through the bolt hole and was above knee level before it was discovered.

The water flow was stopped and the water receded but the engine and engine room remained coated with dirty oil!

It was then that all the help arrived! And what a team appeared. Before leaving Toul, Duncan had called the Lagarde port who had called the local 'sapeurs pompiers' - the local firemen. They had called the water police - and so the fun began. Just like in a scene from Peter Mayle's 'A year in Provence'!

First to arrive was Patrice from the Port Lagarde, a lock back, with his friend. They were followed by 3 fire trucks with 12 firemen, then another van with 3 frogmen in their wet suits, a local police car with 2 policemen, a couple of local on-lookers, and finally a car with two water police from Metz, a 45 minute drive away! That's 22 people, with Duncan still to arrive!

As seems to be the French custom, the

people greeted each other, then they stood around, talked to us, then consulted with each other; they considered, looked and thought.

When the frogmen arrived, John took one of them, dressed in a red wetsuit, down into the engine room to show him what he had done in tightening the valve. This smart frogman, then rummaged around under the water and found the missing bolt which they then replaced. All now seemed to be sorted except for all the mess; everything was coated in oil, including the guys' shoes and our carpets. Black oil everywhere!

We were now safe from sinking. The frogman, who had been in the engine room, appeared from below, in his tight, revealing red wet suit and for some reason, asked if we would like to see his dongle? We stifled our mirth - there was obviously something 'lost in translation'!

What happened next was most unexpected. We faced an hour or so of polite but serious, investigatory questions



The red frogman!

from the two Metz water police. And they were very serious. One, a very attractive, slim, dark, young woman, asked a series of questions, in excellent English, the other was her older male colleague. Politely, she asked where were our captains' licences? Where was the radio licence and the licence to use it? Where were the life safety vests? How many vests did we have on board? Were there any children on board? Finally, they checked the fire hydrants and decided all was good. The water police departed. The rest stayed.

None of these 'sapeurs pompiers' from the fire department of the emergency services could leave until our mechanic arrived and gave us the all clear. Eventually Duncan Flack, our marvellous saviour and dear friend from Lorraine Marine arrived and the team was able to depart. By now it was very late. Dinner was ready and at last we ate; Duncan joined us but did not dally, he was on the run and wanted to get home.

And so, for us, this was just another day barging in France. Unlike many other barges and travellers, we love uneventful and boring days!

Tonya Jennings

