

Fancy some argy-bargy?

Experience life in the slow lane with a cruise on a narrowboat

WORDS Hannah Fox

Two hundred years ago, the canals were a busy and thriving network, delivering raw materials to factories up and down the country.

Today they are mainly used by tourists and a lively canal culture has sprung up. I'd never been on a barge before so was slightly worried about steering, and the thought of being in charge of a 50ft narrowboat was quite terrifying. My two friends and I arrived at Rose Narrowboats' hire shop, deep in the Warwickshire countryside, and were immediately given intensive tuition on how to steer, moor up, check the engine and fill up the water tank. The four-person boat was fully equipped with everything you need for a short break, including a toilet and shower room, a kitchenette with fridge, sink and cooker, and a seating area with TV.

After a shaky cast-off, we were soon chugging up the canal in our bright red and green narrowboat called 'Chanelle', gallantly trying to steer in a straight line.

Our route took us about 18 miles along the Oxford Canal, starting near Brinklow and finishing at the picturesque village of Braunston. We used maps provided by the boat hire company and the route was long enough for us to travel to Braunston and back in five days. On our first day, after a couple of close encounters with bramble bushes and low bridges, we entered a 100ft tunnel at Newbold and then moored up for the night,

taking care to use the special knots we'd been taught so we didn't float away. In the morning, as we stood on the prow of the boat with a mug of steaming tea, we were greeted by a family of swans complete with fluffy grey cygnets. It was wonderful to encounter so much wildlife right on our 'doorstep'. The view along the canals is beautiful. As you pass fields full of sheep and cows you can spot brightly coloured kingfishers darting among the reeds and herons wading in nearby ponds.

On arrival at the second village, Hillmorton, we encountered our first lock. These are like gates along the canal, which allow the boat to go uphill. Operating the locks is easy, and jumping on and off, pulling the boat in, turning the lock keys and pushing the gates open is quite a workout. By the end of each day, my arms and shoulders ached from all the pushing and pulling, and the fresh air meant I slept soundly every night.

CANAL CULTURE

Canal etiquette is a key part of the boat experience. You have to stay to the right, which took a little getting used to, and slow down when passing moored boats so you don't rock them. Canal life is very sociable and when passing boats, it's customary to smile and say hello. If you run into trouble – or run aground in our case – then a passing boat will often help you out.

The beauty of canal boat cruising is that there is no itinerary. You have the



healthy's canal-faring reporter Hannah (right and above left) discovers the beauty of Britain by boat



freedom to go as far as you want within your allotted hire time, either spending a relaxing day moored up, or cruising between villages. You can generally moor up where you like, but it must be on the towpath side, as the other side is often private land. Then you can cook dinner on your boat or stop off at one of the pretty pubs dotted along the route.

The gentle cruising along the canal combined with the active, outdoor lifestyle makes for a rewarding, uplifting and relaxing week – and it's good for the environment, too. There's no better way to see beautiful Britain than from a narrowboat. **healthy**

DESTINATION DETAILS

Rose Narrowboats offers boats for two to 10 people. Fuel and insurance is included so all you need is food. The cost of hiring a boat depends on the length of your trip, the size and star-rating of the boat, and when you are travelling. A week-long break in July on a four-berth boat will cost approximately £945. For more information, call 01788 832 449 or visit www.rose-narrowboats.co.uk.