



advised against any kind of sexual activity for the duration. The rule remains: "If the boat starts rocking, then we come knocking."

Of course, the biggest barging offence is to break the speed limit and create "wash" against the side of other boats. Resident narrowboaters and fishermen can't abide us holiday types and, given the chance, will raise clenched fists and complain to the boatyard if their peace is disturbed for even a second.

And it seems these complaints are a more modern occurrence. According to John Twelftree who manages Swan Lane Wharf in Stoke Heath, Coventry (from where I have hired two boats - Admiral Benbow and Buttermere for later this month), a younger crowd is being drawn back to barging.


"These days, a lot of young people and parties are taking the boats for hen nights, stag dos and end-of-term get-togethers," he says. "We get quite a few groups of students. Ten years ago it seemed to be more for family holidays."

Certainly, it has doubled in price in the time I've been doing it - hiring an eight-berth for just a weekend costs nearly £1,000. And many boatyards are becoming increasingly fussy about who they take along (big and single-sex groups are often banned for fear of misbehaviour).

Meanwhile, my group has swelled in number - from a paltry 10 to a whopping 18 last year. Together, we have now barged in Cheshire, Oxford, Wiltshire and Warwickshire. And everyone still fights for the naff badges that you buy at the barge shop on the first day that give you a duty for the holiday's duration - "bilge-pumper", "tiller-girl", "captain" and "first mate".

Is it time to get a new hobby? Yesterday Alex, my long-time friend and barging companion, sent round an email. "Check out the link for the ultimate barging lock," he wrote. "As Mecca is to Islam, surely the Falkirk wheel is to the barging fraternity. We must go there."

I fear it may be time to worry.



Don't be put off narrowboating by its lack of glitz, or even by that dread term "chemical toilet". I've been on four barging weekends and they have all been brilliant fun. Enforced relaxation might seem an odd idea, but slowness is what it's all about. You watch the tops of hedges and fields go smoothly and surreally by, you nod and smile at other bargers, you lie on top of the boat - and your blood pressure drops to a pleasant state of near-catatonia. Some embrace the geekiness of piloting the barge: the challenge, say, of turning the boat at a tight "winding hole". But what I like best is the canal-side pubs. Imagine the scene. You are doing nothing and feeling super-relaxed, and then what? You have a few drinks sitting in a pub garden and feel happier still. The Caldon Canal near Stoke - where we found ourselves most recently - is one of the most picturesque in the country. Don't fret when, on leaving Stoke, you find that the journey starts amid bleak suburbia. Soon enough things get bucolic and you find yourself gliding down the narrowest of waterways with willows overhanging one bank and swathes of Himalayan balsam on the other. There's plenty for those wanting a hit of industrial nostalgia: the aqueduct at Hazelhurst, the steam train at Cheddleton, the marvellous cracked wooden paddles and winding mechanisms of every lock gate (yes, locks do feature a lot on a barge trip). But if that all gets too much, and you're even fed up with doing nothing, moor the boat at a remote spot, turn up the stereo, and dance on the towpath.