

HELLO SAILOR



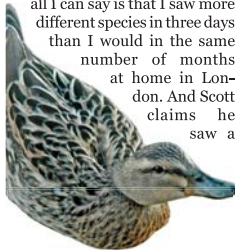
Tris Reid-Smith and Scott Nunn managed to spend three days on a **narrow boat** without drowning or even falling in.

It was our last day on the narrow boat and we were just starting to feel like we had mastered it when the ducks flew in.

Perhaps I was thrown by the fact that we'd been watching *Dam Busters* the night before on the boat's DVD (it was on special offer at the Tesco where we bought food for the trip). And just like Richard Todd in a Lancaster, they flew in low, straight at us. Panic! Would they hit the front of the boat? No, they landed neatly on top of the cabin and waddled down its full length to meet us at the stern.

There they stood, inches from me, amicably pecking at the life-buoy and quacking away like we were old friends. They must not have known that we'd eaten scrambled duck eggs for breakfast.

It was the closest of many animal encounters during our short holiday on board. If I knew anything about birds I'd give an impressive list at this stage, instead all I can say is that I saw more different species in three days than I would in the same number of months at home in London. And Scott claims he saw a



parakeet – though presumably an escaped, rather than a native, one.

It all sounds very relaxing, doesn't it? But within the first 10 minutes we managed to collide with the first object we encountered on the canal – a stationary narrow boat. By the time we hit, I'd shoved the throttle fully into reverse so the "crash" was more of a tap. Out popped a grumpy old geezer who refused to accept our grovelling apology and seemed a bit annoyed we hadn't done any damage (having hit fender to fender at snail's pace) so he couldn't get even more irate.

Of course everyone knows when you're steering with a tiller you have to push it in the opposite direction to where you want to go. But for landlubbers it takes a bit of getting used to as we had discovered. Soon we adapted and learnt that the boat is easier to control when it is going slow. And apart from that first incident, everyone else treated our (and their own) ineptitude on the water with highly amused indulgence.

My proudest moment was when it came for us to turn around halfway through our trip. We dutifully found our way upstream to the turning point near Rugby. Our narrow boat was very long and the hole we had to turn in was very small. It seemed as unlikely as being able to get a forearm into a... well you get the idea. But once we'd angled our-

selves right I was able to execute a rather elegant eight-pointer and headed away with a warm glow of achievement.

Actually boating is hard work. We built up our muscles fending off from the bank and even handling the tiller on a windy day took a bit of effort. But whenever you get tired you can moor up pretty much anywhere along the tow-path and take a break. In preparation for mooring I had re-learned all my knots from boyhood sailing expeditions but found I only ended up using a simple locking hitch – very disappointing!

Once you have tied up, you can really begin to relax. Taking a walk – or even a jog – along the tow-paths or to one of the nearby villages is one of the real joys of being on the canal. I'd like to say that's

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because it gets you even closer to the wildlife or make some comment about serenity. But the real reason behind my enthusiasm is that so many of the footpaths end at quaint village pubs where you can have a beer by a roaring fire or grab a bit of pub grub.

For many of our meals, though,

we found we ended up eating on board the boat. The facilities were far better than I had expected with a fridge, small freezer, oven, grill and four gas hobs.

In fact the boat was in excellent condition over all, with a dining table, comfy leather arm chairs, double beds and a pretty decent shower. It was all spotlessly clean and when we stepped onboard on a cold April morning, they had been running the central heating so it was snug inside for us.

By "they" in that sentence, I mean the hire team at Black Knight's Napton Marina (between Oxford and Birmingham and accessible by motorway) who were super-friendly, organised and helpful. They understood we were novices and took time to get us out of the marina and safely on our way.

They were so nice we felt even more responsible for the boat in case we had some kind of accident. But we needn't have worried, speaking to friends later we discovered they had managed several collisions when they had done similar trips, narrow boats are pretty sturdy.

Now I think of it, it's strange that canal trips are thought of as the preserve of retired people when so many 20 and 30-somethings get a group together and do a good booze cruise. It's a great way to hang-out with a crate of beer, and, er, your mates. Of course it would also make the perfect self-catering UK holiday for a young gay family. So could narrow-boating's fuddy-duddy image be ready for a re-branding? Well it's happened to caravans – they're now endorsed by celebs! Can cool canals be far behind?



Casting off

For Black Prince Holidays from Napton or other bases on the canals, see black-prince.com or call 01527 575 115.

For general advice about walking or boating, see British Waterways' site, waterscape.com. Their customer services number is 01923 201 120. You can also visit enjoyengland.com for tourist information.

Stratford-Upon-Avon

Stratford, or Shakespeare's Stratford as the locals don't call it, is a short drive from Napton and the perfect place to stay if you want to get on your boat and cast off early in the morning.

What better way could there be to start your holiday than taking in one of the RSC's summer-season plays and then a leisurely dinner?

We stayed at the surprisingly smart and comfortable Holiday Inn, right next to the canal. Impressive facilities included a gym and pool. See holiday-inn.co.uk or call 0870 400 9670.