



Travel

with Robin McKelvie



THERE were raised eyebrows from friends when I announced I was embarking on a week cruising the canals between Glasgow and Edinburgh.

A week later I was a total convert after a trip that took me between Scotland's two biggest cities at a pace that drifts you back through the centuries.

Until 2002 this unusual journey was not even possible.

What were the main arteries between the cities during the Industrial Revolution, the Forth & Clyde and Union canals were no longer connected. Much of the waterways were clogged with weeds and that most Scottish of aquatic interlopers — the abandoned shopping trolley.

Things have come a long way in recent years thanks to an influx of cash from the Millennium Commission and the determination of British Waterways that the canals should open again.

Impressive

New bridges have been built, the canals dredged and cleared of vegetation and, of course, the stunning Falkirk Wheel has been conjured up in one of the most impressive feats of Scottish engineering since the canal's heyday.

Setting off west from Falkirk on the Forth & Clyde Canal all doubts about the trip quickly faded as a green cloak of trees and fields appeared around our boat and we settled into the 4 mph pace.

There's something supremely calming about not only sharing the water with swans, but also being overtaken by them.

After quickly mastering the steering, we eased into the sort of relaxation that modern life seldom allows.

Aboard a canal boat you really have time to relax and let the world go by.

I travelled with my wife, mother-in-law and father-in-law and on the way we picked up a collage of friends and relatives, and even my cats, Islay and Skye, for a brief spin



Scotland's forgotten artery

■ Robin's wife Jenny and mum and dad, Margaret and Peter, who joined the party for the trip across the Almond Aqueduct.

on the canal. They all — especially the cats — entered into the spirit of this soporific mode of transport.

We found our own ways to relax, whether it was reading in bed when you feel like you really should be up, sunbathing on the deck or just watching the scenery.

On our second morning, after a hearty dinner the night before in a pub near Kirkintilloch, things took a surreal turn as we sailed through

Glasgow's outskirts, past Maryhill's tower blocks and on to Firhill Stadium before arriving in the city centre and our base for the night at British Waterways HQ.

Up we popped like submariners for a curry and pint before retiring to our mobile home with its proper double beds, stereo and TV.

Heading back east we tackled the Falkirk Wheel — very impressive to look at but quite daunting when you are underneath its hulking shadow.



■ The Falkirk Wheel — impressive to look at but daunting to negotiate in a canal boat. Thank goodness for British Waterways staff!

Adventure

Mercifully British Waterways staff were on hand to do the hard work and we were soon up on the lock-free Union Canal with only 32 miles between us and Edinburgh, an epic adventure with overnight stops to enjoy in Linlithgow and Ratho en route.

It's up to you where you stop. We took lunch stops at various points, enjoyed a barbecue — much to the amusement of the natives in Winchburgh — and moored in a different place most nights.

The highlight was Linlithgow with its lovely canal basin and easy access to the local pubs, shops, restaurants and the world-famous palace.

On the run into Edinburgh the greenery momentarily gave way to concrete bridges on the reborn stretch through Wester Hailes, but once we crossed the Prince Charlie Aqueduct we were soon back in a world of rowers, reeds and wildlife as we approached Edinburgh's financial district and the newly revamped Lochrin Basin.



■ One of Robin's cats, Islay, enjoys the sun on the Union Canal.

This leisure oasis is another sign that the canals are finally making a comeback.

Sitting proudly by our brightly painted boat at one of the new restaurants that line the waterfront, we were the talk of the lurching office workers. I'd like to think that as we slowly turned tail and set sail for Falkirk, more than one or two looked on with a touch of jealousy as we joined the swans cruising Scotland's forgotten canal artery.

Factfile

ROBIN TRAVELLED with Black Prince (01527 575115 or www.black-prince.com) who rent out canal boats from their base beneath the Falkirk Wheel. Boats cater for two to 10 passengers with initial tuition and petrol included on all trips. They also provide a route guide and some basic training on handling the boat.

Hotel of the week

ABODE — THIS stylish hotel lies right in the heart of Glasgow and I used it recently as a base for checking out the surrounding shops and restaurants. With an award-winning chef in the kitchen and some chic modern rooms it can be hard to motivate yourself to leave what is a very contemporary hotel in a charmingly historic building. 129 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2 2SZ. Tel. 0141 221 6789. Double rooms from £120. www.abodehotels.co.uk



Flight of the week

EASYJET HAS announced new flights from Edinburgh to the Polish city of Krakow. Flights start in November with some real bargains for early bookers. Krakow is brilliant for a weekend with plenty of sights, restaurants and bars all within the charming cobbled old town. It's become a bit of haven for British stag parties though, so those looking for a quieter visit should consider travelling midweek. Return flights from £41.98. www.easyjet.com