



# SUNDAY EXPRESS

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## TRAVEL

### UNLOCK THE WATERWAYS

Paul navigates 58ft Abigail around the challenging Stourport Ring

**PAUL MILES enjoys a slower pace of life on a week-long narrow boat [holiday](#) around the Stourport Ring with its 100-odd locks traversing a mix of industrial and rural England.**

WE AWAKE to the sound of ducks quacking outside the window and eat breakfast on deck in pale summer light. Moorhens squabble in the reeds and a walker ambles past with her dog, wishing us a good morning with a smile.

We chug along at a top speed of four miles an hour, overtaken by joggers and cyclists on the towpath. This is a slow, friendly, parallel universe. Britain's canals are enjoying a bit of a renaissance of late. There are more boats on them now than there were in the late 1700s and early 1800s when the then revolutionary transport system flourished. Now it is nearly all leisure craft that pootle up and down the 3,000 miles of navigable waterways. With a friend, I hire a spacious, 58ft narrowboat and set off for a week's circular journey on the Stourport Ring, a gruelling 105-lock, 74-mile route.

The man from the boat hire company, Black Prince Holidays, shows us around Abigail, our home for the week. He explains how to fill up with water and start the engine, screw down this and undo that. He joins us for the first half-hour to check we have the steering under control. It's tricky to start with but we are determined to master it by the end of the first day. We begin our journey in the middle of the world's longest flight of locks, Tardebigge, where 30 locks raise the canal 200ft in under four miles. "I didn't know it was going to be such hard work," puffs my friend as he runs back and forth, winding paddles up and down and opening and closing wooden gates that weigh more than a ton each. Meanwhile, I steer the boat into each lock, where it rises slowly, like a loaf in a baking tin. "Hard work?" I reply, cheekily, resting on the tiller. A narrowboat holiday can be good exercise for the crew, especially when there's only one.

Our voyage will take us through the Midlands, Staffordshire and Worcestershire, on to the River Severn and then back along the Worcester & Birmingham canal.

Along the way, there are Industrial Revolution attractions to visit including glassworks, potteries and steam trains but completing the circuit in a week means there isn't much time for anything else but buying provisions, cooking and seeking out the odd canalside pub. We survive our first day and moor up, six hours later, under the watchful gaze of the graceful Baroque spire of Tardebigge church.]

Friends drive out to meet us and tour Abigail. She has two bedrooms, a shower room with a flush toilet, a galley with fridge and stove and a little sitting room with television. With an interior space less than 6ft wide, you soon get used to walking around with your elbows lucked in. It's all a far cry from the Industrial Revolution when boats laden with heavy cargo were pulled by horses through landscapes

belching steam and smoke. In contrast, when we pass through the middle of the Black Country, sites of foundries and factories, such as the one at Netherton that made the chains and anchors for the Titanic, are overgrown with cow parsley and elderflowers.



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Today, canals are an intersection of urban brashness and rural prettiness. On days two and three, into and out of Birmingham, we chug from city to country and under whizzing motorways. dereliction gives way to swanky canalside developments and supermarkets, then to pastures and cottages. Floating beer cans bob among swans, reeds and waterlilies. Graffiti-covered motorway bridges cross over waterways otherwise arched by rustling ash and oak trees. Our guidebook and map by Michael Pearson is invaluable. He says that the Staffordshire & Worcestershire canal is “the prettiest canal in the country”. It does seem very lovely but also rather twisty and narrow, edged by red sandstone cliffs that drip with ferns, foxgloves and ivy. We pass under the Severn Valley Railway viaduct, just as a steam train chugs overhead.

It seems we have travelled through a portal to another, much slower age. We had been anxious about going on the River Severn at Stourport. Abigail would feel lost in its swirling enormity. In 2007 there were floods and boaters had to be rescued by helicopter when their craft were washed into trees. We needn't have worried; the Severn is slow and low, its willows dipping in the water seem Amazonian in their lushness. After passing through two vast river locks (which, thankfully, are manned) we moor for the night at a floating pontoon.

A mink steps aboard and peers quizzically inside the boat and a huge salmon leaps from the water. One of Thomas Telford's iron bridges arches over the river nearby, busy with cars and the occasional tractor. On board, I prepare lasagne and salad in the kitchen with a view of the river. We feed swans as we sit outside in the bow with a glass of wine listening to the roar of a weir. By road it's only nine miles to the end of our journey. We will take a day and a half to complete the Stourport Ring. Or perhaps another century.

GETTING THERE Black Prince Holidays, a member of Drifters (0845 762 6252 / [www.drifters.co.uk](http://www.drifters.co.uk)), offers a seven-day self-catering holiday on board Abigail from £765 (four sharing).

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