

Taking to the waterways for a cruise

NATHAN ROUS and crew enjoy the experience of a trip along the Leeds-Liverpool Canal

YOU'RE going to laugh at this, I know you will.

When I went narrowboating in April there had been so little rainfall that British Waterways were considering closing the canals. Levels had dropped so drastically that hulls were being dragged in Hull and rudders scrapped in "Rudderham" (sorry, that was the closest I could get).

What a difference four months makes, eh? Torrential rain, gusting winds and widespread flooding – newly dubbed "the three aarrghhs". Indeed, the last time I saw a narrowboat it was resting on its side in the middle of a

field in Tewkesbury. But April was like an Indian summer... only in the spring... and in West Yorkshire.

We picked up our boat in Sowerby Bridge, a beautiful old mill town, and were given a quick guided tour from the wonderfully helpful team at Shire Cruisers.

They had trusted us with a 56ft vessel. Now I'm no Sea Lord but it was about the size of the QE2. Brightly painted – for both decorative and warning purposes no doubt – and brimming with great features, our boat had everything. Aga (I'm kidding), plasma-screen telly (I'm doing it again), Jacuzzi (I can sense you're

getting bored with this). Well, it was close. With a cooker, fridge-freezer, central heating as well as a TV and DVD player it was hardly roughing it. Don't put too much faith in the TV and DVD player though as neither really work due to the erratic aerial. Anyway, you won't need a TV to keep you occupied, especially if you follow our lead and arm yourselves with Monopoly, Top Trumps, Uno and Scrabble.

Since our trip last year, son Noah and nephew Nathan, now seven and 10 respectively, are at a far more competent age and were a huge help during the occasional crisis – handing pointy things and long

things and ropey things. We needed them more than we thought as a canal without water is about as helpful as a cycle-lane made out of drawing pins. The boat kept grounding, you were lucky to moor within four feet of the bank and the locks wouldn't open.

For my wife, who is slowly getting rid of the prefix "un" from her title of able seaman, taking controls of the boat is the biggest peril so although she preferred to "wo"man the locks it was tough work. At one troublesome stage she called a builder over to help. He looked at me with disgust as she huffed and puffed and I sat at the helm with a gin and tonic.

"She doesn't like driving the boat," I offered by way of explanation.

"All the blokes say that," he spat.

Having a separate

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bathroom to the boys was a particular advantage, one which was highlighted during a video tour of the boat.

"And here's the boys' bathroom," I said into the camera as Nathan swung the door open, only to reveal a toilet which probably hadn't been flushed in the entire time they were on board. The only female on board needed resuscitating before we could continue.

It was blistering the entire weekend so it gave us plenty of opportunity to park up (probably not the nautical term but it's not like we were crossing the Atlantic) and explore. It was back to my old hunting ground as I'd started my journalistic career in the wilds of West Yorkshire at The Halifax Evening Courier and the Brighouse Echo. Any historical accounts were soon vetoed

however as the boys started yawning and calling me an old man. I had, after all, started there before both were born.

They were more impressed as we made an expert entry into the deepest lock in Britain. At just under 20ft, Tuel Lane lock is an awesome sight... unless you are at the bottom being barked at by the gruff lockmaster who is plainly bored of holidaymakers making pathetic attempts to keep their craft under control.

He doesn't perhaps realise that "I'd hold the rope steady" sounds like "I've sold the Pope already" when you're miles below and the sound of rushing water makes conversation impossible.

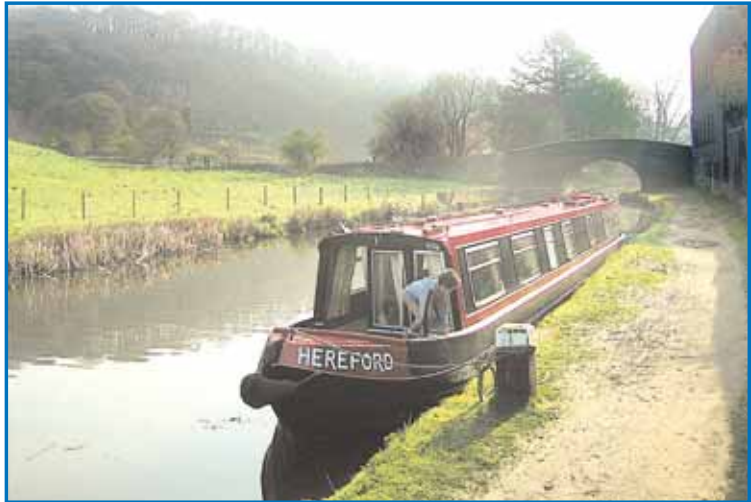
By the time our four days

were over we had been through more locks than David Blaine. This particular stretch of the Leeds-Liverpool canal is perhaps to be avoided for the novice in favour of less complicated waters. But if you like a challenge this will certainly fit the bill. We met a couple who proudly announced they had completed all 292 locks in the ring during a hectic fortnight – including 28 in one day. I did my best to lose them, but with a top speed of 4mph it wasn't easy.

To the uninitiated, locks are complicated and time-consuming. To those who know what they are doing, they are simply time-consuming. Yet by the time we'd completed half a dozen there was a certain sense of satisfaction. Worrying, isn't it.



All ship-shape for a trip along the canal



Escape for a few days and take to the waterways



It's a great opportunity to take in the views when you're away from the hustle and bustle

TRAVEL DEALS

CORNWALL: Cornish Collection (0845 365 1394) offers seven nights self-catering in four-bedroom cottage sleeping eight in centre of Looe for £485 from Sept 29, and from £370 any week October 27 to December 15.

TUSCANY: Thomson Lakes & Mountains (0870 606 1470) offers seven nights half-board in four-star hotel in Montecatini from September 8 & 15, with flights from Manchester, from £399, reduced from £625.

CROATIA: Hidden Croatia (0800 021 7750) offers seven nights' half-board at Hotel Pastura on island of Brac from £441 through October, including flights, private transfers and double sea-view room.

FRENCH MOUNTAINS: Crystal Active (0870 402 0289) offers seven nights full-board from September 15 in Club Active Le Cairn in Chamonix for £269, reduced from £399, including flights and free weekly programme of guided bikes and hikes.

CUBA: Captivating Cuba (0870 887 0124) offers seven nights all-inclusive beach holiday in Varadero from £715 per adult, £320 per child (up to six) or £415 (seven-11) for travel September 1 to October 11. Package includes Virgin flights and all-inclusive accommodation.

NEW ENGLAND: TrekAmerica (0870 444 8735) offers eight-day tour from September 22 and October 6 from £793, via Appalachian Trail, White Mountains, Acadia National Park, Boston, with biking, swimming and sunset cruise as optional activities. Flights extra.

CHINA: Adventure Co (0845 450 5312) offers 12-days trekking the Great Wall from September 16, including visits to Beijing Plianguan and Yungong Caves, for £1,512, with flights, all transportation and accommodation, some meals and group leader.

TURKEY: Crystal Active (0870 402 0289) offers seven nights B&B from September 14 at Club Active Tamarisk in Ortakent, Turkey for £269, reduced from £489, including flights, windsurfing tuition, group sailing, sea kayaking.

TRAVEL FACTS

Nathan Rous travelled with DRIFTERS – a consortium of award-winning holiday boat companies. Contact www.drifters.co.uk or 08457 626252 and find great ideas for enjoying the waterways on www.waterscape.com.

Readers who quote Castle Wharf Promotions/Go Boating will get £50 off a part week, £100 off a full week or £250 off two weeks. This offer cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer.