

# On the go

**WE SET A SCORCHING PACE** during our weekend break on the Oxford and Grand Union canals.

I'm not talking about the speed of the boat, which at an average of 3mph was pedestrian, but the glorious weather which made me wish I'd brought sun tan lotion.

The lack of lotion was my only regret of the holiday though, as a weekend of virtually unbroken sunshine (a contrast to the rest of the summer) cast a rosy glow over our experience on the water courtesy of Rose Narrowboats, of Stretton-under-Fosse near Rugby in Warwickshire.

As newcomers to narrowboating, we were given a thorough grounding by staff before being set loose. Despite this the 50ft four-berth boat seemed enormous and the canal narrow, so for the first mile or two it felt like trying to steer a juggernaut along a garden path.

However, provided you allowed for the timelag between adjusting the tiller and the vessel responding it was surprising easy to steer. That said, the course needed constant correction and it's a good idea to have a change of hands at the tiller, especially if you're travelling for hours. The 12-ton vessel also took a lot of stopping, so manoeuvres, especially in tight spots,

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had to be carried out carefully and slowly.

Internally, the boat was cosy with its wooden interior and nooks and crannies. For us, it was the floating equivalent of a horse-drawn gypsy caravan, though with central heating, kitchen and plumbing, it was more appropriate for modern holidaymaking.

You also felt a more intimate connection with the boat than a car, given that you had to carry out engine checks and clear the bilges every morning before setting off. The rhythmic thump-thump of the diesel also had a surprisingly soothing effect while you were steering, especially after a couple of glasses of wine or beer. The boat had a loo and shower on board. You may prefer to use facilities onshore where they're available – which was a good excuse to go to the pub.

Mooring too was a revelation. Provided you kept out of certain areas



(clearly marked) you could stop for the night along the bulk of the towpath side of the canal. This allowed us to moor in the middle of the countryside more than a mile away from the nearest settlement and far away from any street lamps or other light pollution. This meant a starry night when we went to bed and a beautiful sunrise the next day.

The real star of the weekend was the British countryside. Perhaps because we were going so slowly we were able to appreciate it more. Our trip from Rose's base to Braunston and back only covered some 30 miles but took in some breathtaking views that could never be appreciated – even if accessed – from a car. It may be largely a legacy of Britain's industrial past but the inland waterway network – if the section we traversed is any guide – allows you to discover some stunning countryside, and the best way to view it is from a boat deck.

This was true even in the urban areas of Rugby we passed through and it was hard to believe that we were in a country of 60 million people. It was significant, too, how quickly we

# slow

**PAUL HANCOCKS** and family ditched the car for the weekend to savour a small section of Britain's extensive canal network on a narrowboat



readjusted to the slower pace of the boat.

Armed with one of the Pearson's Canal Companion guides, we motored to Braunston. The guide was indispensable for working out the distances and journey times involved as well as the number of locks to be negotiated. Bridges en route were numbered, allowing you to keep track of where you were.

Traversing the locks was time-consuming, but the whole rigmarole of waiting to go in, opening the paddles (sluices) and gates, etc, was an additional fun element of the holiday, though with all the heavy wooden lock gates and gearing, they're not places for fooling around.

It may have been a combination of the slower pace and the autumnal sunshine, but the people we encountered were friendly and helpful, ranging from assisting with the locks to simply a cheery wave as we passed by.

There was also an added dimension to the holiday as October 25 marked the 40th anniversary of the passing of the Transport Act. This acknowledged Britain's canal network as a leisure and tourist amenity as opposed to purely

for carrying goods.

The upshot is that our canal network is a national treasure, and it's up to us to appreciate and it make sure the government does too, because if it is allowed to decline then there'll be huge swathes of the countryside that will be inaccessible to the likes of you and I. After all, even if you don't use a narrowboat you can still appreciate the waterways from the towpath.

## FACTFILE

■ We travelled with Rose Narrowboats, members of Drifters Waterway Holidays, a collection of established firms operating 500 boats from 30 different locations across England, Scotland and Wales. Contact them on 08457 626252. Alternatively log on to [drifters.co.uk](http://drifters.co.uk). For ideas for enjoying the waterways, log on to [waterscape.com](http://waterscape.com).

■ Readers can enjoy the following incentive to get out on the water during 2009, if they quote *Castle Wharf Promotions/143*  
 £50 off a part week  
 £100 off a full week  
 £250 off two weeks  
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