

# Take it easy with a canal boat trip

## LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE

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**THEY** had gone from being the vital lifeblood of the nation to clogged arteries, apparently not so much on life support, as at death's door.

Now, though, Britain's canals have become more popular than ever.

And this 21st-century revival of the waterways that transformed transportation in the 18th and 19th centuries isn't down to moving cargo relatively quickly — it's moving people very slowly!

The country's canals have been

by **Bill Gibb**  
taken over by holidaymakers and short-break lovers looking to sample life in the 4mph slow lane.

Recent figures from British Waterways reveal that the record 31,000 boats pottering along last year is even more than at the height of the industrial revolution.

And they've been tempted back by a massive regeneration and restoration programme.

In the past 10 years, 200 miles of new or restored canals have opened, meaning there are now some 2000 miles of watery routes to take to.

And there's more on the way with, for example, a

£600-million regeneration scheme underway on the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal.

And wherever you are, in city or countryside, you can find a waterway within striking distance.

Birmingham, for instance, has one of the most-intricate networks in the world and can be argued to have more miles of canals than Venice.

Of about 160 miles at its peak, 100 miles are still navigable.

They come together at the thriving Gas Street Basin in the city centre, where you can sample smart places to dine or drink.

### Suburban

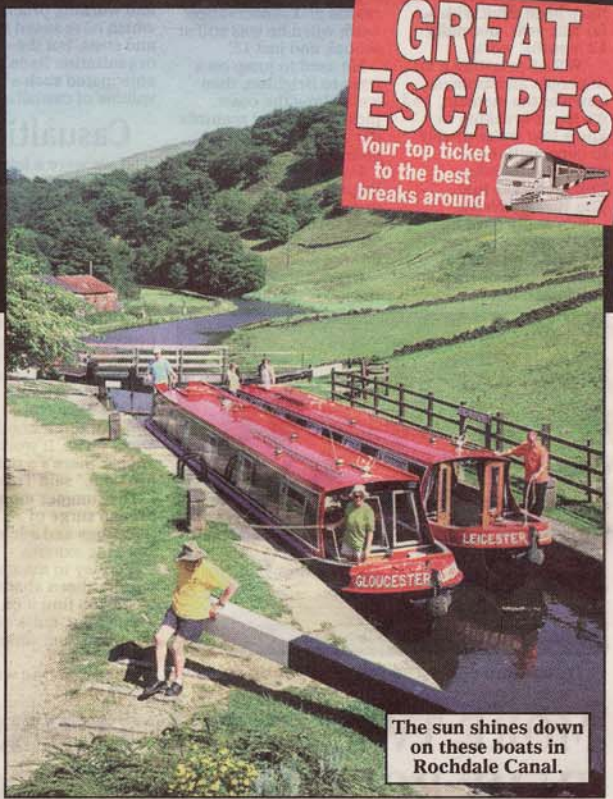
But you can just as easily get away from it all on the windy, suburban routes and some very rural branches.

Even those in London will be aware of a now-thriving waterways network.

And, just 30 miles from the city, you can find yourself in the peace and scenic splendour of the Chiltern Hills.

Those taking to the waters in Scotland can observe a technological marvel, as well as stunning scenery.

Tens of millions of pounds were spent at the start of the new millennium on reopening the 35 miles



The sun shines down on these boats in Rochdale Canal.

and 35 locks of the Forth and Clyde Canal across the country, including Glasgow.

Meanwhile, the Union Canal in the east, taking in capital Edinburgh, has hardly any locks, but does have dramatic viaducts and Scotland's only canal tunnels.

And, for the past six years, you've been able to transfer seamlessly between the two — thanks to the Falkirk Wheel.

It's the world's first rotating boat lift — a major tourist attraction in its own right — that's the height of eight double-decker buses and lifts boats from one canal to another.

Wherever you choose, a large part of the beauty is just taking the wheel and you should have no fears about doing that.

With hire companies investing £60,000 or £70,000 on average in their well-equipped boats, they're not going to let anyone head off in one without a comprehensive grounding.

But it really is easy to pick up — and at just 4mph, high-speed collisions are out of the question anyway!

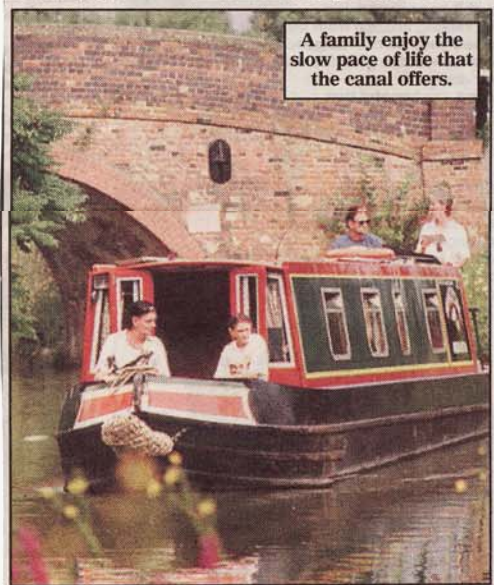
You can hire for long weekends, midweek breaks or full weeks and enjoy thousands of fine canal-side pubs and restaurants, as well as wildlife literally within touching distance.

### Seeker

And if you're still not sure it's an adventure for you, why not follow the example of the big screen's biggest adventure seeker?

Narrowboating got a huge boost when *Indiana Jones* star Harrison Ford introduced actress girlfriend Calista Flockhart to the beauties of the Llangollen Canal in North Wales.

With its famous Pontcysyllte Viaduct, carrying the canal 126 feet above the River Dee, it was obviously a sight to behold, even for Hollywood's A-Listers.



A family enjoy the slow pace of life that the canal offers.

### ✓✓ TRAVELLERS' CHECK ✓✓

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Bill Gibb - August 30 2008

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