



From Only: £91.45 Per Person

Departs: Aug & Sept 2008 For: 2 Days

Buckingham Palace

Visit Buckingham Palace and this year for the first time ever you will see the Ballroom set up for a full State Banquet with a breathtaking display of silver, gilt, fine porcelain and flowers, truly a sight to behold!

Quote Reference: BR020



From Only: £149.95 Per Person

Departs: 25th Apr & 17th Oct 2008 For: 3 Days

Beamish & World's Oldest Existing Railway

This super tour combines a visit to the fascinating Beamish Open Air Museum with a ride on the Tanfield Railway - the world's oldest existing railway, dating back to 1725. It all adds up to a weekend of history, heritage and scenic beauty not to be missed!

Quote Reference: BR061



From Only: £219 Per Person

Departs: 5th July 2008 For: 2 Days

Formula 1 British Grand Prix

What a 2007 season with the most remarkable debut season of any rookie in the history of Formula 1 motor racing - with the incredible Lewis Hamilton achieving nine podiums in his first nine races.

Quote Reference: BR023



From Only: £319 Per Person

Departs: 21st Apr, 12th May & 26th Sept 2008 For: 4 Days

Queen Mother's Secret Garden & The Highlands

A visit to the Castle of Mey, the Queen Mother's 'secret summer home' on Scotland's rugged northernmost coast, is just one of the highlights awaiting you on this great value break to the stunning, unspoilt and, for many, undiscovered north of Scotland.

Quote Reference: BR134

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TRAVEL

A narrow escape



Steady as she goes: Canalboat Sir Belin negotiates another lock

By Jon Bennett

EVERYONE thought I was mad when I told them I was taking my wife and two young daughters on a canalboat long weekend out of season.

"Make sure you take your thermals," seemed to be the stock response. But my head was filled with romance borne from too much of The Wind in the Willows when I was young and, to be honest, I couldn't imagine a better time to be taking this trip than in the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. And I was right.

After an easy jaunt up the M5 to Brewood, just north of Birmingham, our Shropshire canal experience began as we were introduced to the Sir Belin - an eight-berth cruiser that was to become our home for the following three days.

As something of a landlubber, the

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63ft length of this beautiful vessel was nearly enough to put me off before we'd even begun. After all, I was the one expected to become helmsman of this floating behemoth.

Before we had even left our moorings, the children had already made themselves quite at home in their bunks - the novelty value far outweighing the fact that there was little room for manoeuvre on these, the tiniest of beds.

Hot and cold running water, a fully functioning gas cooker and central heating are just a few of the home comforts in the narrowboat, although the lack of mains electricity meant prudent use of electronic devices. My initial horror at not being able to recharge the laptop or the mobile phone was soon assuaged with the realisation I was there to recharge my own batteries.

While my wife put away the provisions in the small, but beautifully formed kitchen, I was not only given a comprehensive "driving" lesson, but also taught how to clear the propeller of leaves, pump out the bilge, and top up with water.

To my utter relief, the yardman came with us as far as the first lock at Wheaton Aston, allowing me to take the helm for the very first time under expert tuition.

After the frantic pace of modern living, it takes a while to get used to the relaxed pace of life on the canals. Four miles per hour is flat out, but 2mph is the accepted norm when passing moored vessels or fishermen.

Steering, however, turns out to be remarkably simple. Just point the tiller in the opposite direction to the way you want to go and wait, wait, wait for the boat to respond.

It is ill-advised to travel at night, so

our first foray into the canal network was curtailed by diminishing light. Having rejected the chance to stay at the designated mooring posts in favour of some independent "driving" practice, it came as something of a shock to find ourselves in the middle of nowhere with only the owls for company.

Any feelings of discomfort soon gave way to the utter tranquility of it all.

Doors bolted and heating on, the Sir Belin was more snug than any hotel room, and no-one, but no-one, knew where we were... Day two saw us make steady progress along the Shropshire Union, experiencing life on the water to its fullest, appreciating the embankments and cuttings that Thomas Telford himself worked so hard to construct.

Passing under a high bridge and into the prodigious Woodseaves Cutting, it feels as if you've entered

Tolkien territory; mosses and ferns flourish in the misty environment, the steep 70ft sides untouched by human hand for many a long year.

We reached Tritel Wharf in the late afternoon and decided to avoid the flight of five locks.

Instead, we turned our vessel around ready for the return journey, moored up and went on foot to watch other, more experienced boaters unravel the mysteries of the Victorian lock system.

It was with sadness that we moored up for the final time at Wheaton Aston. Just as we had come to terms with a carefree life on the water, and with the smell of woodsmoke still heavy in our nostrils, it was time to leave our lovely boat. But as W H Auden wrote: "I have only to close my eyes, cross the iron footbridge to the towpath, take the barge through the short brick tunnel and there I stand in Eden again." Exactly.

FACTFILE

For booking information, contact Drifters via their website at www.drifters.co.uk, or call 08457 626252; Western Daily Press readers can also enjoy the following incentive to get out on the water if they quote Castle Wharf Promotions/Go Boating £50 off a part week, £100 off a full week and £250 off two weeks. This offer cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer: Alternatively, for more great ideas for enjoying the waterways, visit www.waterscape.com



Cosy base: The Bear Hotel, Cowbridge, has a warm atmosphere and friendly service

WEEKEND RETREAT

Former coaching inn filled with character

The Bear Hotel, 63 High Street, Cowbridge, South Wales. Tel: 01446 774814; fax: 01446 775425; website: www.bearhotel.com

STEEPED in history this charming country hotel is full of character and is right in the heart of the affluent county town of Cowbridge, near Cardiff.

It's so central that, at one time, the stagecoaches stopped here to change the horses on the mail run between the Welsh capital and Swansea. Although ideally placed to explore South Wales, you could opt for a quiet weekend strolling around the town known for its restaurants, specialist shops and upmarket boutiques.

more than 30 en-suite, individually decorated rooms, and two have four-poster beds. We had one of the cosy rooms in the attic which had a dormer window seat where you could sit and watch the world go by below on the High Street. There was a flat-screen satellite TV and tea- and coffee-making facilities. The room couldn't be described as spacious but the modern, impressive bathroom with separate shower was almost as big again.

What else can you do? Enjoy a quiet drink or light meal in the lounge or watch the rugby on TV in the bustling bar. There is also a quiet area known as the Cockpit to relax.

What's on the menu? What isn't? The recently refurbished Bear Pit with arched stone roof has come a long way since Napoleon's troops were reputedly held there after a failed invasion in the 18th century and is now an elegant, intimate restaurant with an extensive menu catering for all tastes. The chef makes full use of local produce and there is a strong Welsh flavour to many of the dishes. The self-service Welsh breakfast seems to mean everything from full English to toast and cereal and you get a proper pot of tea.

How do you get there? Drive. It's probably easy to get as far as Cardiff by bus or train but after that, the last leg by public transport might prove difficult. From Bristol head down the M4 and take the second Severn crossing. Stay on the M4 until junction 33. Take the first junction towards Barry. At the roundabout, take the fourth exit on to the A48 towards Cowbridge, which is on the A422. The Bear is on the High Street which runs through the bustling town. The large residents' car park is to the rear of the hotel.

First impressions: Oh no, I've packed all the wrong clothes. At first glance, this stone 12th-century coaching inn with sash windows oozes country comfort, but don't be surprised if you turn up to find well-heeled guests in dinner jackets and ball gowns spilling out of the flagstone bar and on to the pavement. The Georgian ballroom, with high ceilings and chandeliers is a very popular venue for functions and weddings and the Cowbridge clientele don't do high street fashion. Don't worry. On both nights we stayed there silk dresses and bow ties soon disappeared into the sumptuous, soundproofed function rooms and we didn't feel uncomfortable sitting down to dinner in jeans.

What are the rooms like? There are



A room: Each is individually decorated

How much does it cost? Double rooms range between £95 and £130 but the hotel is offering a winter deal, which includes March of £110 per night for a double room, dinner and full Welsh breakfast.

The verdict: Whether you want to trolley around the country or coastal lanes in the pretty Vale of Glamorgan, take a bracing stroll along the prom in the Victorian seaside town of Portchaw or head for Cardiff, this AA three-star hotel provides a cosy base for a weekend away. It's perhaps not quite as plush as the well-maintained exterior suggests but it has a bustling, warm atmosphere, friendly service and good food.

JANET HUGHES



Easter fun: Hunt eggs on the Isle of Wight

Destinations

THREE-NIGHT break, with breakfast, at three-star Metropole Hotel, St Helier, in Jersey, costs £149 per adult and £85 per child, based on two adults and two children under 12, valid until March 31 (not Easter). Includes foot-passenger crossing on Condor Fast Cat from Weymouth on a Monday or Friday, and transfers. Details: 01534 735511; www.modernhotels.com

SEE Liverpool during an Easter weekend break. Stay in city-centre self-catering apartments near to Tate Liverpool, the Beatles Story and Merseyside Maritime Museum. Three nights in a two-bedroom flat, sleeping four between March 21-24, costs £385 (saving £50). Details: 0845 122 0465; www.sacoapartments.co.uk

VISIT the Scilly Isles, 29 miles south-west of Land's End, and stay in Hell Bay. Dinner, B&B costs from £89pp per night. Valid on new bookings until March 31. Details: 01720 422947; www.hellbay.co.uk

THREE-NIGHT break for up to six persons in North Devon costs £175 (saving £100) at Woolacombe Bay Holiday Park, from March 14. Stay in a three-bedroom lodge. Site has heated indoor pool, golf, tennis and 10-pin bowling, plus entertainment. Details: 01271 870343; www.woolacombe.co.uk



Scenic: Head for the Scilly Isles

COMBINE a stay at the Balmoral Hotel, in Edinburgh, with opera at the Playhouse, where La Traviata and Madame Butterfly will be performed, April 10-12. A dinner, B&B package from £290 per room, per night, includes dinner, breakfast, plus use of spa (treatments extra). Opera tickets booked in advance through the operator. Details: 0900 888 040; www.roccoortcollection.com

STAY at Low Penhowe B&B, in Malton, a traditional stone-built farmhouse with views of