

travel

Our voyage with the boat people

Do you have trouble winding down on holiday? Martin Ross samples a break where you have no choice but to take it easy

Most people fancy the idea of a narrow boat holiday but, perhaps apprehensive about all the palaver of locks, tillers and windlasses, never get round to taking one.

Well, I can happily report that there's absolutely nothing to be apprehensive about. This is based on the fact that over the space of our four days afloat no one drowned, we didn't crash into anything (too seriously) and we didn't sink. Nor, I should point out, did we offend any of the seasoned veterans who live on the waterways with our bumbling inexperience – well, there was that one man shouting at us from a bridge as we frantically tried to avoid bumping into some moored vessels. He may well have just been offering his assistance but we couldn't make out what he was saying over the roar of the engine and because we were already shouting at each other on the boat.

Our narrow boat was supplied by Anglo-Weish Waterway Holidays, part of a consortium of inland waterways holiday providers going under the name of Drifters who provide waterways holidays the length and breadth of Britain.

Anglo-Weish operate from nine bases that stretch from Cheshire as far south as Bath and like most waterways holiday providers offer boats in various sizes for as little or as long as you fancy. The welcoming staff at the Anglo-Weish office strategically sited at Bunbury Locks in Cheshire run through everything you need to know about navigating the canals and locks, show you where everything is on your craft and explain how it all works. After that introduction you're left to your own devices. Surprisingly – especially when you consider how much there is to remember – there's no special licence required to man the tiller of a regular canal-going vessel.

The first hour piloting the narrow boat on your own isn't so much a baptism of fire as a baptism over a low heat.

The first thing to grasp is that there are no handbrake turns or emergency stops here. If you want the boat to turn or slow down it has to be given a few minutes warning. It's a little like the delay between asking an eleven-year-old to do something and them actually doing it.

That's not surprising, when you consider the size of the craft. Between where the pilot sits at the back, to the fore deck where the tools are stored, our 56ft vessel comfortably accommodated a double bedroom and wardrobe, bathroom, fully fitted kitchen, dining area (which converts into another double bed) and TV lounge.

Of course, the fact that you have to take your time is the real attraction of this sort of holiday. No matter how adept you are at keeping up with your fast moving and frantic day-to-day life at home, those skills won't get you anywhere here. You have to slow down, take your time, get methodical. If things go wrong you don't run your motors to get out of trouble, you slip into neutral, get the ropes out and use good old elbow grease to solve the problem.

"Brute force and ignorance rarely solves anything" one seasoned waterways dweller observed after watching our attempt to forcibly get the narrow boat into a lock while being sucked sideways against the sill of the by-weir. Slowing down is an important step in getting into a holiday frame of mind, so just by getting on a narrow boat you're well on your way to getting away from it all. You soon start to appreciate the simpler pleasures of life and it gets to be a pleasantly meditative experience cruising gently along a meandering stretch of waterway, birds twittering in the hedgerows, cows chewing

blankly on rolling green pastures, the engine chugging reassuringly beneath your feet. That's the pace we settled into as we headed from Bunbury up to Barbridge Junction. There we moored by the Barbridge Inn, savouring a few pints of Old Peculier before retiring to our boat for a good night's sleep.

The following morning we turned right onto the Llangollen canal at Hurleston Junction. Here you are immediately met with four daunting locks that'll lift your boat over 34ft. Fortunately there's also the welcoming sight of a lock keeper, whose friendly help and cautionary tales of small

children being clocked on the nose by flying windlasses are greatly appreciated as you put into practice what you learned the day before, heaving the mighty wooden gates open and shut, raising and lowering the 'paddles', blasting the huge quantities of water into and out of the locks. Then we were on our own negotiating the next five locks ourselves as we made gentle progress to the picturesque Wrenbury. Here, by the canal wharf, old mills and pub, you get out your British Waterways keys (a vital piece of equipment that opens up all sorts of useful things like water tap boxes) and operate the electrified bridge, simultaneously activating warning sirens and closing the road to traffic until you've made your way through. After all the gentle cruising it's almost unbearably exciting.

Once you're through you'll find the friendly Cotton Arms pub is well prepared for hungry boaters with food on offer all day (and that all important selection of real ale).

From Wrenbury it was up the winding point (pronounced the same way as making a baby burp) where there is a section of canal broad enough to do a U-turn. We slowly turned the narrow boat round.

If we had had the time (probably a fortnight) we would have carried on upstream, up six more locks to a long lock-free stretch that leads to the frankly terrifying Pontcysyllte Aqueduct that carries your boat 120ft over a precipitous drop to the River Dee before your final approach to Llangollen. Maybe next year!

This time, though, it was a gentle return to Bunbury for us. Now adjusted to the different pace we allowed ourselves plenty of time. Suffice to say, we were a little late back.

Of course, it wasn't a big problem – there's little on the waterways that is. If you do get in to difficulty the chances are you'll meet some nice people as a result, get some good advice and, more often than not, a helping pair of hands. One lock keeper was unperturbed by our blatant attempt to destroy his wall. "It's a contact sport," he ruminated.



INSIDE STORY: A typical narrow boat interior

factfile

- Martin Ross's holiday was courtesy of DRIFTERS – a consortium of award-winning holiday boat companies. www.drifters.co.uk. Tel 08457 626252.
- Find great ideas for enjoying the waterways on www.waterscape.com
- Readers can enjoy the following discounts if they quote 'Castle Wharf Promotions/Go Boating' at the time of booking – £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.



LAZY DAYS: Watching the world glide by

