

The Daily Telegraph



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Canal boat holiday: Fast route to relaxation

Early anxieties are soon dispelled as Max Davidson enjoys an idyllic journey along Northamptonshire's canals.

"Just turn the ignition to the left... diesel tank... wait for 20 seconds... as soon as the yellow light comes on... remember to check the weed hatch... macerator lavatory... the switch over there... bilge pump... we do ask you to remember... engine coolant... every night without fail... water filler tank... should you happen to smell gas... isolation valve... bright red lid... the bottom of the spanner, which is also..."

Crikey! This is supposed to be a relaxing weekend in the country but, five minutes into the on-board safety briefing, I can feel my heart pounding. There's no way I can remember all this.

I have got a frankly amateurish crew: my partner Julia, a landlubber friend called Fiona and a delinquent dalmatian, Milo. And although the Red Poll looks pretty as a picture, and not too humongous compared to some of the other boats on the canal, she is not immune from disaster, not with me at the helm. I would rather be back in my car, whizzing up the M40.

We may be going at only 2mph, inching out of the Gayton Marina in Northamptonshire on to the Grand Union Canal, but the boat is 50ft long – the size of a large lorry – and the steering is a nightmare. You move the tiller to the left if you want to go right, to the right if you want to go left, and vice versa if you want to reverse. Crazy.

Mercifully, my anxieties prove short-lived, just an attack of first-night nerves. By the time we have chugged along the canal for a couple of hundred yards and gone around a bend or two, I am feeling relaxed, in control, even confident.

Did I say I'd rather be back in my car? Fool! The waters glide past, the wind rustles the trees and, all around us, there is a deep peace. A heron watches our progress, nodding its head, as if in approval. We pass a cornfield, a bridge, a couple of old cottages. I no longer feel nervous: I feel privileged. And judging by the boom in canal use – up 13 per cent in the past year – thousands of others feel the same way.

After years in the doldrums, when many parts of the network fell into disuse, canals are suddenly sexy again, in tune with the times. To the stressed-out modern traveller, fretting about everything from fuel taxes to carbon footprints, there could be no more beguiling way to enjoy life in the slow lane, savouring the English countryside, English waterways, but also savouring something else – our industrial heritage.

The Red Poll has not even got as far as the first pub before I have to navigate Blisworth tunnel, the third longest in Britain. Dank, narrow, murky, it is nearly two miles long, took more than 10 years to construct and, when finally completed in 1805, provided a crucial link between London and the industrial Midlands. No great engineering skills were required – just picks, shovels, wheelbarrows and gunpowder. But as you creep, blinking, through it – feeling like a sewer rat – you take off your hat to the men who built it.

At the other end of the tunnel is Stoke Bruerne, a pretty canalside village, bustling with pubs and eateries. Pre-dinner, we drop into the excellent Canal Museum, a treasure trove of canal memorabilia, from painted watering-cans to old photographs of canal people between the wars: living and dying on their boats; poor in economic terms but rich in comradeship.

More than 200 years of history scroll past, from the great engineers and visionaries of the 18th century to the "Canal Nurse", Sister Mary Ward, who ran a lockside surgery for more than 50 years and died aged 87 in 1972.

Canals, like everything else, have their own language, their own quaint local customs. “Live-aboards” are the travellers of the waterways, simultaneously reviled and romanticised. “Gongoozlers” are the loafers who hang around locks and towpaths, offering unsolicited advice. I had heard of gongoozlers: now I am about to meet them.

“Left hand down a bit,” shouts a man with a pint of beer in his hand, as I steer the Red Poll into the first lock on our journey. “No, right hand!” shouts another man.

As Julia and Fiona close the lock gates, then wind up the “paddles” which regulate the flow of water in and out of the lock, the crowd of hangers-on swells to double figures: good-natured all, but quite prepared to laugh their heads off if we run the boat aground or get stuck. It is a relief to get through the lock, moor the boat and make a beeline for the pub.

What a gloriously lazy lifestyle! You have to sacrifice one or two home comforts. Our fold-down bed is on the narrow side and, in the morning, when I ask a fisherman the way to the nearest newsagent, he looks stupefied. He thinks that, if I go right and then left, walk four miles, then... I have to settle for coffee, bacon and eggs, then a walk along the towpath with Milo. But it’s such a beautiful morning, with the sun dappling the trees beside the canal, and the ducks and the moorhens gliding through the shadows, that I don’t miss my papers.

Is the FTSE up or down? Did Chelsea win? Is Gordon Brown still Prime Minister? I don’t know and I don’t care. We are only 10 miles from Milton Keynes but it feels like 10 million, here in the slow lane, with our new friends.

For a county not known for its scenery, Northamptonshire viewed from the canal is gloriously unspoilt: rolling farmland, punctuated by the odd weather-worn village. A flag of St George flutters above a church tower. Cows plod across a field to their water trough. There is a smell of wild flowers and newly-mown hay.

But the human scenery is even more eye-catching. Every boat we pass – from the rust-buckets festooned with flowers to the sleek new 60-footers with satellite dishes – is deliciously individual. The very names are evocative: Third Time Lucky; The Lady Godiva; His ‘n’ Hers; Doubting Thomas; Haggis Hunter...

“How do you hunt haggis?” I shout to the lady at the helm.

“We’re still trying to find out!” she shouts back.

There is a human warmth on the canal you never find on the high street. People wave, smile, stop to talk, as if they have got all the time in the world – which, of course, they have. If they were in a hurry, they wouldn’t be here, in this watery Eden, where nothing moves faster than a kingfisher swooping through the reeds. Pure bliss.

As we moor the boat on Monday morning, before hurtling back home down the motorway, I make a mental audit of the weekend. The figures speak for themselves.

Parking tickets: 0. Speeding fines: 0. Hours spent in tailbacks on motorway: 0. Hours spent going through airport security: 0.

Number of times one of us has given a sigh of contentment, and exclaimed, “This is the life!”: Countless.

- Three-night short breaks on a canal boat, departing from a number of locations throughout Great Britain, cost from £367 with Drifters (www.drifters.co.uk, 08457 626252), a consortium of holiday boat companies. Week-long breaks cost from £565.
- For some great ideas for enjoying the waterways, see www.waterscape.com.
- The Canal Museum at Stoke Bruerne (01604 862229) is open daily from 10am-5pm in the summer. Entry: adult £4.75, child/concession £3.25, family £12.