

Canal Boating: Barging through England by Narrowboat

The only sound as the narrowboat slides through the canal is the faint lapping of water against its bow. Occasionally ducks and swans halfheartedly complain, their feathers ruffled by the small wake sweeping along the stone banks. Even at the bow of the boat, the source of propulsion some 60 feet to the rear cannot be heard.

With a speed limit of just 4 mph, a trip aboard one of Britain's thousands of canal boats offers plenty of time for a good look at the countryside and fascinating urban architecture while relaxing with family and friends.

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This all became possible 250 years ago with the opening of what is now considered Britain's first purpose-built canal. Its function was to supply coal from the Lancashire heartlands of northern England for the furnaces of Liverpool's chemical industries. For the next 150 years, thousands of miles were dug, filled with water and populated with specially built barges to transport materials, finished goods and the families of those needed to operate the boats.

Railways eventually replaced the canals as a lifeline for industry, as smart money was invested in the newer, faster and cheaper technology. The canals carried less traffic and fell into neglect.

But in the mid-20th century, enterprising businessmen saw the potential for a new kind of vacation experience. They began to rent and sell traditional-style narrowboats to people eager to explore Britain's watery back roads. Town planners who once considered the murky waterways a headache and eyesore began to realize their potential attraction. Former bankside factories and warehouses became popular as urban places to live. In London, Oxford, York and Chester — where it was once necessary to negotiate the canals with a police escort — the 2,300 miles of waterways became blossoming heritage, residential and entertainment districts.

And narrowboats became the preferred way to explore them.

Narrowboats are covered barges, equipped with living quarters and a small motor. They are built for narrow canals, and are no more than seven feet wide. They are slow, cumbersome creatures that demand advance preparation when a change in direction is required, but for the most part are not difficult to operate. In about 30 minutes, rental companies can teach the fundamentals for piloting the boats and making daily inspections to ensure all is running smoothly. Operators are then let loose with the 14-ton vessels with enough fuel to last the rental period.

John and Liz Gregory, who rent boats at Snaygill Boat Hire in North Yorkshire, are well-versed in teaching the fundamentals to the inexperienced.



"Oh yes, we get lots of first-timers," says Liz Gregory. "Once they've settled in we give them lessons on the simple workings and accompany them through the first set of locks and swing bridges."

For first-time canal vacationers, locks are the biggest challenge. Beginners will break into a sweat either in anticipation of that first encounter or the exertions needed to get through one. On most canals, these simple yet marvelous feats of engineering are unavoidable and while at first the mechanism and principles of gravity can seem intimidating, they are soon easily mastered. (A lock raises boats up and down hills and valleys of water by entering a chamber and letting water in or out to raise or lower the boat accordingly).

It's almost guaranteed that locks eventually will become something to look forward to, since the rest of the time piloting the vessels is fairly uneventful.

Dominic Carr of Manchester, England, calls his first canal holiday "An almost a Zen-like experience."

Holding onto the tiller at the back, you find yourself endlessly staring at the front, which is almost hypnotic. The peace and gentle pace just shrugs all the pressure off.

"We had come with two other couples and the boys wanted to start steering straight away, while the women kept busy in the galley bringing up coffee and sandwiches. It was like the 'Stepford Wives' until my wife, Caroline, had enough and insisted it was her turn to have a go at 'driving.' "

Coasting through woodlands and past small villages, you can stop whenever and wherever you wish. Bikes and fishing rods are popular equipment to take along, and when it's time to pull over you can either go cycling inland or go after some carp, perch, trout, pike and perch. To give the galley a rest, there are plenty of pubs and restaurants en route that are happy to let boaters tie up, take a glass of

something and sample the local specialities.

Most of these inns were the roadhouses of their day, built to cater to the 18th- and 19th-century passing trade when canal building was at its peak. Thirsty for ale and company, the often lonely boatmen would be grateful to relax with companions — a tradition still very much part of a canal experience.

Indeed, it almost seems written into bylaws that the canal folk who live along or spend most of their time around these waters cannot pass anyone without some friendly engagement or at least a greeting, even with those out for a walk along the accompanying paths (Gongoozlers in canal speak).

One of the most popular routes for scenery, wildlife and history is the 231-year-old Shropshire Union Canal. Scattered along its lengths are a number of boat yards renting narrowboats for the day, week or longer.

Near the banks of the canal, which runs along the Welsh and English borders, is one of the most unusual tourist attractions in the U.K.— the Hack Green Secret Nuclear Bunker. Built in the 1950s, the huge complex buried deep beneath the countryside was set up as a shelter for military and local officials who would run the country in the event of a nuclear strike during the Cold War. Its warren of rooms, equipment and furnishings have been left virtually unchanged since it closed in 1966. It is an eerie insight into just how close the West came to nuclear war.

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