

The joy of going straight

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There is nothing like exploring the UK's inland waterways to take the stress out of life, says **Sarah Meyrick**

IT IS the Water Rat who puts his finger on it. "There is nothing — absolutely nothing — half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats," he tells Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*.

"Nothing seems really to matter, that's the charm of it. Whether you get away, or whether you don't; whether you arrive at your destination or whether you reach somewhere else, or whether you never get anywhere at all, you're always busy, and you never do anything in particular; and when you've done it there's always something else to do, and you can do it if you like, but you'd much better not."

Ratty's vessel may have been a skiff rather than a narrowboat, but it is still the most eloquent description of the joys of life afloat. First-timers sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that a canal holiday is about distance travelled, or locks ticked off; old hands know that too fixed an idea about the destination will almost inevitably lead to frustration and disappointment.

For one thing, the speed limit is four miles per hour, and even this is excessive if you are going past moored boats. (Going any faster damages the bank irreparably, and will lead to unforgiving glares.) For another, everything always takes longer than it should. There's passing traffic to negotiate, fishing lines to avoid, mooring-up to master, and mud to get stuck in.

At busy times of the year, you will almost certainly have to wait your turn at locks. But forget drumming your fingers on the tiller — this is the moment that most people put on the kettle and chew the fat with their fellow boaters.

In my experience, most canal- users display enormous courtesy and good humour (although, of course, boat-owners tend to sneer, just a little, at those in hire boats). And, since day-to-day life is so hectic, the enforced slowing of pace is very therapeutic, whether you are at the controls or on deck with a paperback.

It is all pleurably undemanding, while simultaneously offering decisions just absorbing enough — lunch before or after the next lock? stop at this pub or the next one? — to enable the boater to switch off from whatever has been left at home.

Britain has an impressive 2200 miles of inland waterways, rich in history and abundant in wildlife. British Waterways estimates that half the population lives within five miles of one of our canals and rivers, and as many as 11 million people use them every year, in one way or another.

Getting to know the network offers a fascinating insight into Britain's industrial heritage. Constructing the canals required impressive feats of engineering, and their impact on communities was often as dramatic as the arrival of the railways.

Once you have used the canal to travel from A to B, your mental map subtly shifts. My children, when small, were particularly delighted when asked in a transport survey how they had travelled to a city centre, and the questioner had to create a brand-new "boat" category, just for them.

For many years, our boat, *Noah's Ark*, provided the ideal family escape from the vicarage. It was moored only a few miles from home (three miles by canal, further by road), which meant we could snatch a couple of hours, or an overnight stay, if there was no time for an extended expedition.

Our children got to know our bit of the Oxford Canal like the back of their hands; at one stage, our son could list, in order, all 43 locks (depth and ease of use noted).

The highs include the magic of the early-morning mist rising over the landscape when no one else was around, and the frequent sighting of kingfishers, herons, and swans. There was the thrill of creeping into our first tunnel, headlamp on, alert to the elusive glimpse of light at the other end. There was the adrenaline rush of navigating the 21-flight of locks at Hatton with another family; and the week we visited both Warwick Castle and Stratford-upon-Avon by boat. Along the way, friends would join us for the day or for a meal in one of the many wonderful canal-side pubs.

The lows were mostly associated with the weather — although our tiny wood-burning stove meant that winter trips were entirely possible, and often very special as we heard the ice crack. At times, confined to a small space, we all became a bit stir-crazy, and had to pile out on to the towpath to walk or cycle off excess energy.

Then, suddenly, we outgrew it, literally: limbs seemed too long, tempers too short, and the maintenance/pleasure ratio reversed. *Noah's Ark* now belongs to another (clergy) family; I regularly see her from the train, and smile. We, meanwhile, have discovered other canals, and other ways of enjoying them. And yes, Mole, in answer to your question, it really is “so nice as all that”.

Take five: canal breaks: Phillippa Greenwood **and** Martine O'Callaghan **pick five canal holidays**

Hotel narrowboats or barges

It is the great gentle break. During the day, choose whether to pick up a glass of wine or a windlass, and after dusk let someone else make dinner and do the washing up.

Hotel boats usually operate with an intimate, family-run ethos, and there's always a warm welcome. The random risk of whom you share your boat with is part of the buzz, but if you think that sounds too ghastly, some boats offer group bookings.

Reed Boats: A four-star traditional hotel-boat pair, run by a retired cleric. Sleeps eight. Phone 07977 229103, or visit www.reedboats.co.uk

European Waterways (Go Barging): Luxury all-inclusive hotel barges in the UK and Europe. Phone 01784 482439, or visit www.gobarging.com

Takara (formerly Wool Owl): Single narrowboat. Sleeps four. Phone 07981 798272, or visit www.hotelboat.co.uk

Waterside camping

A steep hill along the Kennet and Avon Canal transforms into an amazing 16-lock experience at Caen Hill. Whether you experience it by boat, bike, boot, or wheelchair, it is one of Wiltshire's many “magical” highlights. The towpath along this stretch is particularly well maintained for easy, year-round cycling and walking. Lower Foxhangers Farm sits canalside at the bottom of the

flight, and offers everything from a pitch for your tent to self-catering mobile homes, narrowboat hire, and even B&B in the farmhouse.

More details: Phone 01380 828254, or visit www.foxhangers.com

Working holiday

The Waterways Recovery Group organises canal camps throughout the year with weekend or week-long working holidays. You will be helping to restore derelict canals, doing anything from driving digger-trucks to clearing muck from lock gates or cooking for about 20 other campers. Roll up your sleeves and muck in — there is a job for everyone, no matter what your skills are. Do your bit for the canals, and have the time of your life.

More details: Phone 01494 783453, or visit www.wrg.org.uk

Ceilidh on the water

If a narrowboat holiday on the tranquil waterways of England is not enough for you, you might like a barge on the Caledonian Canal in the Scottish Highlands. Throw in some wild Gaelic music, and a ceilidh holiday aboard the Fingal of Caledonia, and it could become the ultimate experience. It promises sublime scenery, too.

More details: Phone 01397 772167, or visit www.fingal-cruising.co.uk

Ride Llangollen to Pontcysyllte

It is only a short day's ride, but pack your toothbrush — you'll want to stay. A handful of water-miles crams enough excitement to fill a holiday. High above town, Llangollen Wharf is usually busy with boats, people, and horses. But follow the towpath out of town and you'll discover a lonelier landscape with only sheep, herons, and soaring kites for company. When you reach the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, dismount to brave the slim towpath hugging the water with 127-foot drops either side. More details: visit www.waterscape.com

Phillippa Greenwood and Martine O'Callaghan are the authors of *Cool Canals: Slow getaways and different days* (Coolcanals Guides, £14.99 (£13.50); 978-0-9560699-0-0)