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Journey time: Four days

Don't be put off narrowboating by its lack of glitz, or even by that dread term "chemical toilet". I've been on four barging weekends and they have all been brilliant fun. Enforced relaxation might seem an odd idea, but slowness is what it's all about. You watch the tops of hedges and fields go smoothly and surreally by, you nod and smile at other bargers, you lie on top of the boat - and your blood pressure drops to a pleasant state of near-catatonia.

Some embrace the geekiness of piloting the barge: the challenge, say, of turning the boat at a tight "winding hole". But what I like best is the canal-side pubs. Imagine the scene. You are doing nothing and feeling super-relaxed, and then what? You have a few drinks sitting in a pub garden and feel happier still.

The Caldon Canal near Stoke - where we found ourselves most recently - is one of the most picturesque in the country. Don't fret when, on leaving Stoke, you find that the journey starts amid bleak suburbia. Soon enough things get bucolic and you find yourself gliding down the narrowest of waterways with willows overhanging one bank and swathes of Himalayan balsam on the other.

There's plenty for those wanting a hit of industrial nostalgia: the aqueduct at Hazelhurst, the steam train at Cheddleton, the marvellous cracked wooden paddles and winding mechanisms of every lock gate (yes, locks do feature a lot on a barge trip). But if that all gets too much, and you're even fed up with doing nothing, moor the boat at a remote spot, turn up the stereo, and dance on the towpath.

Merope Mills

•For canal boat hire, contact Drifters Waterway Holidays (0845 762 6252; drifters.co.uk). Find great ideas for enjoying the waterways at waterscape.com