

Going slow on the Shropshire Union Canal



Mooring is plentiful and almost always free. Canalside pubs are always popular

by [David Cawley](#), a Travel Professional

Hiring a narrow boat for a trip along Britain's canals is a lovely, leisurely way to holiday, and the Shropshire Union Canal is one of the best to go for - as long as you're not too superstitious...

"We are not amused," reputedly grumbled Queen Victoria when passing through the locks of the just-opened Caledonian Canal in northern Scotland. Today, it's quite the contrary. With a speed limit of a giddy 4mph, one of the quickest ways to slow down in Britain is to take temporary hold of a candy-striped tiller aboard one of Britain's thousands of **canal narrow boats**. It's fantastic fun, completely absorbing and, better yet, not difficult to do at all.

The Shroppie

If just hiring a boat isn't enough, why not add an extra little frisson to the adventure by travelling along Britain's most haunted canal? Built in the early 19th century, the **Shropshire Union Canal**, or "Shroppie", winds 67 miles from **Ellesmere Port** near Liverpool through the historic splendour of **Chester**, across the verdant, gently rolling countryside of **Cheshire**, **Staffordshire** and **Shropshire** to its conclusion near **Wolverhampton**.

Many of its structures can be credited to the engineering genius of Sir Thomas Telford, and it comes with its fair share of locks and architectural curiosities. It's also part of the **Cheshire Ring** around northwest England, a circular cruise route that means it is possible, given enough time and fair wind, to head north, skirt the scenic beauty of the **Pennines** and venture into the heart of **Manchester** for some high-end culture or high-octane nightlife.

Spine-tingling experiences

When the mix of glorious countryside, fascinating architecture and urban things to do becomes too much, some may want to pursue the Shroppie's more unworldly attractions. There are at least four ghosts associated with this canal, from the ghostly apparition of a **Roman centurion**, seen guarding the former entrance to the city of Chester, to the spirit of an **American WWII pilot** who crashed near the canal at Church Eaton in Staffordshire.

The best-known and perhaps most disturbing phantom is said to be "**The Monkey Man**", a former boatman who drowned by bridge 39, just outside Norbury, in the 19th century. Witnessed by a number of people over the past 100 years (most recently in 2002), the ghost has been described as a strange black creature with enormous eyes.

Betton Cutting, near Market Drayton, has always had a dark reputation among boating people - a shrieking spectre has been seen and heard here, as well as a more amicable apparition who is said to help push boats through Tyrley middle lock.

For a palpably spine-tingling experience of a different kind, one of the most unusual tourist attractions found anywhere in the UK sits close to the Shroppie's banks: **Hack Green Secret Nuclear Bunker**. Built in the 1950s, this huge complex buried deep beneath the folds of the countryside was for military and local officials to run the country from in the event of a nuclear strike during the Cold War. Its vast warren of rooms, equipment and furnishings has been left virtually unchanged since it closed in 1966, creating an eerie atmosphere and giving an insight into just how close the West came to nuclear Armageddon.

Learning the ropes

Haunted or otherwise, locks are where most first-timers might get anxious. On most canals, these simple yet marvellous **feats of engineering** are unavoidable and can be intimidating. But after initial encounters, they soon become something to look forward to, and are great places to meet fellow boaters and walkers as you wait to pass through. Raising and lowering the paddles and pushing on the lock gates can also be a great way to compensate for doing very little else all day except unwind and admire the slowly passing vistas.

Boat-hire companies such as www.drifters.co.uk are well versed in teaching newbies the extremely **simple fundamentals**, along with the daily checks needed for a smooth inland voyage. After only half an hour's tuition, first-time hirers are cheerfully let loose into the British landscape with up to 60 foot and 14 tons of narrow boat beneath them. Unlike their bygone working predecessors, narrow boats in the 21st century come fully equipped with **all mod cons**, right down to the garlic press. The most complicated thing to master on board will be the flat screen TV/DVD, while the oven, heating, shower and toilets offer no more challenges than those found at home. The fuel and water tanks are filled, and with wine, beer and food (bought by you in advance) cramming every available space in the galley, you're ready to discover the freedom of the open waterways.

Sociable side

This is a perfect way for a group of friends or family to spend some - albeit cosy – time together. It doesn't take long for everyone on board to find their feet and soon the whole crew will want to get involved with the steering and lock-negotiating. Boats can moor just about anywhere along the canal banks and, better yet, most pubs have **dedicated facilities** for narrow boats. Indeed, stopping at these equivalents of motorway service stations for a drink and something to eat is a tradition going back for centuries. Many of the pubs have accommodation, providing some the chance to spend the night in the privacy of a room with its own real bed and private ensuite bathroom.

Two of the pub highlights on the Shropshire Union Canal are **The Anchor** at High Offley, which offers real ale in authentic, unpretentious surroundings to the many who pass by, and **The Shroppie Fly** in Audlem, which is popular with those looking for some fine wholesome food in picture-postcard village surroundings.

Then there are the **canal folk** themselves. It almost seems written into law that the people who live on, or spend most of their time around, these waters cannot be expected to pass anyone without some friendly greeting. In fact, nearly all boat owners will be more than happy to lend a hand or offer advice if they find you in some kind of canal conundrum.

Canal mania, it seems, is back, and stronger than ever. So pick a part of Britain that you fancy exploring, and it's more than likely that you'll find a canal there waiting to be discovered. Just look out for ghosts along the way...

Recommendations

Useful contacts

National waterways information sites: www.waterscape.com;
www.canaljunction.com

Contact Drifters (a consortium of 'award winning' holidays)
and quote 'Castle Wharf' for discounts on boat hire,
www.drifters.co.uk (Tel: 0844 984 0322)

