

Time out on the Grand Union Canal

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Peaceful mornings on a canal boat holiday

Once an industrial transport system, Britain's waterways have been taken over by a legion of boaters infatuated with the romance of narrow boat travel.

Natasha von Geldern dips a toe in the water and discovers the truly relaxed joys of a canal boat holiday in the UK.

We nosed out of the marina and into a watery world of brightly painted boats with glinting brass fittings - and even more colourful characters. Through quiet fields of half-grown wheat, past villages where garden lawns reach down to the water, and along green corridors where trees kiss across the canal.

On the towpath the wild flowers were in full bloom, with man-high hemlock and child-high cow parsley fringing the views to fields of bright rapeseed and boutique flocks of rare-breed sheep.

Britain's canals were key players during the industrial revolution - used for fast carriage of large volumes of manufactured goods and raw materials when the roads were not in any state to be much use. From the mid-19th century railways and later road vehicles presaged the decline of the network but the popularity of leisure boating from the 1950s onwards has seen the saving and restoration of many canals in the UK.

We deliberately chose a route that allowed a day's cruising before we had to deal with any locks.



It wasn't long before the boys were having discussions about whether "this is the top speed" and whether more water ballast would improve the handling. But really, chugging along at five miles per hour there is not much to do but enjoy the view and try to pick the best canal boat name. As well as the expected selection of women's names, flowers, and Wind in the Willows allusions, there are philosophical names – 'Solace', 'Satisfaction', 'Reality'. Hippy names like 'Dream Catcher', cutesy names like 'Piglet' and 'Dizzy Duck' and whimsical canal boat names like 'Me 'an 'er'.

There seem to be different classes of canal boater as well, from newby weekenders to old sea dogs. Long termers have private moorings with picket fences and petunias (and garden gnomes). There is a whole community out there of people having a great time messing about in boats. We clearly fell within the first category and were firmly put in our place by a died-in-the-wool narrow-boater when we came to our first lock. Yes, after five or six hours of gentle cruising it was time for action. The Buckby Flight has seven locks and rises over 19 metres to the Braunston Summit.

I had quietly imagined the boys would do most of the work (I was, literally, holding the baby after all) but with the old-timer directing them ashore I found myself in sole charge at the tiller. Initially I thought the old fellow with his rough little blue boat must be cursing at having to ascend the seven-lock flight with us rank amateurs. But I think he enjoyed the temporary company and he soon had the team trotting up and down the towpath opening and shutting these incredible pieces of Victorian invention. He was most upset when water gushing through the lock gates gave his crop of dill an unwelcome drenching.

So what do people do on a canal boat holiday? There are readers, drinkers, anglers and knitters. Sunbathers, gardeners and cyclists. There are art galleries and potteries to visit en route, pub gardens to sit in, and if you throw your bike on the roof you can go off on a bike ride down country lanes. The permanent narrow boat dwellers must enjoy a laugh at the expense of weekend canal boat holidaymakers but they kindly welcomed us into their peaceful little world.

The early mornings were just a little misty and dead calm, with rabbits nibbling the abovementioned petunias and ducks diving for breakfast. The days were warm and sunny.

At the top of the Buckby flight is a very nice canalside pub and a flock of gongoozlers. The term apparently arose from canal workers' slang and refers to people who enjoy watching canal activity and they were happy to sit and watch our efforts navigating through the lock. Apparently some committed gongoozlers carry a lock key just in case a boater needs help but fortunately we made a fair job of it. In fact by the time we got to the top it all felt quite straightforward.

The New Inn is very welcome and welcoming, especially on a warm day, and we tucked into cold pints of Addlestone's and large plates of cod and chips. Braunston Tunnel pushes 2,042 yards (1,867m) through a low range of hills in the Northamptonshire uplands and dates from 1796. In the pitch blackness we were "startled" by a kink in the tunnel, which we later found out was the result in a mistake in direction by two sets of contractors.

A mistake that must have caused all sorts of bother for boatmen in the old days. There is no towpath in the tunnel so prior to motorisation getting the canal boat through would have involved "legging". Two men lay on a plank across the bow and propelled the boat forward with their feet against the wall of the tunnel. We didn't have to do any legging but we were all relieved to reach the end after 20 minutes in the dark, especially the man on the tiller! At last we emerged and arrived at the [Braunston Junction marina](#) - the crossroads of the Grand Union and Oxford canals. There are several Georgian and Victorian buildings in and around Braunston and the elegant white and black Thomas Telford cast iron bridge makes for a grand entrance to the marina. We needed that grand entrance because we really needed to turn around and make some progress back towards home base that day and the marina at Braunston was absolutely rammed with canal boats and boaters enjoying the annual Historic Boat Rally.

It was a little like walking into a local pub where all the regulars turn to stare at you. The end-of-June festival seems to be one of the events of the year for narrow boaters and there were hundreds of them moored in the marina and jostling for space in the canal. Many of these are authentic working boats, lovingly preserved, that take pride of place in the grand parade.

There are plenty of other attractions besides the boats, including live music, beer tents, craft displays, Morris dancing and even tunnel legging demonstrations. This is a fun day out for the family whether or not you're onboard a canal boat. Everyone was having a great time and had varying and friendly advice but we successfully passed cleanly through the marina without damaging any paintwork. So we continued on cruising, lunching and laughing through another night and day until our return to Gayton Marina. And what was the best canal boat name? 'AMIBOVARD' *Natasha von Geldern*

Canal boat holidays in the UK

Travelbite.co.uk's Natasha von Geldern took her canal boat holiday with UK Boat Hire, members of [DRIFTERS](#), a consortium of 'award winning' holiday boat companies who have bases throughout the UK. The canal boats are very comfortable, with a bathroom for each of the double bedrooms and a fully-equipped kitchen.

For more information on canal boat holidays in the UK see the [Drifters website](#) or call 08457 626252. Travelbite.co.uk readers can enjoy the following incentive to get out on the water by quoting [Castle Wharf Promotions/190](#):

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