



The Barging Life for Me!

CAROL ANDREW approached her barging holiday with some trepidation – but returned full of passion

Setting off on a barging holiday was exciting but a bit nerve-wracking at the same time. Driving to Gayton Marina near Northampton, I wondered if my two friends and I would really be able to manage the 66-foot boat without a disaster. Not only would there be the ubiquitous locks to contend with, but our itinerary also demanded that we navigate the Blisworth tunnel, which at 2,813 metres is the third longest canal tunnel on the UK network. It all sounded like something of a challenge.

We arrived at the marina with some trepidation and boarded the boat for a briefing. Looking around *The Thrush* I began to feel decidedly more comfortable. We were only onboard for two nights, but it looked as if we could have sailed the

length of the Grand Union Canal, with all our needs catered for.

Our trusty boat had a microwave, a DVD player and even a hairdryer.

Before we knew it we were off, the boat happily chugging away. With a glass of rosé in hand and the sun just beginning to sink, all fears abated. The first section of canal led us alongside a railway track and under a few humpback bridges, the hum of traffic accompanying us.

After a short stretch we had to contend with the Blisworth tunnel. It was dark, dank and very, very long. At its deepest point you are around 43 metres below ground level, and it feels as if you have entered the Mines of Moria. Luckily we didn't encounter a boat coming the other way. We moored up on the other side – not wanting to over-tax ourselves with the first cruise.

The next day the weather was perfect and we found ourselves out in the countryside, edging past cows and sheep at the Formula One pace of four miles per hour. For lunch we had a barbecue on the towpath, eating our food on the roof of the boat. We enjoyed taking a long time over our meal, passers-by waving a friendly hello. All weekend there was a real sense of camaraderie with the other boaters. We even met a couple journeying all the way to London to be stewards at the London marathon. A two-week adventure by boat and one that would take a couple of hours in the car. Certainly not the most efficient way to travel, but I felt quite jealous nevertheless.

The canals' heyday is over but, as we found, there's still a lot of enjoyment to be had cruising along one. It felt like a total break from reality – even though we were actually only a stone's throw from home.

Carol travelled with Drifters, a consortium of holiday boat companies with bases around the UK.

Website www.drifters.co.uk

Tel 08457 626 252

Readers can enjoy the following incentive to get out on the water – please quote Castle Wharf Promotions/176

• £50 off a part week • £100 off a full week • £250 off two weeks

This offer cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer.

