

CANAL boat holidays are what you make them. If you prepare well, you are bound to have a great time, even if the weather is lousy, writes *Roxanne Blakelock*.

A short break in early October presented a challenge on the first day, with winds that apparently even the most seasoned cruisers aim to avoid.

Nonetheless, myself and the three other members of my crew, just as clueless as me, set sail on our narrow boat – The American Thrush – for our mini adventure.

Complete beginners can easily partake in a holiday like this, as we discovered.

The mechanic drove us around the first tricky corner as we travelled north up the Grand Union Canal, giving us tips as we went as well as a full induction beforehand.

The boat was well equipped and the staff very friendly but I wish we had been warned about the people living on the canal.

House boats, understandably, are very precious to their owners, just like any home.

We learnt the hard way that bumping into house boats, or even just passing too closely by them, is a heinous crime – to be avoided at all costs, if you want a trouble-free holiday.

Being novices is apparently no excuse and many expletives were thrown our way, but it was all part of the experience.

We set off from Gayton Marina, just outside Northampton. We passed Bugbrooke Marina, a sweet place with a pub, which are common along the canals.

You are advised to fill the boat with water every day, so we stopped at Stowe Hill to do this. The water not only allows you to shower etc but also gives the boat more buoyancy, making it easier to control.

It's straightforward to buy essentials along the way – we stocked up with bread and milk in a little village called Weedon.

We got as far as Whilton Marina Saisons, where we had to turn around, unfortunately just missing the opportunity to go through some locks.

It was obvious to many that we were new to the boating game, as we zig-zagged across the canal.



The American Thrush and below, one of the canal homes



But we felt more professional and relaxed at the helm as time went on, getting the hang of the counter-intuitive movement of the stern.

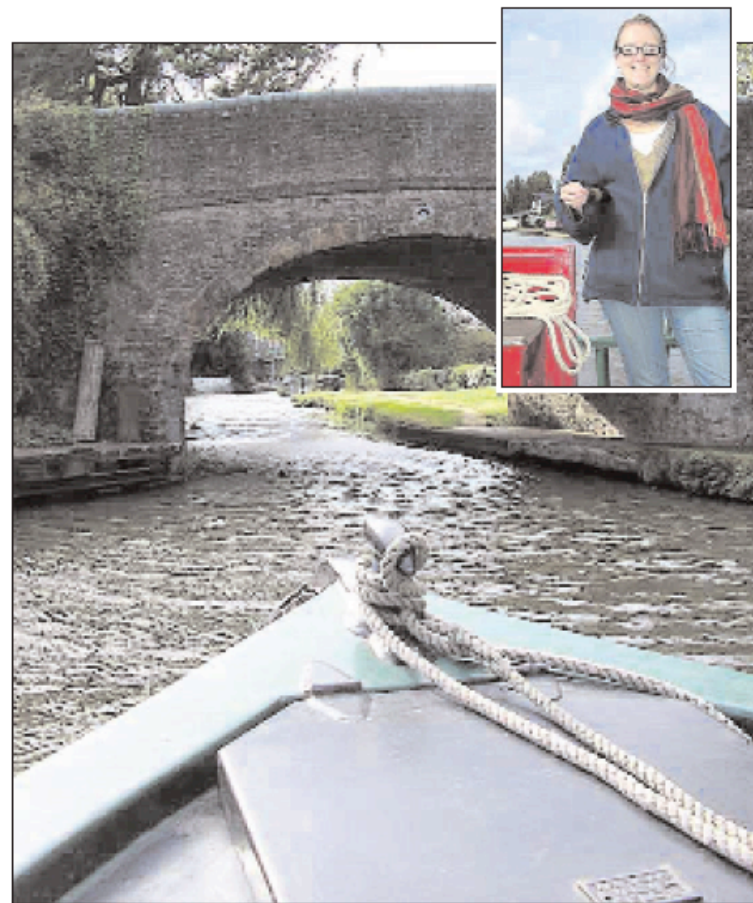
We scraped through without any injuries or catastrophes, and I would love to have another go some day.

Home sweet home.. oops sorry!

Narrow boat factfile

FOUR people narrow boat: Short Break – £515 to £1000 depending on the time of year; Week Break – £790 to £1600.

Two people narrow boat: Short Break – £415-£870; Week Break – £640-£1300
www.ukboathire.com
0330 333 0590.



Captain Roxy, inset, and the view from the boat