

A NARROW ESCAPE

Could a sedate narrowboat holiday just a short hop from Birmingham hold the attention span of two jaded urbanites? You'd be surprised! BY JULIE ALPINE



Our beach-loving writer, Julie Alpine, together with husband Shaun [left] swapped deck-chairs for deck shoes on her first trip on a narrowboat. It won't be her last!

If you've mastered a three-point turn in a Renault Clio during rush hour in central London, you might think that you'd have no problem attempting the same thing in a 55ft narrowboat in a secluded 75ft turning point in the Shropshire Union Canal. We did. We were wrong.

As the ornate rope fenders – the narrowboat equivalent of car bumpers – of our boat, *Sir Ulfius*, bounce gently off the side of the canal

for the hundredth time, we're still pointing in the wrong direction, and beginning to wonder if we're ever going to get our trusty vessel back to the hire company by the agreed time. Okay, so that's not until tomorrow evening, but with a top cruising speed of three miles an hour, our 6pm deadline is beginning to look near impossible. Oh well. Maybe it's time for a break and a nice cup of tea. Evidence of the healing powers of slow travel, surely?

Photography: Alamy, Julie Alpine

Rewind two days and we'd arrived at Brewood Wharf, a half hour's drive from Birmingham International Airport, hot and bothered after a hectic week in the urban jungle (and an argument over directions). The moment we caught our first glimpse of the Shropshire Union Canal, though, the tension started to ebb away.

Slicing through the counties of Staffordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire, the graceful waterway links the canal system of the Midlands, centred

on Birmingham, with the River Mersey and Manchester Ship Canal at Ellesmere Port, Cheshire. Completed in 1835, it was the last major civil engineering accomplishment of famed Scottish stonemason, architect and engineer Thomas Telford. And if this all sounds somewhat industrial, the surprise is just how beautiful the "Shroppie" – as the canal is affectionately known by locals – really is. Another surprise was just how luxurious the

interior of a narrowboat could be. We were like excited kids when we discovered the comfortable double beds, two bathrooms (one with power shower), kitchenette with all mod cons and – wonder of wonders – a TV in the living area. More stress drained away as we happily put our groceries in the fridge – all local, organic produce that we'd pre-ordered and was waiting for us on arrival. The people at Countrywide Cruisers, the small, family-run company that rented us our →

“The whole experience somehow felt more energising than two weeks spent lying on a beach could ever hope to”

There are no speed cameras or traffic wardens loitering in the bushes that line the waterways – you might get followed by a swan or two, or cut up by a duck, but otherwise it's smooth sailing all the way



Worth mooring your boat for

- **The Hartley Arms**, Wheaton Aston (Bridge 19). Celebrate getting safely through the lock with a pint of real ale and the dish of the day at this popular canal-side spot. Tel: +44 (0)1785 840232.
- **The Anchor Inn**, High Offley (Bridge 42). A famously unspoilt boatman's pub where beer is fetched from the cellar and served by the pitcher in surroundings that have barely changed in a century. Tel: +44 (0)1785 284569.
- **Williams of Wem**, Market Drayton (Bridge 62). A sumptuous delicatessen bursting with a vast array of cheeses, breads, pastries, cakes, pickles, chutneys, jams, cold meats and sandwiches – everything, in fact, that you'll need for a midnight snack on the Shroppie. Tel: +44 (0)1630 652222.
- **Audlem Mill Canal Shop**, Audlem (Bridge 78). Shopping and browsing in this converted mill is as much a social event as a retail experience. Expect canal-related books, gifts, crafts, artwork – and lots of local gossip. Tel: +44 (0)1270 811059.

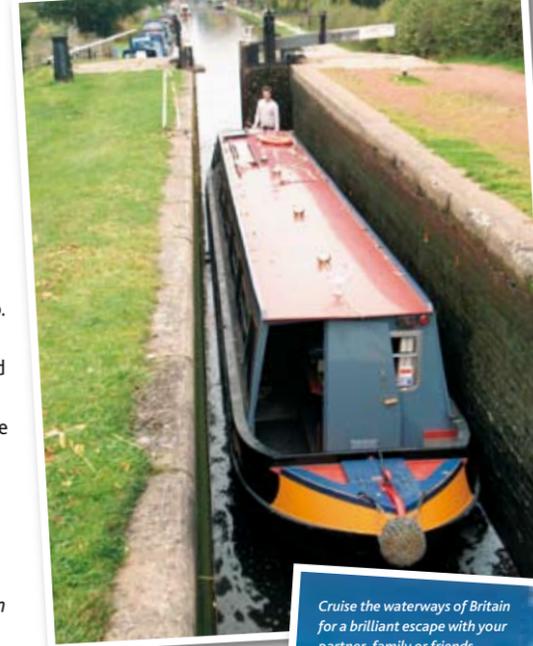
boat, know the canal's twists and turns, its wildlife and the amenities inside out. Which is why we were grateful when, as complete narrowboating virgins, they sent Trevor with us to show us the ropes for the first hour of our glorious three-day trip.

Having enjoyed holidays on the waterways for over 17 years, Trevor packed in his job six years ago and "got myself a job in a boat yard". After he'd shown us the basic maintenance we'd need to know for the duration of our voyage (easy enough, even for someone who doesn't know how to check the oil on her car), and how to map our route and plan the itinerary with the help of the *Pearson's Canal Companion* book, we cast off the ropes, started up the engine and were on our way. As we passed boats with names like *Serendipity*, *Stress Free* and *Moving On*, Trevor's decision suddenly started to make a lot of sense.

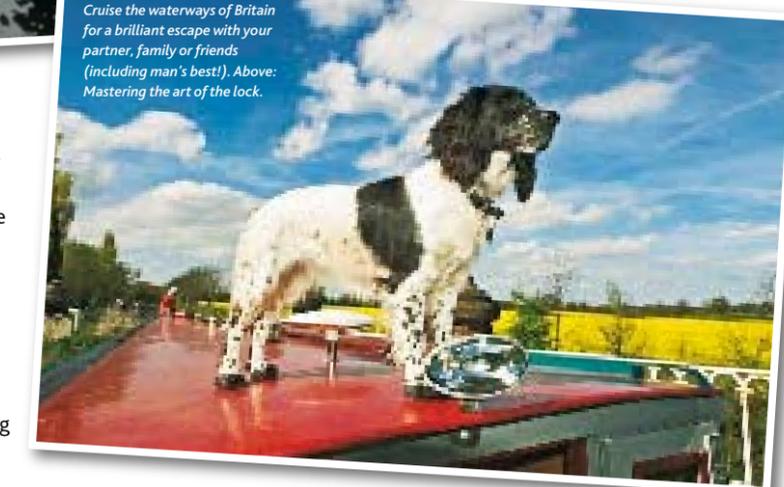
There is something strangely *Twin Peaks*-esque about English canal-side life. Was the spooky-looking alien hanging from a tree a local's attempt to scare the crows off his vegetable patch, or something more sinister? Was that really an old Range Rover being used as a garden shed? But there's also a sense of wonder at being able to see a side of the countryside that would never be available to you if travelling by another mode of transport; to traverse fields of grazing Fresian cows and woolly sheep on water, not tarmac.

And then our first lock, at Wheaton Aston, came into view. As the British Waterways *Boater's Handbook* says, "there's no mystery to using locks – just a series of step-by-step tasks". Nevertheless, we were grateful for Trevor's expert guidance as we approached the gates. Although there are many different kinds of locks, they all work on a similar principle. With the gates closed, you open sluices to let the water in or out. When the water level under your boat is the same as the level you're moving to, you simply move in or out of the lock. The trick is not to get your boat caught on the "sill", the narrow ledge on either side of the lock's walls, as had happened to one poor family that we'd read about in the copy of *Waterways World* magazine we'd found in the *Sir Ulfius*. As the lock emptied, the stern of their rental boat had settled on the sill, and the bow went under the water, sinking the craft. After reading this, we paid close attention to Trevor's instructions!

Any preconceptions we'd harboured that a narrowboating holiday was going to be... if not exactly dull, then at least uneventful, had been shattered by the time our boat safely reached the required level and we waved goodbye to Trevor. In the fast-paced, fast-talking world that we live in, there was something perversely thrilling about taking to the waterways at the tiller of our own richly painted cruiser, drinking endless cups of tea and munching our way through packet after packet of biscuits while watching the world slide by. From the up-close sightings of herons, buzzards and kingfishers, to the friendly pubs, restaurants and local shops that we moored alongside and visited en route, the whole experience somehow felt



Cruise the waterways of Britain for a brilliant escape with your partner, family or friends (including man's best!). Above: Mastering the art of the lock.



more energising than two weeks spent lying on a beach could ever hope to.

But it's the cuttings that really took our breath away: sections where the canal meanders through chunks of emerald-green forest. Lazy shafts of sunlight would break through the trees, illuminating the mulchy, fragrant-smelling forest floor, and sparkle off the water. The silence was so absolute that you could hear the "plop" when a single leaf fell from a branch and dropped into the water. The worries of everyday life seemed a million miles away.

Back in the designated turning point, another narrowboat, thankfully, glides into view. "Hello," we call to the skipper. "It's our first time... Any tips?"

Our new-found saviour with lots of much-needed narrowboat knowledge calls over that we should "take her down to a virtual standstill, then throttle hard and turn". Somehow we manage it under his amused gaze, and are soon chugging back in the direction of Brewood, the end of our truly delightful holiday drawing ever closer.

It's only when we pull up alongside the dock where our journey started – a forgivable five minutes late – that we realise we haven't switched on the TV the whole time we've been gone. Why would you bother when the views are as perfect as these? Next time, we decide, we'll book a whole week and take a bunch of friends. Heck, we might even buy a boat of our own and wave goodbye to the hustle and bustle of city living for good.

It's a surprisingly tempting thought.

CRUISE CONTROL

Countrywide Cruisers is part of an award-winning consortium called **Drifters** (tel: +44 (0)8457 626252; www.drifters.co.uk). Quote "Castle Wharf Promotions/bmibaby (136)" when you book a narrowboat holiday with Drifters and you'll receive £50 off a part-week trip; £100 off a full week or £250 off two weeks (may not be used in conjunction with any other offer). You can "set sail" from Birmingham, Edinburgh and Glasgow – for more great ideas about how to enjoy the waterways, go to www.waterscape.com

GETTING THERE

Take to the water at Brewood Wharf, just half an hour from Birmingham International Airport. From here, bmibaby flies to 24 different destinations across the UK and Europe. For more details, log on to www.bmibaby.com



Photography: Julie Alpine, Castle Wharf Promotions