

FINANCIAL TIMES (FT Weekend)

The straight and narrow

By Paul Miles

Published: March 7 2009 00:20

Location, location, location. The trouble with a house is that it exists only in one place. It is static, rooted to the spot. The joy of a home on a boat is that it – and you – can locate anywhere there is navigable water. Of course, that is potential sorrow too: waves, tides, currents, storms, rocky shores and deep oceans where there be monsters. But not in a narrowboat, which, by dint of its flat-bottomed, pencil-shape and therefore inherent instability, is limited to more tranquil waters.



Of the UK's 3,000 miles of navigable inland waterways, nearly 2,000 miles are man-made canals, where there is nary a current, it is only 4ft deep and you are never more than a short wade from dry land. You can go in only one direction, forward, and you can be in Wales one month and England the next, although that would be going too fast. (To get to Scotland's canals, you would have to transport your boat on a lorry.)

Urban or rural, riverside or canalside, in marinas with plug-in electricity, CCTV and supermarket deliveries or in bucolic isolation with solar and wind power, firewood to chop and mushrooms to pick – you can sample them all and still look out of the same window from the same room.

Location, traditionally the most important factor in choosing where to buy your dwelling place, is no longer the deciding issue. You are free – free to roam with your home, to travel, not dwell. You can find your inner nomad and explore, whether you prefer country or city, solitude or company, self-sufficiency or convenience, northerners or southerners.

You can go anywhere – as long as there is a bank where you can moor.

Thankfully, unlike most banks, these ones aren't collapsing. Indeed, more mooring spots are appearing each year as British Waterways and volunteers reclaim miles of canals, restoring once-busy 18th-century trading routes. New marinas are also being built, providing 3,400 new moorings since 2006, with 400 more planned. There are more boats on the waterways now – more than 31,000 – than at the height of the industrial revolution. British Waterways estimates about 10 per cent of these are lived on.

But, before you rush to the nearest boat brokerage, there are some issues to consider. You will have to get used to peers referring to you as “that hippy on a houseboat”. You will have to pay a fortune in mooring fees if you want to live, say, on Regent's Canal in London. You will have to get used to walking sideways. You will become very aware of how fast the toilet's waste tank is filling up. You will learn what it is like to know your water supply will soon run out, likewise your power. You will have to shed possessions, especially big ones. You will have to learn how to steer a steel battering ram, 25 tonnes and up to 72ft, around often-twisty canals, where there can be mudbanks, moored boats, low tunnels, locks, gobby youths and drowned shopping trolleys to contend with. (Steering, by the way, is from the back, with a tiller that you push left to go right and right to go left.) You will have to learn how to grease the stern gland, check the weed hatch and know when her (or his) bottom needs blacking.

Despite all this, I wanted to give it a go. But, ever the waverer, I wanted to try before buying. As with housing, the boat-sales market is soft and shows no immediate signs of recovery so I was in no great hurry. My rationale was that if I were to enjoy living on a narrowboat in the short, dark, grey days of January and February, then I would definitely enjoy it in the green promise of spring, the long days of summer and the mellow fruitfulness of autumn.

I found a new hire company willing to rent me a “luxury narrowboat”. This might sound like an oxymoron but there was a satellite dish and flat-screen television (which I never used) and fine crystal glasses (ditto). The company gave me a good discount, though quite who would have paid the full rate of more than £6,500 for seven weeks in the depths of winter, I don't know.

What I didn't get was a barge pole, an anchor, a good briefing – or the welcome hamper. Within 10 minutes of leaving Tewkesbury marina, I had bumped into a bridge. King John's Bridge is described in the invaluable Nicholson guide as noteworthy for being where “visibility is

restricted and great care should be taken". If only I had read that first. If only the hire company had warned me. As steel crunched on brick, the lockable security cover to the engine's control panel was sheared off and fell into the river Avon with a splash.

Bob Scarrott, the lock-keeper at the next obstacle, a lock at right-angles to the river, informed me that "the correct way to go through the bridge is actually backwards". With his help, the boat made it through the lock and I moored on the nearest pontoon for four nights to recover from the shame.

Several days later, my confidence mending but fragile, I undid my mooring hitches. In convoy with Bob, I steered a course upriver, past another hazard – a long sandbar. Three days, 30 miles and four locks later, I left the danger of rivers – currents, floods and width – and entered the joys of the canal system at Stourport-on-Severn, the only town in the UK that arose as a result of the canal era.

The problem was its historic basins, or harbours, were doing good impressions of outdoor ice-rinks in the coldest winter for some 20 years. Once I had been "locked in" by British Waterways staff, through a staircase of locks, where the ice covering yielded to a good wallop with a (borrowed) barge pole, I could go no further. I was stuck, frozen fast. To make things worse, the toilet was now overflowing, its waste tank already full. Things could only get better.

And they did. Although temperatures plummeted to minus 11°C, the wood-burning stove kept the boat cosy, fellow boaters were friendly and, finally, the pump-out machinery thawed and the waste tank was emptied. Then, one sunny morning, with my father along for the ride, we were off, crashing through the thawing ice on the Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal at 1mph until we gave up, two miles on.

Once the thaw had really done its job and I could move on to liquid canals, the upsides of this lifestyle became obvious. It was all to do with location, after all, or rather the variety of a 2,000-mile linear village: skeletal winter trees covered in hoar frost, starry nights, kingfishers flying past in a flash of electric blue, winter sun on my back as I cruised along at 3mph, passing fields and forests, the mellow brickwork of historic buildings and waving walkers.

Narrowboat living has a metaphysical dimension. Time slows and distances lengthen. To travel four miles and negotiate two locks in a day is an achievement. It recharges the batteries – literally (and heats the water). Canalside villages near enough for joggers to run between,

seem, from my boater's perspective, a day or two apart.

I slowed down too, finding time to cut firewood – getting exercise, fresh air and free, carbon-neutral fuel, all in one. I cooked lentil soup on top of the stove as it belched out heat from burning logs I had just chopped. I made bread and sprouted mung beans. Perhaps I am “that hippy on a houseboat” after all? I did small amounts of work, when I had reception for mobile broadband, but mostly I went with the flow and, being on a canal, that meant doing nothing much.

After years of living in London, life was remarkably tranquil. I spent hours listening to music and reading by the fire. “Mr Bojangles” and *Madame Bovary* were companions, among others, and I couldn't understand the latter's desire to flee the countryside. I listened to news on Radio 4 about how our big city, London, had ground to a standstill in the deepest snow for decades. How lovely, I thought. I hope they enjoy it. Outside, rural Staffordshire was exquisite, covered in four inches of snow. Even the birds were still. Meanwhile, I played snowballs with fellow boaters. A shortage of gritting salt made no difference to those of us not using roads.



Living on a narrowboat gave Paul Miles the chance to experience the physical challenges of activities such as lock manning

When I had told a friend, who once lived on a narrowboat, about my plans, she enthused “it's such a big space”. I didn't understand; a narrowboat interior is 6ft wide. “It's like camping; you feel like all the outdoors is yours,” she clarified.

She was right. There is a way that, in the steel tube, windows and side hatches to each side, sky-lights above, sitting below water level, you are immersed in nature. Poke your head outside and you are greeted with a landscape of trees, birds and water. One morning, two swans were just

taking off and flew so close I could have touched them.

Even in cities, the canals are often arteries of greenness, visited by diverse birdlife. (Unfortunately, they are also places for undesirables to loiter and drink. But enough about me.) I aimed mostly for the countryside. But the UK's canals were built to link industrial hubs, so cities are a major feature. Next month, a length of canal will reopen in the centre of Liverpool, connecting the Leeds and Liverpool canal with the city's South Docks for the first time in 100 years. Some towns, such as Daventry, are meanwhile proposing to build new canals.

On these waterways, you are at the junction of history – an intersection between those days of fervent canal building over two centuries ago and the modern, hopeful, revival of these water gardens, many of which had become nettle-choked wastelands. As my midwinter experiment comes to an end, reflections of sunlight dapple the inside of my boat. The temperature has picked up a few degrees. Snowdrops are blooming and the shoots of bluebells appearing.

I am smitten.

Read blogs. The oldest is www.grannybuttons.com, while www.seyellas-journey.blogspot.com follows a couple cruising.

Try before you buy. Look at www.drifters.co.uk, a consortium of hire companies, or www.etr.co.uk for long-term rentals. I used www.cruisefreepirit.com, which currently has only one boat.

Decide what you want. Cruiser or traditional stern? Portholes or caravan windows? Cassette or pump-out toilet? Side-hatches are recommended and I think a solid-fuel stove is a must. Also consider technical details: the engine, inverter and calorifier.

Consider size. Boats up to 58ft long can use all British canals; from 58ft to the maximum, 72ft, you are restricted to fewer. Wide-beam boats are spacious but more limited in where they can go.

Learn the ropes. Start by joining the Residential Boat Owners' Association, www.rboa.org.uk. then enroll in a helmsman's course through www.ryatraining.org. Later, try a diesel engine maintenance course or sign up for River Canal Rescue, www.rivercanalrescue.co.uk.

Invest wisely. Boats tend to depreciate in value, prices range from about £30,000 to £100,000 or more and interior styles vary from traditional dark wood to sleek contemporary chrome. Sales websites include www.apolloduck.co.uk and www.newandusedboat.co.uk. Mortgages are via marine finance specialists that usually require a 20 per cent deposit and charge interest rates of 9 per cent on 10-year terms. Try www.collidgeandpartners.co.uk or www.barclays.co.uk/marinefinance.

Chart a course. Will you stay put or cruise? If you want a base, especially in a city, secure your mooring before your vessel. British Waterways auctions them at www.waterscape.com and has private marina information. Otherwise, the maximum stay in one place is usually 14 days but it can be as short as 24 hours.