

Go with the FLOW

IT'S the holiday that everyone enjoys, bringing new meaning to the phrase "getting away from it all". To the uninitiated, drifting lazily down a river or canal in a hire boat might seem a tad boring. But nothing could be further from the truth. There's always something to do aboard, while great walks and bike rides are to be had along the towpath or further afield, and all in a wonderful environment where you wouldn't know if World War Three were to break out.

Kids love it, so do teenagers and grandparents as well. Scared of the prospect of negotiating all those locks? Don't be. It's easy, it's fun and there's usually someone on hand – be it lock-keeper or passer-by – to lend a helping hand.

The languid River Mayenne is a perfect place to get into the swing of things. It runs from the southern borders of Normandy down to join the mighty Loire, France's longest river. The surrounding countryside is idyllic, with gently rolling hills and lush riverside meadows, where cows grow fat and great cheeses are born.

Our trip down was autoroute almost all the way from Calais, with a journey time just over three hours and a crossing facilitated by P&O Ferries, giving us a break to stretch our legs and enjoy a gourmet-standard meal in the very pleasant Langan's Brasserie onboard restaurant.

Our base was the sleepy little village of

Jolly boating weather – ROGER ST PIERRE takes to the waterways of England and France

Daon, just downriver from the bustling town of Château Gontier, whose markets bristle with fresh local produce.

You can cook onboard in a tiny, but efficient, galley or head for one of the many local dining establishments that range from simple low-cost bistros to Michelin Star challengers with their stratospheric prices but divine food.

Our boat was perfect for two and a dog, but you can rent vessels for up to 12 people.

Side trips took in the Roman-Gallic thermal spa at Entramme; the beautiful gardens of the Château de la Ronglere, at Saint-Sulpice; and the animal refuge De L'Arche, with its mighty tigers, just outside Château Gontier; as well as guided visits of the atmospheric mediaeval towns of Mayenne and Laval; while we were able to buy wonderful artisan creations and local gastronomic products at the Maison du Passeur, in Ménil.

You don't have to cross the channel to enjoy the waterway boating experience though.

Try the Birmingham Ring Canal, as I did with my family recently.

"What?" You might cry, but the mix of soft countryside and Victorian industrial architecture there provides a highly atmospheric few days afloat – and Birmingham has more miles of canal than does Venice.

Many hundreds of miles of once neglected British waterways have been brought back into service over the past couple of decades and canals carry a greater annual tonnage now than they did in their early 19th century heyday, before the railways almost put them out of business; but now it's people rather than goods.

More than £84million has been spent on the canal that links Glasgow with Edinburgh and features the dramatic Falkirk Wheel, which opened in 2002, while in the North Midlands the Victorian-era Anderton Boat Lift re-opened five years ago to give access once more from the Trent and Mersey Canal to the River Weaver below.

The Drifters group is a consortium of narrowboat operators who offer their craft on a self-drive basis for everything from a day trip to a full-blown holiday.

Whether you are the captain, a sedentary passenger or someone who wants to take their turn at the tiller, operating the locks or tying up, you are in for a real treat.

You can navigate the Thames Valley, the Pennines and the delights of Wales and Scotland – the itineraries available via Drifters are endless.

Our own weekend afloat took us from the Alvechurch Boats yard into the very heart of Birmingham, where the delightful Gas Street moorings put us just a few short steps away from the buzz of this reborn metropolis, with its super shopping, museums, galleries and much more. And on our return leg we negotiated the spooky mile-plus long tunnel that kids just adore.

You need no licence or previous experience to pilot a river or canal boat in France or the UK and full instruction is given in the simple tasks involved.