

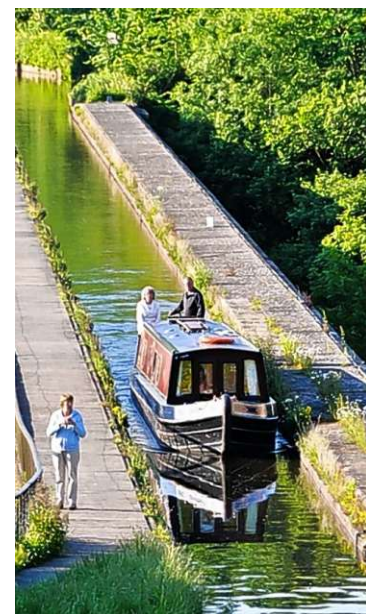
Travel



Gentle pleasures of cruising flat out in the slow lane...

flat out in the slow lane...

Kiera Knightley, Kevin Spacey, Harrison Ford and Calista Flockhart have done it. Now **Steve Grant** discovers the slow pleasures of a canal boating holiday



For such old-fashioned looking craft, many are amazingly modern inside

with gas stove, grill, oven, fridge, and microwave alongside even more modern accoutrements such as central heating, a CD player and a flatscreen TV with Freeview and DVD. And, importantly, plenty of storage space.

As you would expect, progress along the canal is made at an unhurried rate – often walking pace – with the freedom to cruise at your leisure between dawn and dusk, and moor virtually anywhere you please. After our barge initiation at Wrenbury Mill, we travelled for just over an hour, through the locks at Marbury, Quoitsley and Willey Moor before mooring up and enjoying a meal and well-earned drinks at a waterside pub. Our other evening entertainment in this peaceful setting was the spectacular tumbling aerial displays and loud calls of randy male Lapwings in the field opposite.

After a comfortable night's sleep we set off towards probably the most challenging bit of our journey – Grindley Brook. This has six locks, three of which are a staircase with a lock-keeper to help. And, as there's a café at the lock, an audience to watch as you go through. That said, we managed very well, I think – particularly mum and Finn who had to physically operate the locks (well someone had to be in charge of the boat).

From the top of the staircase there is about six hours of lock-free cruising, with only a few lift bridges and an 80-metre tunnel to cope with, all the way to Ellesmere.

And a wonderful few hours it was too – just pootling along under warm

spring sunshine, enjoying the sights and sounds of the waterways.

As well as the lovely countryside, there's a multitude of birdlife to be seen alongside the plethora of ducks and geese. We saw Wrens, Great Tits, Goldfinches, Chaffinches, and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. I even spotted a dashing Kingfisher near Whitchurch.

The canal passes through the internationally important Fenn's, Whixall and Bettesfield Mosses where colourful Green Hairstreak, Orange-tip and Green Veined White butterflies can be seen dancing through the air.

The route then passes through some of the nine glacial Ellesmere meres. Created in the Ice Age, they are popular spots for fishing and watersports.

After performing a shaky – and probably highly entertaining for viewers – three-point turn at Ellesmere, we moored up and headed into the market town for dinner. There, at the Black Lion Hotel, we discovered probably the best – locally made – steak and kidney pie ever. Fabulous!

The next morning it was time to set off on our meandering return journey. We cruised all day before setting at Marbury ready to return our boat the next morning.

Despite the distance from the West-country to Cheshire we all had a great time and thoroughly enjoyed being on the canals. Enjoyment helped by some unusually fine spring weather. It's just surprising how doing very little is so tiring...

THE FACTS

Steve's holiday was with DRIFTERS, a consortium of award-winning holiday boat companies with bases throughout the UK. www.drifters.co.uk 08457 626252.

WMN readers can enjoy the following incentive to get out on the water, if they quote Castle Wharf Promotions/15

- £150 off a week, £75 off a short break outside school holidays.
- £100 off a week, £50 off a short break, for school holidays (from now to August 20, October 22).
- £250 off a two week holiday.
- This offer cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer.



Negotiating a series of locks can be the most challenging part of the journey

Britain's canals are in better shape than ever and with hundreds of boats available for hire, boating holidays have never been more popular on the UK's peaceful inland waterway network.

More than 320,000 people now go canal boating each year, exploring over 3,000 miles of inland waterways. The number of boats on our waterways has increased by 35 per cent in the last 10 years – there are now more boats than at the height of the industrial revolution.

It was during that period that the Duke of Bridgewater was given permission to build the first canal from his coal mines at Worsley to Manchester. Once it opened it became the wonder of the age. Over the next 30 years numerous canals were built, reaching a peak in 1793 when 20 were authorised and boats were also built to transport passengers.

They fell into decline with the advent of the railways and their industrial use finally ended in the early 1960s. However, the revival of the canals for pleasure use started in austere post-war Britain.

And it's not hard to see why they caught on in our increasingly fast-paced and frantic world. Narrowboat holidays are simply the fastest way of slowing down.

To test the theory out, I headed, with my mum Carole – who's just about to retire – and my 10-year-old son Finn, to the Llangollen Canal, probably the most beautiful canal in Britain, certainly it's the most popular. The scenery varies from isolated sheep pastures to ancient peat mosses, from tree lined lakes to the foothills of Snowdonia. The jewel in its crown is undoubtedly Thomas Telford's magnificent Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, which was awarded UNESCO World Heritage site status last year.

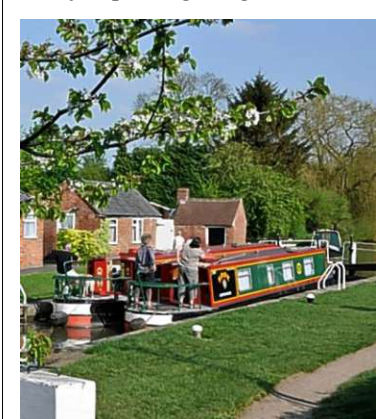
The Llangollen Canal leaves the Shropshire Union Canal just north of Nantwich in rural Cheshire and climbs through deserted Shropshire

farmlands to cross the border into Wales near Chirk. It then cuts through increasingly hilly countryside to finish alongside the River Dee tumbling out of Snowdonia, just above Llangollen. It is 41 miles long and takes at least three days to cruise one-way.

Sadly our three-night break would not give us the time to do that so we headed from Wrenbury Mill via Grindley Brook, past the medieval town of Whitchurch to Ellesmere and back.

Apparently no previous experience of boating is necessary as the barges – all individually hand-made in this country – are supposedly easy to handle and a quick lesson is given at the start of every trip. Nevertheless, I'm sure the 58ft Heron class boat from the Alvechurch boat fleet we picked up was at least two foot shorter when we handed it back! Canals have a surprising number of S-bends.

The boats range from 42ft-70ft in length and can cater for up to 12 people. For such old-fashioned looking craft, they are amazingly modern inside with a fully equipped galley



The joy of retro

If you bang your head in a tent, the worst you get is the fizz of nylon brushing against your hair.

The same cannot be said for a vintage VW camper van. If you are thinking of hiring one of these glorious machines, drill it in to all family members to mind their heads, or issue crash helmets.

Anyone who fails to fall in love with this camper has probably had a severe blow to the noggin, though. From our eight-year-old to passers-by in their eighties, the VW camper has an inexplicable attraction.

Maisy, our mint-green mobile accommodation, is a strong statement of cool intent. The restored paintwork is faultless, while inside the original 1978 interior is basic but surprisingly functional.



Matt Chorley serves up the bacon butties for his wife Alyson and children Emily and baby Jessica on their VW camper van family holiday. Picture: Richard Austin

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Rural Getaways



If you fancy something to really get your taste buds tingling try a gastronomic break in the countryside. This week's selection of Cartwheel members specialise in producing and preparing top quality local food. Wake up to the smell of homemade bread, start the day with a hearty farmhouse breakfast and indulge in an afternoon cream tea but make sure you leave plenty of room for dinner! For more 'good for food' short breaks visit www.cartwheelholidays.co.uk.

Burton Farmhouse
Superb, four star farmhouse B&B (pictured above) in area of outstanding natural beauty, near Kingsbridge, Devon. Onsite country restaurant serving delicious local produce. Hearty breakfasts, children's teas and four course evening meals from £25. Mouthwatering cream teas made with own clotted cream. Ideally situated for exploring the South Hams. B&B from £36 pppn.

Rezare Farmhouse
Characterful, four star, silver award farmhouse with emphasis on good food situated in the Tamar Valley Cornwall. Three-course dinners using seasonal produce available nightly from resident chef. Fully licensed. Delicious AGA cooked breakfast. High standard of comfort. Price from £39ppn.

Tregerrick Farm
Lovely, four star farmhouse B&B with AA breakfast award,

overlooking peaceful valley in the heart of Cornwall. Complimentary cream tea on arrival and extensive breakfast menu with homemade bread and preserves and daily breakfast specials. Packed lunches available. B&B from £36 pppn.

Wood Advent Farm
Elegant and stylish, four star accommodation in beautiful countryside on working farm in Exmoor National Park, Somerset. Delicious breakfasts, evening meals and traditional Sunday lunches. Excellent for walking. Dogs welcome by arrangement. Price £40 for one night.

Old Rectory
Tranquil, 5 star gold award winning B&B in Boscawen Cornwall. Luxurious bedrooms, walled kitchen garden supplying home-grown fruit, vegetables and eggs for breakfast. Evening meals – tasty food from Cornwall. Guests welcome to bring their own wine. Only 2 miles from the coast path. Price £45ppn

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