

Slow Boat To Linlithgow

Entering the Falkirk Wheel.

Jenny McKelvie savours a complete change of pace on Scotland's Lowland canals.

On the Union Canal.

to Banknock where we moor for the night.

I settle quickly into

the pace of life on the water, taking my turn to steer using the tiller at the stern — happily zigzagging along till I get the hang of it.

When I'm not steering, I can concentrate on the scenery as we gently swish past an expanse of green fields complete with grazing cattle.

The canal is sixty feet wide, which makes us feel as if we're sailing on a river. What sets us apart from river craft is our speed, or the lack of it.

As we amble along at a steady four miles per hour, cyclists speed past us on the towpath. Even swans and

dog walkers move faster than us!

The next stop's Glasgow, but who cares about where we're going? At the mellow pace of life on the canal, the stresses of everyday life just evaporate. The ever-changing scenery looms large, not to mention tea and biscuits.

I love the glimpse we have of Ruchill Church and in particular its hall, designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. They've got a tearoom, I see, and I make a mental note to drop in next time I'm in the area.

Then there's Kelvingrove Park. Though I've been to Glasgow before, I've never come in by narrowboat, and I half expect an industrial sprawl to rear up ahead of me, but the canal banks remain green right through to the British Waterways

Photographs by Jenny McKelvie.

WHEN we told friends where we were going on holiday, they wondered why we'd chosen somewhere so close to home. The Lowland canal system isn't that exotic a destination! And how would we keep ourselves occupied aboard a narrowboat for seven days? The thought had crossed my own mind, but we're in for a very pleasant surprise. We decide to tackle the leg from Falkirk to Glasgow first, which takes us west on the Forth and Clyde canal, through a flurry of locks, under the lift bridge at Bonnybridge,



Wave to the nice people!



The road opens for us.



Linlithgow sunset.

headquarters, where we have secure moorings for the night.

Next morning, we double back to Falkirk, pushing all the way in a single day in such glorious sunshine that we can't believe our luck.

We park up for the night in the basin at the Falkirk Wheel, and decide to have a towpath barbecue.

As we dine, trains rumble by between Edinburgh and Glasgow, reminding us of just how little distance we're travelling in a whole week.

The Wheel, the world's first rotating boat lift, is all lit up; pink, blue, then orange — a truly spectacular sight. And in the morning, we're going to use it!

This part of our journey commands a large audience,

Our narrowboat.



as people from the visitor centre crowd the bridges and canal side to watch us ease our barge into the Wheel.

This is the vital part of the seventy-eight million pound Millennium Link which has reconnected the Forth and Clyde with the Union Canal. The Wheel is a hundred and fifteen feet high, and an imposing sight from any angle.

As it slowly turns a hundred and eighty degrees and lifts us above the basin, dramatic views unfold of both canals and the surrounding countryside. None of us will ever forget it.

We chunter out of the Wheel into the Union Canal via two enormous locks, each an engineering feat in itself. The next stage of our voyage is the eeriest — a long, dimly lit tunnel at Falkirk, with an uneven, cavernous surface and water pouring from the ceiling.

This canal's much narrower and needs some adjusting to on the part of the steersman, but we've got the hang of it by Linlithgow. The basin in this historic town is perhaps the most attractive mooring point along the route, and we stop to visit the Palace.

The next stretch will take us into Edinburgh, then back to Linlithgow, with an overnight stop in Ratho. My husband was born in West Lothian, so this part of the trip is very familiar to us, and it's the real highlight for me.

The lush vegetation along the banks provides an idyllic setting for some industrial

heritage — the Winchburgh shale bings, which glisten in the sun like miniature versions of Ayers Rock.

Then comes the Almond aqueduct, and Almondell and Calderwood Country Park, a restful stretch on the approach to the city itself.

Again the canal side views surpass my expectations as a terrace of townhouses is perfectly reflected in calm water. The newly revamped Edinburgh Quay at Lochrin Basin is also impressive.

I thought I knew Bruntsfield, but behind it I discover a hidden world of boats, restaurants, bars and new apartments.

Preparing for our return jaunt to Falkirk, the pressure's really on, as we have a sizeable audience of lurching workers enjoying our attempt to turn round!

Luckily, many seem a little envious as we set off for yet another lotus-eating afternoon. Much better than being stuck in an office.

All too quickly, we find ourselves on the homeward leg, relaxed, rejuvenated and wishing we could do it all again.

In just seven days that narrowboat has begun to feel like home, and the sceptic in me has transformed into a canal enthusiast. I'm looking forward to my next canal holiday, but doubt that anything can match the two we've been travelling along.

A splendid week, truly splendid.

The End.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Jenny and her family travelled with Black Prince Holidays Ltd., who have a base at the Falkirk Wheel.
Tel.: 01527 575115. E-mail: enquiry@black-prince.com.
Website: www.black-prince.com.