

**The journey from Northampton to Milton Keynes is usually unremarkable; the M1 was not built for interest or amusement, but taking the same route in a narrowboat is a more enjoyable experience altogether.**

## **A Narrowboating Weekend on the Grand Union Canal**



The main line of the Grand Union Canal begins at Norton Junction just west of Northampton and follows the line of the M1 all the way down to Watford. The canal was here first, of course, being completed in 1805 and pre-dating the railways and any reliable national road network. It provided a direct route to London from the potteries at Stoke on Trent and the Birmingham coal mines, and was a busy commercial thoroughfare for around 150 years. Generations of boatmen and their families piloted a wide variety of craft up and down: narrowboats, barges, 'keels', 'tows', dredgers, lighters, short boats, flats, 'tom puddings', tugs, ice-breakers and 'starvationers' – so-called because of their exposed ribs. Today there is little commercial traffic, but the canal retains its charm as it meanders through tiny villages with waterside pubs, under beautiful miniature stone bridges, through industrial wastelands and the peaceful countryside of Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire.



Hiring a narrowboat for a long weekend or a week is the perfect antidote to the stress of 21st-century living. It is above all slow, with a maximum speed of about 3mph. Because of the need to negotiate tunnels and locks, your average speed is much less than this, and you make less progress than you expect. You soon become accustomed to the new pace, and its charm is heightened by the occasional glimpses of modern life: the Birmingham express rattling over the bridge above you; the M1 roaring in the distance. You experience for a few days how simple life must have been 200 years ago, and modern noise and ugliness come as shocking intrusions. After a while, you lose track of time, relishing the patchy mobile network that disconnects you from work and home. Meanwhile you drift along, watching the wildlife and planning your next stop to pick up provisions or have a pint. Many of the pubs that used to line the canals are gone, but enough survive to provide refreshment after a long day of opening and closing lock gates. The local beer is Banks, described as 'the diesel of the industry' and it is a welcome accompaniment to the usual 'pub grub' dishes on offer. On the canal from Gayton down to New Bradwell, there are a few gems to discover. The **Boat Inn** in Stoke Bruerne is located just above the top lock on a run of seven. It has been in the same family for four generations and you can play Northamptonshire skittles there if someone will show you how. For food, try the **Spice of Bruerne** opposite, whose advertising slogan, 'Sublime Indian Cuisine' remains for good reason uncontested by the Advertising Standards Authority.



Further down, near Cosgrove, the **Navigation Inn** has excellent pub food but also a 'fine dining' restaurant, run by chef Dan Cameron. This is an ideal spot to moor up and celebrate a special occasion, with only a bridge to cross to get home and tucked up for the night. At the north end of the canal is the **Walnut Tree Inn** at Blisworth. This is a real treat to be savoured after half an hour spent passing through the gloom of the third-longest tunnel in Britain. This former railway inn has been refurbished and now offers a selection of good beers and good food, with friendly and welcoming staff. There is music every Saturday night and most Thursdays, a pub quiz on Sundays, and a music festival from 2 to 4 July. While passing through Stoke Bruerne, visit the **canal museum**. It is housed on two floors in an old corn mill right on the towpath. Besides the history of canals, and the Grand Union in particular, it has fascinating exhibits of the 'ware' that boatmen used to decorate their vessels: brightly painted water-cans, jugs, stools and headlamps. It also details the part the so-called 'Idle Women' of the Inland Waterways played during World War 2 in keeping the canals open for vital supplies. When you finally return your narrowboat to the boatyard, take a moment to savour the tranquillity of the canalside setting. In just a few minutes, you will be joining the hurly-burly of the M1. The peace and calm of a different era that you have tasted will soon be lost – until the next time.

**Special Offer: Call Drifters on 08457 626252 and quote *Castle Wharf Promotions/19* to get £150 off a week, £75 off a short break outside school holidays. Or £100 off a week, £50 off a short break, for school holidays (weeks starting 29 May, 16 July to 20 August, October 22). Or £250 off a two-week holiday. This offer is for 2010 only and cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer. [www.drifters.co.uk](http://www.drifters.co.uk)**