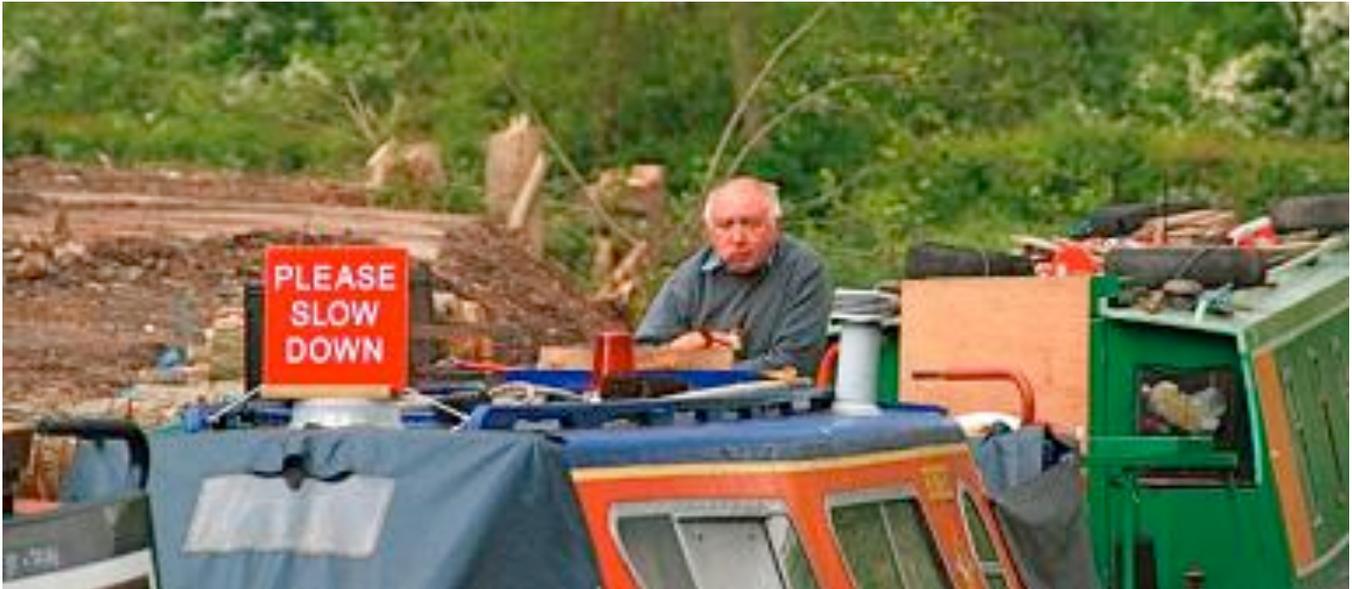


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Explore England's pubs by canal boat ... Six old friends take a narrowboat on the waterways of Worcestershire for their annual reunion.



Terry Ramsey

The five best canal holiday routes in England

Ask the expert: canal holidays - the big questions

How does this sound for fun? A long weekend drifting from pub to pub with a group of friends, exploring the countryside, visiting different towns and villages, yet always having your bed a few hundred yards away at closing time?

It's pretty much perfect for me. Especially as you get to explore one of Britain's most under-valued assets along the way: the canal system, which can take you through the remotest countryside, along a fascinating urban landscape or into the hearts of cities. Even familiar places look different viewed from the waterways.

I went last weekend with six friends, cruising through the Worcestershire countryside. We've been doing narrowboat trips for years – we're pals from university and it's been our annual reunion for more than two decades – so we've have got the routine down to a fine art.

We pick up the boat at Tardebigge, near Bromsgrove, and set off at 3pm. By 3.04pm, Neil is handing round the first bottles of beer. "Sorry about the delay," he grins.

When we first started these jaunts, boats could be pretty rudimentary. Some made Brixton Prison look well-appointed. These days they come with all mod cons.

Ours, The Hanbury, from the AngloWelsh boatyard, has central heating, double beds, flush toilets, mains sockets, a fridge, a TV, a CD player, a shower and a very small bath (it was called a bath but, to be honest, was more like a washing-up bowl with a plug). Boats can also come with a microwave, a wood-burning stove or a DVD player. They can be quite a home from home – provided your home is seven-feet wide and made of steel.

Coming out of the boatyard at Tardebigge, onto the Worcester and Birmingham Canal, you can go left or right. Left goes south towards Worcester – a nice stretch of canal, but there are 110 locks to negotiate on a return trip. ("People with children go that way because they want to tire them out," says the man at the boatyard).

Or you can go north towards Birmingham city centre, and then veer off east on the Stratford-upon-Avon Canal – also a lovely stretch in places, and one which, remarkably, has no locks at all.

Guess which direction we choose? Yes, the easy one.

Not that locks are a problem for us old seadogs (canaldogs?) – it's just that 110 is a lot in a weekend. The conventional calculation is to allow 15 minutes per lock; which means those locks would take 27 hours of sailing time. That's a non-starter for our group, as we are planning modest six or seven hours cruising a day. After all, you've got to allow time for the pub lunches.

FRIDAY

We head up the canal and through the 600-metre Shortwood Tunnel before arriving at the small town of Alvechurch, our stop for the night. But it is only just after 4pm. So we press on to Hopwood, a small village two miles further on. Not because there's much to see, but because it has a pub.

It turns out to be less of a pub and more of a steakhouse, but we have a couple of pints in the Hopwood House where the bargain "two main courses for £10" is pulling in punters, even at 5pm. Then we turn the boat round and head back to Alvechurch for more beers and a meal in the local curry house (well, it is a lads' weekend).

SATURDAY

Pete is our regular breakfast chef on these trips, and he rustles up the usual bacon, sausage, egg, beans and tomatoes. It's amazing how the fresh air makes us hungry. Or maybe it's just because we're away from wives and families and can freely stuff our faces.

We cast off and head north for an hour before entering the dark, dingy and wet hole that is the Wast Hills Tunnel. This stretches for almost a mile and is barely wide enough for two boats to pass. It is a fantastic Victorian achievement, but at the required slow speed, we spend more than 30 minutes in the total gloom, getting showered by the frequent leaks where water pours through the tunnel lining.

Beyond the tunnel, at King's Norton, on the outskirts of Birmingham, the Stratford-upon-Avon Canal runs off to the right and we take it. Although its name is promising, the waterway initially runs through bland suburbs. A possible lunchtime pub comes and goes, dotted with graffiti and looking very shut.

But soon we're heading into countryside and after a late lunch stop at the Drawbridge at Shirley ("two main courses for £7" – even more of a bargain than the Hopwood House) we reach a beautifully rural stretch. With trees arching over the water and very few villages, or even roads, near the canal, this really gives the get-away-from-it-all feeling for which narrowboat holidays are celebrated. We are in the middle of a country idyll. And gliding through it at just 3mph is the best stress relief known to man (well, this man, anyway).

And to make it perfect, we know that when we moor up, at 8pm, at Waring's Green (a village that seems to consist of a farm and a couple of lanes), there are two country pubs awaiting our attention. The Bull's Head at Salter Street is an historic inn that turns out to be another food-dominated eatery rather than pub.

Of course, as it's the one we've chosen to eat in, there are none of the previously ubiquitous two-for-one deals. Instead we pay its rather inflated prices before walking along the lane to the Blue Bell Cider House, a much more earthy and traditional boozery.

At closing time we stumble back to the boat in the dark (only one person ends up with a leg in the water) for more bottles of beer and a raucous game of Balderdash. Bed in the early hours. I think we have kept the ducks awake.

SUNDAY

The rain, which has been frequent over the weekend, becomes a continuous downpour. We have turned round and are making the journey back now, so

we take refuge in the Drawbridge again. Luckily Nick is a weekend sailor and has a complete set of wet weather gear. Guess who out at the helm for most of the day?

By evening we are back in Alvechurch. This time we go for delicious home-cooked food at the small and charming Weighbridge, next to the canal. Followed by a visit to the Swan, where the karaoke night turns out to be unexpectedly entertaining.

MONDAY

Just a bracing one-hour cruise in a brisk wind back to the boatyard at Tardebigge and our trip is over.

VERDICT:

It was billed as a weekend on a narrowboat but at times it felt like an ark would have been more appropriate. When the heavens opened, and the rain beat on the boat's metal roof, we had time to reflect that if there is one thing you can rely on in the UK, it is the unreliability of the weather. In mid-May you might expect to have a fine day or two. But for us every day brought a deluge or two of Old Testament dimensions. We were just unlucky.

But, even so, I wouldn't have missed it for anything. And at the end, despite an unusually boozy Sunday night, I have never felt so de-stressed and invigorated at 9am on a Monday. If the world is getting on top of you, or you just want to chill out, there really is nothing more relaxing than a few days on the canals. Just don't forget your cagoul.

NEED TO KNOW

Terry Ramsey travelled on The Hanbury, operated by AngloWelsh at Tardebigge in Worcestershire, one of the company's 10 bases. A short break (for up to nine people) on The Hanbury in June costs £835; a week's hire costs £1,190. AngloWelsh is a member of the Drifters holiday boat company consortium.

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