

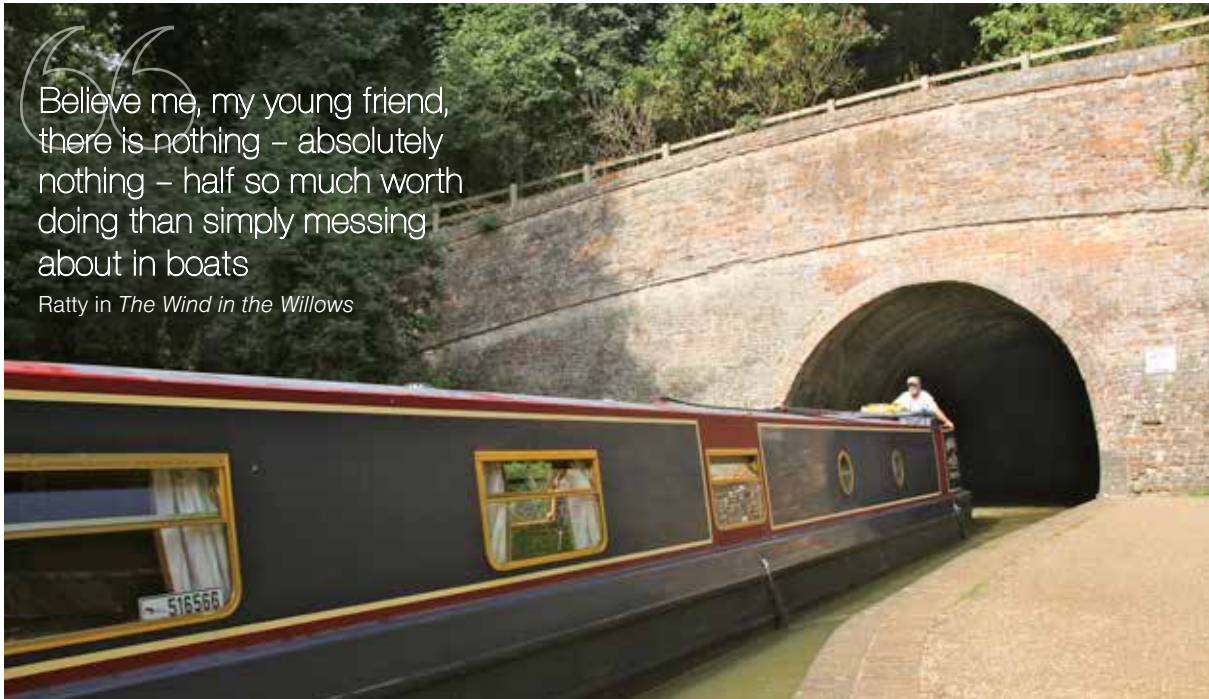
Slowly Does It

VERNE MAREE spends an idyllic week mastering the locks on England's Grand Union Canal.

The press-ganged mate of a wide-beam barge called *Serenity* is giddy with nerves. This is her first lock. It doesn't help that there's a pub right next to the lock, and on this warm August Saturday afternoon, the entire population of Fenny Stratford (about two dozen souls) are "sitting out" on the lawn and doing what the English do best: quaffing large pints of beer and laughing at foreigners.

Fortunately, we are not alone. Before entrusting his precious boat to us, the owner of the *Serenity* is on board to give Roy (the skipper) a few pointers and to show me (the mate) the ropes. Literally. And not just the ropes, but also the windlass, a metal tool used to wind down the paddles, and the pins used to moor the boat to the canal bank.

We're going upstream, so this lock is going to move us up to the water level of the next section of the canal. There's a knack to opening and closing the lock gates; you literally have to get your back into the task of pushing the heavy beam to and fro. For a second or two, it seem to refuse to budge; and to complete the humiliation, a skinny little five-year-old lock-rat girl skips down to help me.



Believe me, my young friend,
there is nothing – absolutely
nothing – half so much worth
doing than simply messing
about in boats

Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows*



Why a canal boat?

I am a terrible sailor. When the going gets rough, I turn pale green and lie down. So Roy gave up his dream of building an ocean-going boat for our retirement, and, casting around for an alternative, he thought of the canals – free of waves, absolutely flat.

Though I'd seen the pretty narrowboats moored in the marina at Stratford-on-

Avon in Warwickshire, where Roy's family lives, I'd never really thought about what they were. I certainly had no idea of the extent of the British canal system.

The system was first developed in the mid-18th century, when roads were rudimentary at best, and horse-drawn canal boats provided the industrial revolution with a reliable and cost-

effective means of transporting goods and materials. Today there's an amazing network of canals criss-crossing Britain – around 3,000 miles of them.

With this little adventure, we're dipping our toes in the water, so to speak. If we like it, and if we stick to two simple rules: one, no falling overboard; and two, no shouting at the mate, *ever* – we may acquire our very own canal boat.



Definitions

Narrowboats have a distinctive design and were originally built to fit the narrow canals of Britain, where locks and bridge holes have a minimum width of seven feet and were designed to take two narrowboats at a time. Originally towed by horses from a towpath, they're often distinctively painted with canal folk art. A **barge** is a canal boat that is wider than a narrowboat.

Life in the slow lane

If you want to slow down a bit – or a *lot*, actually – a canal boat holiday could be just the thing. But anyone who has been in a car with my husband at the wheel will find it hard to imagine him gently pattering along or enjoying a journey for its own sake.

According to Alex, a volunteer lock-keeper for the National Canal and River Trust, one should take each lock slowly, step by step, and never be in a hurry: “We like to say that anyone who is in a rush should be on the M1.”

Even apart from slowing down for bridges and stopping at locks, barges make incredibly slow progress, moving at a glacial two-to-four miles an hour. (Five miles equates to 8 kilometres.) Elderly people walking decrepit hounds along the towpath will pass you.

Going too fast – say 4.5mph – is sternly frowned on, and with good reason: your breaking wake will disturb waterfowl and other wildlife that nests along the banks.

Our boat

The gipsy in me has always hankered after a caravan or motor home; there’s something appealing about travelling in comfort with everything you need, just slightly miniaturised.

We hired the *Serenity* from **Puddling Cruisers** (puddlingcruisers.co.uk). This 55-foot long, 10-foot-wide barge is beautifully furnished with white towels and linen, Denby crockery and upmarket kitchenware. In addition to a small fridge-freezer, it has a wine-fridge that’s also perfect for keeping salad ingredients cool.

It has a spacious shower room complete with macerator flush loo, plus mod-cons such as a satellite TV and music system with iPod dock.

One king-sized bedroom makes it perfect for a couple, but the living-room sofa converts easily into a big, comfortable bed. (This was confirmed by my sister and her husband, when they drove up from Kent to carouse with us and spent the night on board.)

“Canal people are very friendly, and everyone’s equal on the canals,” Rob tells us. Seems there’s a whole mysterious canal-boat sub-culture that’s firmly opaque to newbies like us. Real purists, we hear, scorn mod cons like electricity. One can only imagine how they despise those with satellite TV and spa baths.



How does a lock work?



- The purpose of a lock is to allow a boat to move either upwards or downwards between two stretches of canal that are on different levels.
- Obviously, a boat can only enter the lock chamber when the water level in the chamber is the same as the level of the water in which the boat is floating.
- Going “uphill” along a canal, if the lock chamber is empty you can open the gates and the boat can sail straight in; if the lock chamber is full, you first have to let the water out before you can open the gates to go in. (The reverse applies when you’re going downhill.)
- As the mate, you empty or fill the lock chamber by opening or closing the underwater sluices or paddles, using your own portable square-eyed windlass to operate a system of cogs and toothed ratchets.
- Whether the water is rising or falling, you can’t open the gates until the water levels on either side of the gate are the same.
- How do you open the gate? You literally put your back into it, hoping and praying that the heavy beam will start to move *soon*.



Note: A **flight** is a series of locks designed to take a boat up or down a steep incline, separated by a “pound” of water between two locks, where boats going in opposite directions can pass. A **staircase** of locks, however, is a series of linked locks, where the top gates of one lock are also the bottom gates of the next one.

Our journey

The **Great Union Canal** is the result of an amalgamation in the late 1920s of the Great Junction Canal (built in the 1790s) and several others, which shortened the route from London to Birmingham by about 60 miles – a huge advantage at the time.

On **Day 1**, we pick up our luxurious wide-beam hire barge *Serenity* from its permanent mooring in **Milton Keynes**, located on the Grand Union Canal. After our familiarisation run down to Fenny Stratford with Rob, he leaves us to our own devices. We backtrack to **Simpson** and manage to moor up at a likely spot on the side of the canal – you can moor free of charge virtually anywhere along the towpath side of the canal. (Before boats were fitted with engines, they were towed by horses.)

On **Day 2**, we cover a total of 10 miles, heading for **Cosgrove** lock. Cruising this semi-suburban part of the canal means negotiating dozens of narrow bridges entailing some careful manoeuvring on Roy's part. He admits it takes a lot of concentration to keep the wide-beam moving forward smoothly; you can't take your eyes off the water for long before she veers off course.

We moor up for the evening just before the lock, at bridge number 65 (they're all numbered and identified on the map we've been given), so that we can walk along the towpath to check it out, as recommended. Then we stroll through the horse tunnel to the Barley Mow on the other side for a pub dinner. Maybe it's the fish and chips with mushy peas, but I lie awake half the night, a bundle of nerves, mentally rehearsing the mechanics of the lock system.

Come morning, however, I manage just fine, and the *Serenity* is not disgraced. (Not that there's anyone for me to impress, apart from a family of snooty swans).

For the rest of the day, it's rather fun pootling along at a sedate country pace. Captain Roy at the tiller, I'm free to nip down into the lovely open-plan galley (as we boat-people call the kitchen) to boil the whistling kettle for yet another plunger coffee with chocolate digestives, rustle up a gourmet breakfast



– OK, that happened once – or throw together a salad for lunch.

Day 3 takes us through a six- or seven-mile stretch of increasingly pretty farmland. Despite yesterday's small success at Cosgrove, I'm still frankly terrified of the flight of *seven* locks that lie between us and our destination: the gorgeous 1,000-year-old canal village of **Stoke Bruerne**.

Roy stays on the boat throughout the lock operation; it's my job as mate to go ashore and do whatever is required, using the windlass and the little brute strength my arms can muster. In a flight of locks like this, the mate remains

ashore the whole time, walking from lock to lock.

To my enormous relief, Alex, a volunteer from the National Canal and River Trust, is on hand to give advice and some real muscle. He winds the paddles and pushes open the gates on the left bank, while I do the same on the right. Nevertheless, I'm very proud to reach Top Lock, the seventh and final lock, which is picturesquely located right in the middle of Stoke Bruerne.

We spend a full three nights moored up here. Virtually unchanged for 100 or more years, this lovely stretch of canal front is flanked by the old **Boat Inn** and a bigger



pub called **The Navigation**; there's an interesting **Canal Museum** with its own café; a popular Indian restaurant called **The Spice of Bruerne**, a couple of gift shops and several sources of ice cream to attract day visitors.

It's been the best summer that England has seen for many decades, so everyone's sporting shorts and decidedly un-English tans. Even now, into September, the sun beats down on the Boat Inn's alfresco tables, and on boaters who've pulled collapsible chairs onto the towpath, where they slurp massive glasses of French wine and Skype their children.

Pubs and beer



And that's just the very tip of a delicious iceberg.

Dinner at a pub is a tradition of canal boating, as is the drinking of real beer – local ales are the way to go. We tried **Everard's Sunchaser Blonde** – an English lager – at the Barley Mow at Cosgrove; **Marston's English Pale Ale** at the Boat Inn at Stoke Bruerne; and **Wychwood Thrasher Bitter** at The Navigation at Stoke Bruerne.

Back to base

The return trip is far more relaxing. Already I feel like an old hand. I'm almost pleased there's no one around to help with the downhill flight of seven locks: it's a beautiful day, the cut (as we boating folk like to call the canal) is quiet and we're in no hurry. Now I can truly say I did it on my own; locks hold no more fear for me.

As the *Inland Waterways of Great Britain* rightly says, the countryside here is "pleasant and unassuming" all down to Cosgrove. Once again, we moor close to bridge number 65, and I wander off to explore the church and the village. Later, we take a bottle of wine to the aft deck to watch the warm twilight fall. Pleasantly exhausted from the day's locks, I know I'm going to sleep like a cherub.

On our final morning, Cosgrove lock is my last boating task of the week. After that, the canal runs along an embankment and across a short aqueduct across the River Great Ouse – and then, after breakfasting on a magnificent omelette (if I say so myself), we're back at the Milton Keynes marina.

Mate's verdict

What's not to like about meandering through pretty countryside in some of the most glorious weather England's ever seen? The gods smiled on us; the more usual wet weather would make it a very different experience.

Round Two will take us to the southern French town of Moissac this coming September. There, we'll spend several days on the Canal de Garonne, training for our boat-handling certification – in between gorging on sticky Camembert, hunks of baguette and copious draughts of the local wine.

Will we ever become real boaters? That has yet to be seen – but it's going to be such fun finding out! 🍷



FURTHER READING:

Inland Waterways of Great Britain
(8th Edition)

Jane Cumberlidge

The Boater's Handbook

L. T. C. Rolt

Narrow Boat

L. T. C. Rolt

One Man and a Narrowboat

Steve Haywood

Maiden's Trip

Emma Smith