



A family enjoys a day trip on the canal.





# Journeying Into the Really Slow Lane

Story by Cheri Newton, Photography by Kim Newton

Tucson is not a fast-paced city, and as such it does not bring much stress to bear on my life. So last summer, when my husband and I were invited to take a weeklong stress-relieving vacation aboard our dear friend David's canal boat, *Lily Pad*, in England, I was already relaxed—or so I thought.

Canal boats can go no more than 4 miles per hour, so a person on board can experience the surrounding world from that slow-lane pace. Could seven days on a canal boat take me into a deeper state of “being”—a state that involves focusing on and enjoying what life has to offer in the present? Curious about the answer, we accepted David's generous offer.

At Crick Marina on the Grand Union Canal, we boarded *Lily Pad*, kept left, and cruised into the 3/4-mile-long Crick Tunnel. In the 1800s, horses, mules, or donkeys led along paths on the bank of the canal pulled then-motorless boats through the water. When the boats reached a tunnel entrance, working boaters, called “barges,” used poles to push the watercraft through the tunnel. The dark Crick Tunnel proved to be our initiation to the meditative patience necessary for canal boating.

Once out of the tunnel, we passed under the M1—the motorway connecting London to Leeds—watching cars dashing by, in poignant contrast to our modest speed. Venturing down a “staircase” of seven locks called the Watford Flight, David gave me a drill

on the tasks involved in lock navigation. He explained that if you are leisurely sitting on the bow being the “duck spotter,” as I had been doing until my lesson began, you must quickly become the “lock winder.” Being the lock winder requires an ability to remain acutely in the present.

Once the boat is in the lock chamber, the lock winder closes the gates through which the boat entered, walks across the closed gates to the other side of the canal and cranks the windlass, allowing water to escape or fill—depending on whether the boat is being raised or lowered—the chamber slowly and evenly. Once the boat is at the same level as the next lock, the lock winder pushes on a balance beam that opens the gate in front of the boat, allowing the boat through to the next chamber. This series of events is repeated until the boat is up or down all locks in the staircase.

After our hard work, we moored outside the charming Admiral Nelson Pub in Braunston. A cup of tea warmed my insides. I was beginning to feel like a proper boater. My mates enjoyed



Charming countryside abounds along the Oxford Canal.

refreshing local ales, and we all took advantage of the pub's free WiFi. After a delectable meal of cottage pie, mash, gravy, and vegetables, we retired to our cozy beds.

The next day, bustling Braunston Marina captured the imagination of the boater within me. David led me into one of the specialty shops to buy a line (“rope” to landlubbers) for *Lily Pad*. Appreciating the 19th-century folk art that many boaters use to decorate their boats, I encouraged David to buy a line to match *Lily Pad*'s colors.

After another leisurely day of viewing idyllic English countryside from the boat, we moored for the night. Walking up a steep hill to a church in the beautiful village of Napton-on-the-Hill and taking in the spectacular view brought me relief from my growing cabin fever. Adapting to the living space on a 6-foot-wide boat was difficult for someone spoiled by living in a 2,000-square-foot home in Tucson.

In the morning, we bought bacon from a farm shop and dutifully made sandwiches for the volunteers working along the 2-mile-long Napton Flight, giving us a feeling of kinship with those involved in tending the locks.

That evening, while *Lily Pad* was moored at Penny Compton, David's wife, Philippa, breezed in from London to meet us at the popular Wharf Inn for gorgeous steak-and-ale pies. Our

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The 45-foot-long *Lily Pad* has a kitchen, a cozy sleeping compartment, a bathroom, and a dining-living space that converts into a second bedroom.







conversation centered on planning stops for filling the boat's water tank and emptying the toilet's cassette. David said that a larger toilet tank needs to be emptied less frequently but uses more chemicals. The eco-friendly but more expensive composting toilet was my favored option. Apparently, the narrowboat toilet is a popular subject for boaters to debate—even at dinner!

After another good night's sleep, we maneuvered through the Claydon Locks and then through three more locks to Cropredy, where we explored that sweet village and gobbled up more pies in the Braesnose Arms Pub. I noticed that, as in Napton, all our eyes were on our smartphones whenever we could find WiFi.

Now four days in, I began to have the horrible feeling that I was gaining weight from the delicious carbs that had been filling our plates and stomachs, and life was passing me by as I drifted on the canal, beautiful though it was. Hearing about Philippa's important work as a counselor in London had reminded me that I was on my own work mission in England—to market a screenplay—and watching sheep and cows grazing near the canal was no help at all toward this end. Work-ethic fables, like *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, surfaced from a deep place within me.

A helicopter buzzed by overhead, likely dropping off career-minded arts networkers at the nearby trendy Soho Farmhouse, a private club and hotel in Oxfordshire. I suddenly felt like fleeing the boat and following the helicopter. I resisted the inclination, only because I knew I couldn't get in the door of Soho Farmhouse unless I was accompanied by a member of that exclusive club.

I also became aware that my self-induced panic was simply a step in adjusting to the benefits of life at 4 miles per hour. At this point I also realized that this precious journey might actually be spoiled by my own shadowy thoughts.

Determined to get it together, I took the helm of *Lily Pad* for the first time. At Aynho Wharf we found a mooring with a view of splendid countryside. After dinner at the local pub, we played a card game before retiring. I felt like a kid, free in spirit, for the first time in years.

With the sense that the journey was about to end, we thoroughly savored a breakfast of fresh local eggs as

*Left to right, top to bottom:* Looking into passing canal boats is an acceptable activity, as people are curious about how other boaters arrange their tiny spaces.

A cat peers through a canal-boat window.

Crank the windlass too fast and 40,000 gallons of water might spill in or out of the lock, jeopardizing life and/or boat.

A number of narrow boats dock at Crick Marina.





A refreshing stop at a country pub is just one of the innumerable payoffs for boaters who adjust to life at 4 miles per hour.

we cruised through Oxfordshire. Incredibly, we couldn't resist an enticing organic-farm shop and bought more food supplies. A strong internet signal at our mooring in the extremely picturesque village of Lower Heyford enabled my mates to watch the end of Wimbledon, on a computer. Later, we walked to The Barley Mow, a traditional country pub, where we enjoyed dinner and more beer before heading back to the

mooring and a deep sleep.

The next day, our inevitable return to "civilization" was upon us. Mooring for our final night, in the town of Banbury, we shopped the sales, had haircuts, enjoyed coffees, and had a spectacular curry complete with poppadums. And I discovered mooring in a city has its minuses as midnight revelers shouted "Wake up boaters!" Their calls jolted me back to life at 75 miles

per hour. I suddenly felt regret that I had not managed to go deeper into the experience of just "being" when I had had the chance to in the exquisite quietude of the English countryside, and now the journey was, sadly, over.

Next time, I'll leave my phone at home.

Well, maybe not.

DL

Cheri Newton is a local freelance writer. Comments for publication should be addressed to [letters@desertleaf.com](mailto:letters@desertleaf.com).



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