



AllWays

Narrowboating in the UK

[www.allwaystraveller.com](http://www.allwaystraveller.com)



## Life is good on the Grand Union Canal

**A narrowboat is one designed to fit the UK's integrated network of canal waterways and locks.**

These canals originally provided a nationwide transport network during the Industrial Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

The narrowboats that plied them were first horse drawn and then powered by steam and then diesel engines.

With the coming of the railways, canal use for commercial traffic gradually diminished and had virtually disappeared by the end of the 1960s, though a small number of dedicated boat owners still make a living hauling goods.

From the 1970s many people began looking to the narrowboat as place to live, with many discovering the pleasure of a narrowboat vacation.

Family run operator, Union Canal Carriers' are based in Braunston, Northamptonshire and provide 10 routes, ranging from the relaxing nearly lock free to the more energetic with many locks and tunnels to negotiate.

They offer day trip, short break and longer hire narrowboat opportunities on the Grand Union Canal and have established a dedicated following of long-time guests and those new to this type of holiday..

Union Canal Carriers is a member of Drifters Waterway Holidays, a coming together of nine independent canal boat holiday operators.

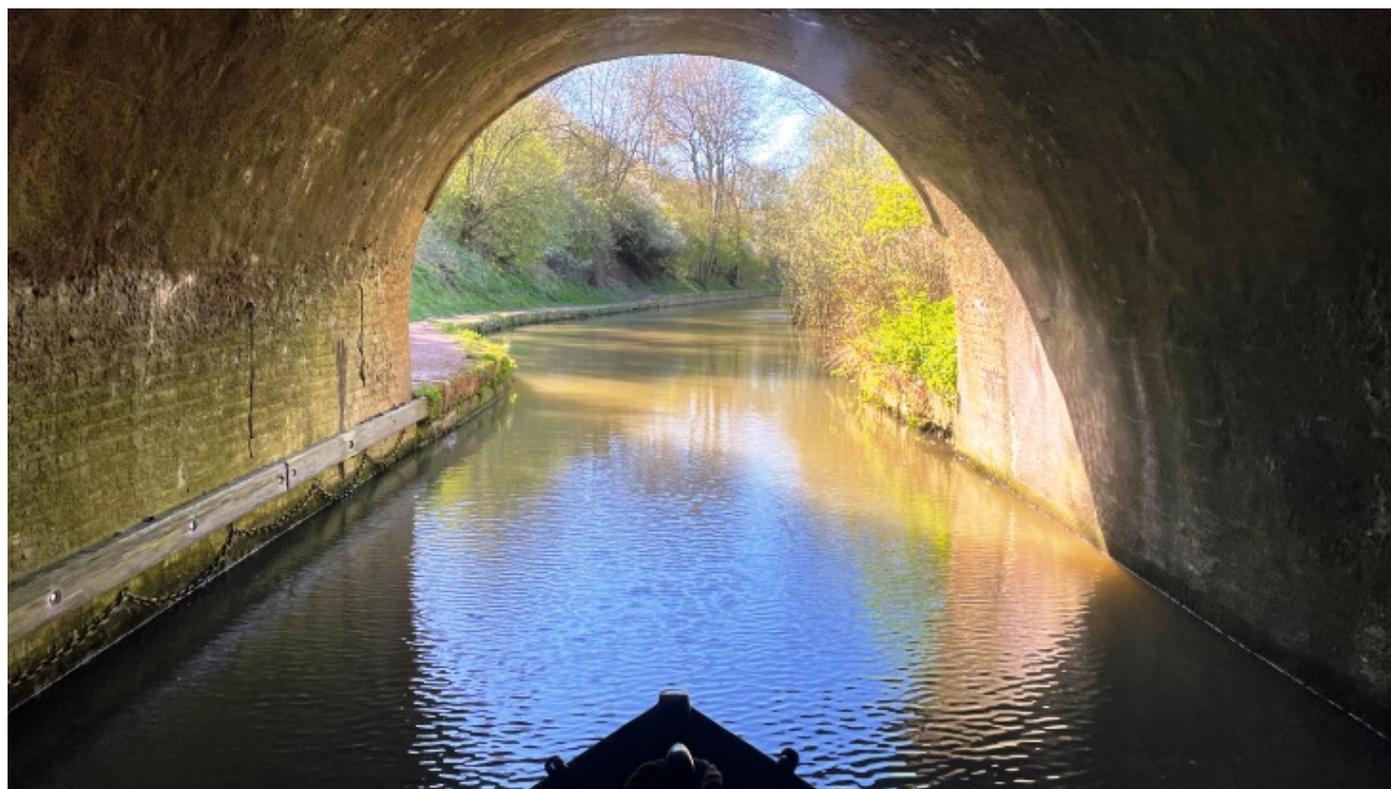
Together, Drifters offers access to over 550 narrowboats for hire from 45 bases across England, Wales and Scotland.

[www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk](http://www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk)

[www.drifters.co.uk](http://www.drifters.co.uk)

**Ashley Gibbins**  
Commissioning Editor  
*AllWays traveller*





## Taking the plunge on narrowboating

If you have not taken to a narrowboat and think you would like it, let me reassure you.

By Ashley Gibbins

You will likely take to it like the proverbial 'duck to water' and be looking forward to the next trip while mooring up for the last time your maiden voyage.

Moreover, the next time on a narrowboat is likely to be even more rewarding because you will 'know the ropes'.

Our first experience of the narrowboat was with Union Canal Carriers on the 47-foot *Purbeck*, the company's first reverse layout boat designed for couple's.

It has a sleeping cabin at the front for a fixed double or two singles, leading into a toilet and shower room, and the fitted galley and saloon at the back.

Arriving at Union Canal Carriers base at Braunston, Northamptonshire we were introduced to *Purbeck* by Heather, before being taken through the first two nearby locks on a trial run with Tim.

We moored within 'spitting distance' of the Admiral Nelson, the perfect English country pub so no need to go anywhere for the rest of the afternoon.

Union Canal Carriers has a fleet of boats that can accommodate two to 12 people.

[www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk/the-boats/](http://www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk/the-boats/)

### Heading off

Up bright and early on our second day, we had moored overnight next to Chris and Graham, a very experienced yachting couple, and for whom the narrowboat posed no problems.

They took us under their 'wing' and travelled in convoy with us into and out of the first set of locks.

And through Braunston Tunnel which, at just over a mile in length, was a little scary on our first full day.

The friendship shown by Chris and Graham was just what we needed and gave us a bedrock of confidence that saw us good for the rest of the trip.

### The canal community

But then the whole canal community which one immediately joins is like that, be it from those living on their boats or, like Nick, who run haulage along the canal.

Then there are the 'old hands', like Chris and Graham, who have obviously got it sussed and make everything look so easy. And finally, there are novices like Ann and myself.



One narrowboater, who helped at a lock summed it up.

"The narrowboat community is a 'village on water'. We are all one big happy family. We all help each other."

How right she was.

## It's all about the going

The other thing that we soon appreciated about narrowboating is that it's all about the going rather than the getting anywhere.

This may sound obvious when top speed is going to be just four miles an hour and even slower when passing boats moored along the canal.

And getting through the locks along the canal slows things down even more.

Much is now made of the pleasures of slow travel and a narrowboat must be the epitome of this.

## Peace and tranquillity

When not making friends for a brief while, at the locks, this is a pursuit of peace and tranquillity in stunning rural surroundings.

There is the freedom to moor up along the tow path, whenever and wherever the mood takes.

And being totally self-contained, one can decide to stop for a brew or the night as one wishes.

I have never woken up to birdsong as loud and as thrilling as we did on the Union Canal.

## Five memorable days

In all, we spent five memorable days on the Grand Union Canal aboard Purbeck and really slotted into narrowboat life.

Of course, we made all the usual mistakes at the few locks and with the first few moorings.

And turning our narrowboat around at a 'winding hole' would have done Laurel and Hardy proud.

But come the end of our trip along the Grand Union Canal we were working as an effective team and had settled into our routine on Purbeck.

The morning 'cuppa' does not taste as good at home as it did on Purbeck, our snack lunch on board was a treat, as were the early evening 'drinks and nibbles' before strolling to a country pub for dinner.

Our first trip on a narrowboat was a truly memorable and really enjoyable, and we said farewell to Purbeck knowing that our next time will be even more enjoyable.

## Tips for the trip

If you think a narrowboat holiday is for you the people at Union Canal Carriers, and the other companies offering similar boating opportunities, will take you through all you need to know.

Some thoughts from our first time

### Physical effort

The first thing to say is that a narrowboat holiday does involve a certain level of physical effort, what with mooring up and negotiating the locks.

That said, we met many retirees who had been narrowboating for many years and were determined to do so for some years to come.

Travelling as a family or group of friends obviously also helps to share the load.



Ann navigates a lock in style

### The dress code

Casual throughout, focussing on comfort over style, and clothes that can be layered if needed, with waterproofs and waterproof gloves also a necessity.

### Use the space onboard

By its nature, a narrowboat is a relatively confined space, but this need not be an issue.

By using all the cupboard and storage space, putting bags behind chairs and under the table it is surprising how much can be tucked away. And, of course, being neat and tidy at all times is a must.

### Grand Union Carriers

For any other advice on whether to opt for a narrowboat holiday contact Union Canal Carriers.

Needless-to-say they will be more than helpful in helping you make the right choice.

[www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk](http://www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk)  
01788 890784  
[info@unioncanalcarriers.co.uk](mailto:info@unioncanalcarriers.co.uk)



Purbeck's interior



Heather from Grand Union Carriers



## The Grand Union Canal

**The Grand Union Canal flows 137 miles and through 166 locks from London to Birmingham.**

The UK's longest canal, it was originally built to transport goods between the two cities but, today, it is the boats that take advantage of the canal, with walkers and cyclists using the towpath.

From the River Thames at Brentford it provides a route through the Chiltern Hills and rural Northamptonshire and Warwickshire to Birmingham.

Along the way, it has branches including the Paddington, Slough, Wendover, Aylesbury, Leicester and Northampton 'arms'.

Some of its most dramatic features include the Iron Trunk Aqueduct carrying the canal over the River Ouse in Buckinghamshire, the Blisworth Tunnel in Northamptonshire and the Hatton Flight of 21 Locks in Warwickshire.

## The Canal and River Trust

**The Canal and River Trust had guardianship of canals, rivers, reservoirs and docks in England and Wales.**

It maintains 2000 miles of waterway network with the 2,949 bridges, 1,582 locks and 280 aqueducts along the way.

This enables everyone to make the most of this tremendous natural resource and the wildlife habitats it embraces.

The face-to-face contact between the Trust and those who live, trade or enjoy leisure time on the water comes through the band of dedicated volunteers who are there to provide any information, advice and support that might be needed.

They are excellent ambassadors for the Trust and 'worth their weight in gold' for narrowboat novices like Ann and myself.

At the start of our trip on the Grand Union Canal it was Pat and John who were there to help at the first locks.



And on our last full day, Kevin helped us through a flight of six locks. We learnt so much about the process and save at least 990 minutes thanks to Kevin.

In Scotland this role is performed by Scottish Canals.

[www.canalrivertrust.org.uk](http://www.canalrivertrust.org.uk)  
[www.scottishcanals.co.uk](http://www.scottishcanals.co.uk)



Pat : one of the Trust's great volunteers



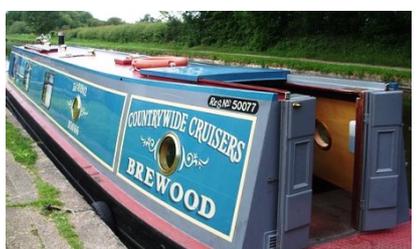
ABC



Anglo Welsh



Black Prince



Countrywide Cruisers



Foxhangers



Kate



Napton



Shire Cruisers



Union Canal Carriers

## Drifter's covers the UK canal network

Taking a narrowboat in England, Wales or Scotland offers the ultimate slow travel experience.

With the right provider, the standard of narrowboat is likely to be of a similar high standard, so it comes down to choosing the canal to go on.

### Drifters Waterway Holidays



Drifters Waterway Holidays is a group of nine independent canal boat holiday operators with 550 narrowboats for hire from 45 bases.

Each Drifters operator will be independently assessed and accredited by British Marine.

[www.britishmarine.co.uk](http://www.britishmarine.co.uk)

Drifters also works with the Canal & River Trust in highlighting the enjoyment of canal boat holidays.

[www.canalrivertrust.org.uk](http://www.canalrivertrust.org.uk)

### Drifters operators

#### ABC Boat Hire

ABC Boat Hire has 15 locations across England, Wales and Scotland, as well as day boat hire, holiday cottages, caravan parks and a full range of marina services for boat owners.

[www.abcboathire.com](http://www.abcboathire.com)

#### Anglo Welsh Waterways Holidays

Anglo Welsh Waterways Holidays offers the choice of more than 160 boats from 11 bases across England and Wales, day boat hire from six bases and operates the Little Star Trip Boat at the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct.

[www.anglowelsh.co.uk](http://www.anglowelsh.co.uk)

#### Black Prince Holidays

Black Prince Holidays offers canal boat holidays from nine hire boat locations across England, Wales and Scotland.

[www.black-prince.com](http://www.black-prince.com)

#### Countrywide Cruisers

Countrywide Cruisers is a family business offering narrowboat hire from Brewood on the Shropshire Union Canal in Staffordshire

[www.countrywide-cruisers.co.uk](http://www.countrywide-cruisers.co.uk)

#### Foxhangers

Foxhangers is family owned and run boating holidays on the Kennet & Avon Canal at Devizes [www.foxhangers.co.uk](http://www.foxhangers.co.uk)

#### Kate Boats

Kate Boats is a family business offering boating holidays from Stockton Top Marina on the Grand Union Canal in Warwickshire

[www.kateboats.com](http://www.kateboats.com)

#### Napton Narrowboats

Napton Narrowboats is a family business offering canal boat hire from Napton Marina in Warwickshire and Atherley in Staffordshire.

[www.napton-marina.co.uk](http://www.napton-marina.co.uk)

#### Shire Cruisers

Shire Cruisers offers canal boat hire in Yorkshire on the Calder & Hebble Navigation and Rochdale Canal and on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal.

[www.shirecruisers.co.uk](http://www.shirecruisers.co.uk)

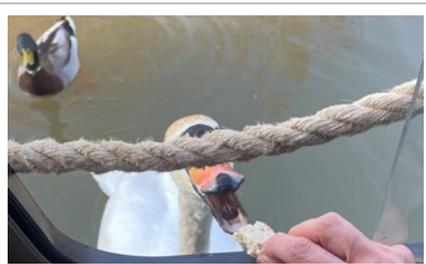
#### Union Canal Carriers

Union Canal Carriers offers canal boat holidays and day boat hire from Braunston on the Grand Union Canal in Northamptonshire

[www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk](http://www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk)

More information : [www.drifters.co.uk](http://www.drifters.co.uk)

## A snapshot of the narrowboating in the UK



## AllWays traveller and the International Travel Writers Alliance



*AllWays traveller* is the consumer travel magazine from the International Travel Writers, providing independent travellers with views of the world from Alliance travel journalists.

[www.allwaystraveller.com](http://www.allwaystraveller.com)



**The International Travel Writers Alliance** is the world's largest association of professional travel journalists.

[www.itwalliance.com](http://www.itwalliance.com)



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