

FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

As I sat on a Virgin Atlantic 747, lost amid Brit travelers to Disneyworld, I had a revelation. I had just spent sixteen days without seeing, or talking to, another American. Although I've traveled from Bratsk, Siberia, to Machu Picchu, Peru, I'd never before been completely separated from my snug American culture. As much as I enjoyed the purpose of my journey—a valuable peek into the past—my plunge into modern middle-class Britain was the unexpected highlight of my trip.

What was I doing? For seven days I lived on a canalboat traveling from Newbury to Bath. More correctly named narrowboats, these boats are seventy feet long by a scant seven feet wide. Our hotelboat consisted of two narrowboats, one pulling the other.



Why was I drifting down the Kennet & Avon Canal at three mph? Partly because I was totally enchanted by my short excursion on the Regents Canal in London in 2003, and partly because I recognized canals as a great untapped resource for authors who write books set after c. 1740. Britain's vast network of canals was the country's lifeline



for transporting goods and supplies, such as coal, timber, limestone, and grain, and doing such mundane work as hauling away manure and trash from cities. They were serene pathways into the heartland when Britain's roads were little more than rutted byways. Yes, there were tolls, based on tonnage hauled, and there

were locks, locks, and more locks. But not until the height of the railway era in the mid to late nineteenth centuries did the canals begin to lose their grip on commercial transportation. (Coal was still being hauled by narrowboat and horse in London during

the gas shortages of World War II.)

But after the canals were nationalized in 1948, they plunged into disuse and were rescued only by a lawsuit against the government and, later, by the determined efforts of a number of dedicated canal lovers. They have been lovingly restored and are now one of the Britain's gems, primarily used for recreational purposes.

How did eighteenth century engineers create them? In most cases, very ingeniously. At the Crofton pumping station, the high point of the Kennet & Avon, I saw the two enormous boilers, lovingly preserved, and the three-story-high pumps that each moved one TON of water per scoop. Why? Because every time a lock is used, water drains downhill and must be sent back up in order for the lock system to function.



Hence, pumping stations. I'll spare you the details of digging canals, lining them so they don't leak, and building lock after lock to raise or lower the water level as needed. Just know some truly intricate engineering was required.

To me, however, the most amazing construction feature is the aqueduct, something I always thought only carried water from a reservoir. But on Britain's waterways an aqueduct carries an entire canal, with depth enough to float a narrowboat over a river, a railroad, or even a modern highway. Just picture an overpass strong enough to support a canal! The Dundas Aqueduct east of Bath is two hundred years old and working fine, thank you very much—a true testament to the engineering of the day. The photos are the Dundas Aqueduct itself, plus a view of the canal flowing over the top of it.



What did I see besides other narrowboats? Mile after mile of alder, willow,



hawthorn, poplar, and silver birch. Wild flowers and reeds of every description, from meadowsweet to brambles to bull-rushes (cat's tails). Oodles of ducks, swans, and geese, though the only other birds I recognized were crows and herons. There were fields of grain and cows on the chalk downs at the top of our climb up from Newbury, jungle-like

greenery on both ends of our trip. Most of the old village houses still exist, with some of the ancient barge inns still functioning as public houses.

Others, including the lock-keeper cottages, are now private homes; one old warehouse has been turned into a theater. Basically, much of the canal is remarkably similar to what it was two



hundred years ago. The main differences, our boat had a motor instead of a horse on the towpath and the locks are brick-lined instead of mostly turf. And we had the luxury of three meals a day served on china around a dining table, plus "elevenses" and afternoon tea delivered on trays by a fleet-footed crew member moving along a six-inch catwalk at the side of the boat.

And, oh yes, we had to open and close every one of seventy-two locks ourselves. Lock-keepers are a thing of the past. That means opening giant wooden levers on each side of the lock, usually by "putting the bum to it." The boats move into the lock, side by side. The rear lock gates then have to be closed. After that, the front sluices are ratched open, using a windlass. When the water level inside the lock is even with the direction in which the boat is moving, the front locks are opened - and then have to be closed again after our boats moved through. This is why I cannot recommend do-it-yourself canalboating unless you have at least four strong backs to help with the locks or are traveling in tandem with another boat. The Newbury to Bath section of the Kennet & Avon canal is



famous for the Caen Hill flight of locks—twenty-nine in a row that take all day to negotiate. Fascinating, but tough. Even with everyone helping, our twenty-something crew was done in by the time we reached the bottom of the hill. (We traveled just behind two boats in which one of the wives was nearly hysterical about this NOT being what she planned for her vacation!)

Was it worth it? Oh, yes! The whole experience—the narrowboat journey, the people I met, even my encounters with British train service, which I cannot praise it too highly—added up to a unique journey back in time while enjoying good friends, good food, and the beauty and peace that still exists in rural Britain.

For those who would like to know more about canal journeys in Britain, take a look at www.flagships.co.uk. Unless, like the poor lady mentioned above, you want to do it all yourself, select “Hotelboats.” For more details about the joys and hazards of traveling by canalboat, feel free to contact me at blairbancroft@aol.com.