

**WATER WORLD**

England's 220-km Grand Union Canal stretches from London to Birmingham, offering boaters a slower pace to explore, away from the madding crowds.

canal days

**BOAT**  
trip!

# SLOW CRUISE

## EXPLORE ENGLAND'S GRAND UNION CANAL BY NARROWBOAT

**T**he red logo on a Virgin train is a smear of lipstick as it rushes past, its signature V publicizing its pedigree as it catapults passengers southward to the urban chaos of London. I'm standing on an ancient stone bridge curving above England's Grand Union Canal, which idly flows below. The train is already an afterthought when I hear the low hum of a narrowboat gliding under the bridge on this early-September morning. >>

Narrowboat on the Grand Union Canal near Weedon Bec

JANET GYENES

*if you go*  
 To learn more about England's waterways or to hire a narrowboat, go to Canal & River Trust. canalrivertrust.org.uk



Narrowboat on the Leicester Line near Long Buckby CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW RIGHT Cranking open a lock paddle, Foxton Locks; sloes, or blackthorn fruits, used in sloe gin; narrowboat in a staircase lock, Foxton Locks; Bill, the greyhound, frolics alongside the canal

take the rural route



>> Dew drops glisten on blue-black sloes and plump rose hips that frame the grassy towpath. The faint whiff of petrol lingers in the crisp morning air as the brightly painted boat drifts into the distance of this pastoral picture. It's as moody and romantic as a John Constable painting.

Stay-aboard narrowboats are available as vacation rentals throughout England, where more than 35,000 of these so-called barges cruise the canals and rivers. Painted with traditional motifs like roses and castles, the history of narrowboats dates back to the Industrial Revolution when horses tramped the towpaths (often led by children) hauling the flat-bottomed boats filled with coal.

get-away

I'm travelling on *Fuzzy Duck* (she's 55-feet long and just shy of seven feet wide), on which the six of us (if you count Bill and Bella, two rescue greyhounds) continue our six-day journey north on the Grand Union Canal to Foxton Locks (we set off at Bugbrooke) on the Leicester Line, with a detour down the Welford Arm, before retracing the route back. This 220-km-long

waterway begins at the Thames in London and wriggles to Birmingham, crossing 216 locks along the way. A speedy trip on one of these slow boats would take a dozen days.

We tie up at the village Weedon Bec in Daventry, Northamptonshire, and poke around in an antiques shop brimming with curiosities such as loaf-like ceramic hot water bottles that were used to "iron" chilly sheets to warm up the bed. Back on the barge, we chat with other boaters as they glide by, steaming cups of tea in hand.

Soon, it's all hands on deck at the Whilton and Buckby flight of seven double locks. Two of us grab tire-iron-like windlasses, which serve as gate keys, and jump off the back of the narrowboat with Bill and Bella. Using the windlasses, we start cranking open the paddles to let water rush into the lock.

Then we push open the heavy wooden lock beams to let *Fuzzy Duck* inside. After, we reverse this winding-and-pushing dance that we'll repeat six more times. The narrowboat floats uphill at an unhurried pace. It's a timeless trick and an idyllic way to explore the England countryside. — Janet Gyenes

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