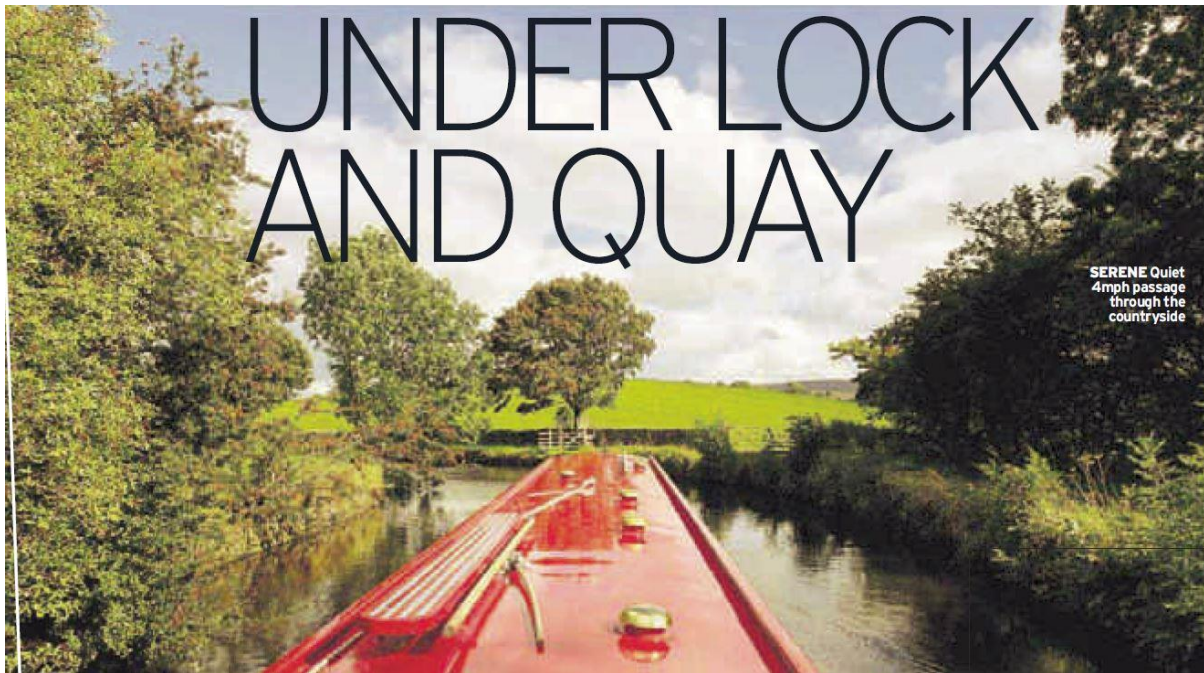


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## **Under Lock & Quay**



### **Novice bargee Trevor Davies skilfully steers his family along a beautiful section of the canal which follows the Pennine Way**

I always fancied walking the Pennine Way but when I looked into it, I realised that was perhaps a bit ambitious.

And then I found out you could cruise along it in a barge.

The Leeds-Liverpool canal meanders, climbs and tunnels 127 miles through the backbone of England.

Its journey reveals both timeless scenery and the era of industrial revolution that forged its place on the landscape in brick and iron.

My family and I joined Shire Cruises to spend a weekend on a narrowboat, discovering all the canal has to offer – its pleasant views, villages, pubs and, as we soon found out, a whole new way of life.

The first thing you notice as you load your stuff on the 56ft craft is the quiet – ducks and swans gliding along the canal, diverting their course for the occasional boat softly chugging along at 4mph.

It was a welcome peace – away from city life and its traffic – which was shattered only by us. Well me, actually.

Navigating our way from Barnoldswick to Gargrave, four miles from Skipton, North Yorks, was not easy, at first. After a thorough guide to the boat and its operations, we were accompanied by Matt, after casting off and moving into forward gear.

He explained: "There are no brakes. You have to put it into reverse to slow down to a halt. And the barge won't steer unless it is in forward."

"Oh," I thought.

"It's a good job the owner wasn't in," he said after my first collision with another barge, stationary at its mooring. "He wouldn't have been happy about that, probably would have shouted and called you all sorts," he added.

"Still, no damage done?" I said, attempting a gruff Yorkshire attitude.

After taking us through the first three locks, telling us how to wind open the sluices of the giant gates before pushing them to the side and motoring in, we were on our own

The panic on our faces before the next likely collision was noticed by the seasoned hand on the tiller of the barge coming towards us. "Oh no, it's another boat," he laughed, mocking us as we narrowly avoided him.

We might as well have had L-plates on the bow.

But it was a balmy Friday evening in the Yorkshire Dales and soon we began to relax.

Our first destination was East Marton, five miles away – although it seemed a lot further to novice navigators like us.

We were told we could moor virtually anywhere on the towpath for the night, by banging in two giant steel stakes and tying up.

But East Marton, close to where the Pennine Way joins the canal, had all the amenities we needed – a pub called the Cross Keys, which had a highly recommended restaurant.

To minimise the number of locks, engineers built the canal along contours of the hills to stay at the same level. The first three locks had lowered us some 135 feet, but we were still cruising along at 459ft above sea level.

The twists and turns of the waterway give you an ever-changing view over a lot of rolling green hills, home to sheep and cows. And on the horizon stand the taller, brooding peaks of the dales.

It's a unique perspective, and you start to daydream about living the good life on a canal boat.

Congratulating ourselves on just one slight scrape going round a hairpin bend, the famous double bridge of the Pennine Way came into view and we had reached our destination.

East Marton was a safe place to moor, but we still locked up before going to the pub. The Cross Keys is a good 50ft above the canal and from the garden we enjoyed a local pint as we admired our nifty bit of parking achieved with ropes, a pole, forward and reverse gears, and virtually no shouting.

A boat like ours, which sleeps six, with kitchen, good shower and two toilets, will cost between £30,000 and £50,000 to buy. There's everything you need, including microwave, TV

and central heating, all running off the mains charged by the barge's diesel engine, which needs to be on for a few hours a day to keep all systems up and running. All you need is to top up with water and fuel along the route.

It's a seductive alternative lifestyle for some. At the pub we met two couples coming up for retirement who were using the holiday to see if they wanted to invest in a boat and fully explore the 2,000 miles of waterways in England and Wales.

It's free to moor in places, where you can stay for up to two weeks, so the costs are low. Of 33,000 boats on our waterways, 26% are now primary residences. That's up 16% in 10 years, according to the Canal and River Trust, the charity that maintains the routes. But we were warned, there are plenty of places to avoid mooring up overnight.

One couple, who had been holidaying on the canals for 28 years, told us: "Don't stay in Leeds."

But we were only here for the weekend and would make Gargrave after tackling six locks the next day.

The food in the Cross Keys was well worth the trip and we made a booking for Sunday lunch for what we were told are the biggest Yorkshire puddings in the county.

After a tiring first day we slept soundly on the barge – and no need for the central heating. We didn't even hear the rain.

The next morning we cast off for Gargrave, pursued by swans, trying to grab some of our breakfast on the patio at the stern.

It was a bit of a slog going down the six locks at Newton Bank, but we were assisted by an energetic keeper, giving us instructions and warning us about boats coming the other way.

Gargrave was a welcome sight, sandwiched between the canal and the River Aire. We moored up for the night and headed off into the village for an excellent meal at the Bollywood Cottage restaurant.

Over dinner, I asked my daughters, aged 21 and 23, about the trip. I wasn't sure it would be their thing, imagining it might be a bit too quiet. But they assured me they loved the serene, slow pace through the beautiful countryside.

And they were both amazed that we were getting a superb 4G phone signal. By the time we headed back we felt like professionals and everyone was at home with their hand on the tiller.

■ Drifters Waterway Holidays has nearly 600 canal boats for hire at 45 bases across England, Scotland and Wales with 2017 prices starting at £395 for a short break on a boat for four people and from £575 for a week; Sowerby Bridge boats for two people from £440 and £675. [drifters.co.uk](http://drifters.co.uk), 0344 984 0322.

■ Sowerby Bridge boat yard is in the town centre with secure parking and 5mins by taxi from the railway station or the yard staff will collect customers.

■ Tourist info: [yorkshire.com](http://yorkshire.com)

**BEST TIME TO GO** The North's canals will float your boat from spring to autumn