

the art of... *slow*

Caroline Coulton discovered that you don't need meditation or medication as a tranquilliser, you can holiday on a canal boat

Being on a narrow boat is almost Zen-like. There's something about being forced to go at less than four miles an hour that sends your brain into 'go slow' and your whole body relaxes. Even winding your way through more than 30 locks, which would in any other situation seem strenuous, here they add to the sensation of calm by the sheer repetitive action. Opening and closing locks becomes a meditative ritual - like a Japanese tea ceremony on a much larger scale. Focus on the winding of the paddle gear, the water flowing in and the gentle lulling chug, chug, chug of the narrow boat and you'll find it's hypnotic.

The locks themselves, a genius staircase of water, allow you to make your way up and down hill, at the same time forging friendly connections



with other holidaymakers as you go through two boats at a time and work the locks together.

With everyone so civil and passers-by waving and smiling at you it's not hard to realise that at one time this was commonplace and now sadly it's reserved for narrow boat goers and people walking on canal towpaths.

We holidayed with long-running established family firm Shire Cruisers, making our way along the Rochdale Canal from Sowerby Bridge to Todmorden, covering 34 miles and 34 very social locks. We climbed through the magnificent waves of the Pennine moors, winding through deep dells, passing Todmorden, Hebden Bridge and Heptonstall (Ted Hughes country). On



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board our narrow boat, Hereford, we had central heating, hot water and comfortable beds; a living/dining area with a TV and a fully equipped kitchen including a microwave, and an impressive two bathrooms with shower and bath.

The lovely Josh, one of the Shire Cruisers staff, took us step by step through the first three locks. He was unfazed and patient with us as we learned how to navigate the winding of the paddles and the pushing of the gates open and closed. He then waved us off, leaving us to go on our way.

We loved our days and nights spent aboard the Hereford and we even got to take our beloved dog with us. Narrow boating is a snapshot of an old way of living - a way that most of us have lost. A way of life

that feels a hell of a lot more right than the hustle and bustle of modern living. We'll definitely be back slowly cruising the Rochdale Canal again soon! □

Prices for a weekend break are from £350 for 2 to over £1,000 for 10, depending on the date. Everything is included: boat licence, all equipment, fuel, instruction, bedding, maps and car parking. Please mention Beautiful when contacting Shire Cruisers at www.shirecruisers.co.uk or call 01422 832 712. Shire Cruisers is part of Drifters Waterway Holidays, which offers over 500 boats from 35 bases across the country. For more information visit www.drifters.co.uk or call 0844 984 0322.

