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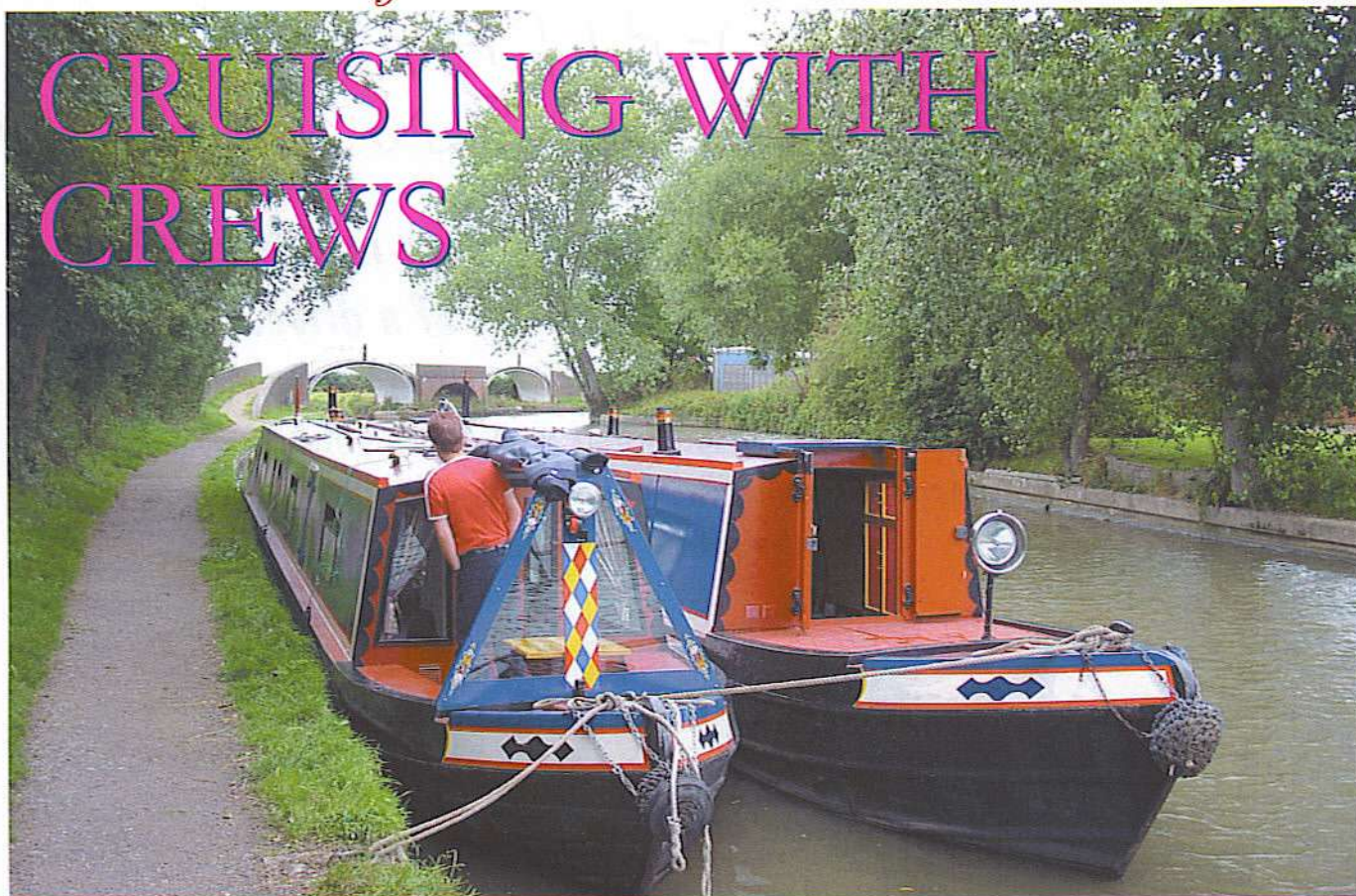
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FREE INSIDE: HOLIDAY HIRE BOAT LISTINGS

CRUISING WITH CREWS



The boats butty Alnwick (left) and motor Morpeth moored for the night on the Grand Union near Braunston Turn.

Richard Hill makes a welcome comeback to the magazine with an intriguing look into a hitherto

little known aspect of his life. Having survived three heart attacks and two major heart operations, Richard finds it difficult for him and his partner to enjoy the canals via the 'self hire' route. Hotel narrow boats could be an alternative, but there's one difficulty. Richard and his partner Simon are a gay couple. Fortunately this year, they found an ideal solution in the new hotel narrow boat holiday company, the Exclusive Gay Cruising Company. It was the perfect opportunity for them to celebrate the 'coming of age' of their 21 years together by taking a week out to sample the pleasure and pampering provided by an exclusively gay crew. Richard takes up the story...

Gay people have always enjoyed and integrated well with the 'canal community'. George Broadhead wrote of a

'humanist' gay 'marriage' ceremony 7 years ago: "On 14 August 1998, a ceremony was held for Gary and Iain on the narrow boat *Wind in the Willows* whilst navigating the Grand Union Canal from Yeading to Greenford, West London"



Owners Peter (left) and Michael.

My own experiences have been similar. The National Waterways Festival, when held in Salford Quays in Manchester a few years ago coincided with the annual gay festival in Manchester called Mardi Gras.

Visitors spending the entire weekend at the Waterways Festival would wear a permanent armband to indicate they had already paid, while similarly, visitors to the gay Mardi Gras could purchase a pink armband which would allow them free entrance to every participating gay pub or club in Manchester's 'Gay Village'.

After my first night at Mardi Gras I quite expected to be in a tiny minority, perhaps even of one, who would be seen wearing both armbands at the Waterways Festival. But I was pleasantly surprised when I noticed many people wearing both, clearly indicating that a significant number of waterway enthusiasts are either gay themselves, or at the very least 'gay friendly' and enjoy spending time with their gay friends.

A great leveller

The actor David Suchet, himself a canal enthusiast once described the canals as 'a great leveller' in a social sense, as did actor Timothy West and his wife Prunella Scales when I interviewed them a few years ago. And so it is.

Although there's nothing obviously 'gay' about *Morpeth*

and *Alnwick*, I did wonder whether the company and crew might encounter any hostility or homophobia once they became 'established' on the waterways. So I asked around and spoke to other boaters, towpath users and canal enthusiasts, explaining the 'exclusivity' of the boats being for a gay clientele. Not one seemed shocked, surprised, disapproving or 'disgusted'. One elderly woman even envied at the fact that similar 'straight' orientated hotel boats didn't provide such exacting, excellent and exclusive standards. Even a couple of 'straight' marine engineers, intrigued by the presence of a film crew interviewing Simon and I were impressed, and even told us of a 'gay' pub we would be passing on our way through Fenny Stratford.

The film crew were there from the ITV series *Water World* who similarly found both our story and the story of an Exclusively Gay hotel narrow boat fascinating. In the second series of *Water World* they had included a gay couple who lived aboard a narrow boat in Birmingham.

Co-owners of the Exclusively Gay Cruising Company are couple Michael and Peter. "When you're here with us," said Michael, "you get treated like a king – or perhaps maybe I should say a queen!"

"Our aim is to let people have a marvellous week, to be waited on hand and foot. Join in with the boating if you want to or otherwise sit back and enjoy the scenery."

The holiday routes are



Being filmed for TV's *Water World*.



A typical twin cabin aboard the *butty Alnwick*.

designed to begin and end within easy reach of a railway station, and a member of the crew meets and greets you at the station. We started our cruise in Rugby, and from the very outset were treated as though we were the only people in the world that mattered to the crew.

Warm welcome

Once aboard, we were welcomed with chilled champagne before being given the grand tour of the two narrow boats *Morpeth* and *Alnwick*.

Morpeth is the powered boat while *Alnwick* is the 'butty'; brand new and fitted out with three luxurious cabins, two double, one twin; all *en suite*. There are 240 volt domestic power sockets in every cabin and very comfortable 6ft 3in beds.

Each cabin is also equipped with a radio/cd/cassette player and the boat has a large collection of CD's. The shelf above the bed has inbuilt individual bed head lights plus a selection of books, fruit and chocolates.

Storage space is limited, but adequate and accessible. The *en suite* shower room has a fully equipped shower, a wash hand basin with hot and cold running water, and a flushing toilet.

Breakfast is served aboard *Morpeth*. The crew offer a refreshingly original 21st Century breakfast before casting off and embarking on

the next leg of the cruise. The dining area/lounge is fitted out in an innovative informal layout, combining the historical aspects of narrow boats such as a real coal cabin stove, through to state-of-the-art hi-fi sound system.

Our hosts, Michael and Peter go to extraordinary lengths to make sure that every guests taste is catered for. When booking you are asked your dietary dislikes and/or needs as well as your food and drink preferences to ensure that they have plenty of everything on board for each guest.

We cruised at the leisurely pace of four miles an hour. As every narrow boater will know, at that speed, in that setting, the country seems an entirely different place.

Do as much work as you want

If it's fitness you're after, then walk alongside the boats, or jog to and from the boats (though they won't be where you left them). Or, you can help out at the locks, winding paddles up and down, pushing or pulling the heavy lock gates, or bow hauling all 20+ tons of *Alnwick* into the lock chambers. The crew will also teach you to take the tiller of the *butty Alnwick*. Or, if you simply want to sunbathe, sit, read and relax while enjoying hundreds of years of history and heritage of our inland waterways while letting the crew do all the hard work – they're used to it!

Lunch is usually served while

Hotel Boat Holiday

the boats are moored. It's a light but luscious lunch, which sometimes you'll enjoy on the move much to the envy of self hire boaters who have to prepare their own!

Peter and Michael clearly put an enormous amount of thought into the design of both the boats and the needs of the clientele, and have undoubtedly succeeded. This pair of hotel narrow boats is the crème de la crème of any similar hotel boats with the added luxury of being owned, crewed by, and catering for an exclusively gay clientele. However, if you're a gay couple who want to spend time afloat with your 'gay friendly' straight friends, (or a straight couple who want to spend time afloat with your gay friends) this too is welcomed.

Not a gay hotel

"We don't style ourselves as a gay hotel," says Michael, "We style ourselves as a gay holiday. We'll make our best efforts to make sure that it becomes more of a week long house party, rather than a hotel."

Each and every evening meal seemed a speciality. Both Michael and Peter are extremely accomplished cooks, and dinner is one of the highlights of every single evening, beginning at around 7.30pm and lasting long into the night.

Weather permitting, Peter and Michael make one evening a canal side barbecue night. During our barbecue evening, I happened to mention, in an alcoholic haze, that one of the



A night time canalside barbecue.

things I enjoyed on holiday was a traditional full English breakfast. Lo and behold, that's exactly what was served up the following morning, even though it's not on the 'usual' menu.

It's little touches such as pampering and pandering to the guests favourite fads that makes this holiday such an extraordinary and enjoyable experience. And all for little more than it would cost to rent a self hire narrow boat. The only thing not included in the price is the bar drinks (open all day long!).

Peter also highlighted the food. "It's quite simple, but it's made with quality ingredients." However, I would argue that the food is far superior to being

just simple, as would fellow guest Tony Woodhead, who said, "To sit down and have somebody who's a much better cook than I am, producing food which I couldn't dream of preparing, brought to me and served to me, I think is wonderful."

This was Tony's third holiday with the Exclusively Gay Cruising Company, and that's just in one year. Tony loves the canals and boating. "The very thought of coming on a canal cruise where you're well looked after is wonderful" says Tony, "I find it's easy to relax in gay surroundings. Because everyone's gay or gay friendly we can say and do all those natural things without looking over our shoulders wondering what other people are thinking. So it's easy to be yourself."

"I think the facilities are absolutely first class. The cabins are really comfortable and in addition to that, the food and the service are very, very good indeed."

Gamble

Owners Michael and Peter took a great gamble when setting up this business. Peter sold his house to pay for the building of *Alnwick* and the refitting of *Morpeth* to exacting standards. It was Peter's expertise and experience as an engineer, combined with Michael's lifelong commitment to gay rights and infatuation with inland waterways that enabled the couple to create a pioneering, prestigious, luxurious and lavish holiday experience exclusively



Morpeth tows Alnwick on a long line.



Morpeth and Alnwick emerge from a lock on the Grand Union - guests can help work locks should they so desire.

for gay people.

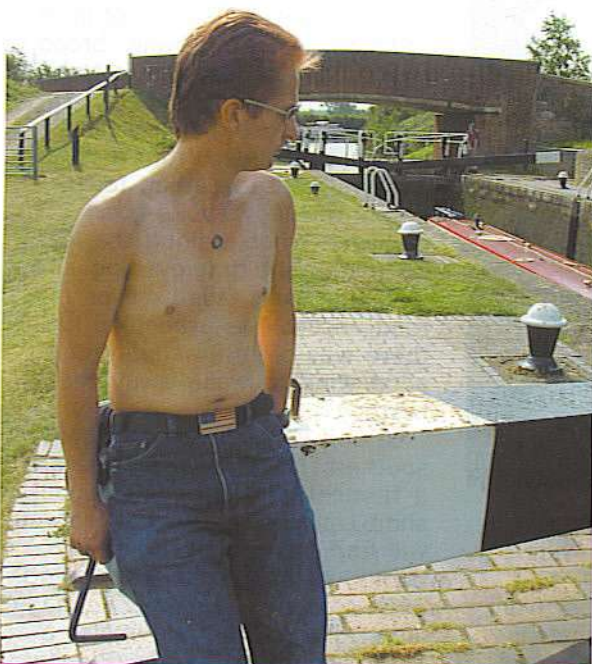
I asked them what inspired them to take such a risk and how they had identified whether or not there was a niche in the market? "When I

looked at gay holidays," said Michael, "there really were only two alternatives. One: You fly to the sun to a supposedly gay resort where all too often all the clubs tend to be similar to the ones back home, such as in Manchester or London or whatever.

"Alternatively you can stay in a gay guest house, but unless it happens to be in Manchester's gay village for example, once you step out of the guest house door, the holiday ceases to be a gay holiday."

Peter pointed out some added bonuses; "Space is our main consideration," he said, "We only take a maximum of six guests." Compared to other hotel narrow boats which sometimes take up to twelve guests at a time, this means that there's plenty of space to move around, to relax, and to chill out in.

Simon and I enjoyed a fantastic week. I'd just spent four weeks in hospital and it was the ideal way of recuperating. And as for any fears I may have had about any homophobia or hostility towards gay people on the inland waterways, it seems my thespian acquaintances were right all along. The canals really are 'a great leveller.'



Crew member Chris operates a lock on one of the hottest days of the year.

HOLIDAY FACT FILE

Spring Cruises: Early April to late May.

Summer Cruises: Early June to late August.

Autumn Cruises: Early September to mid-October. Christmas and New Year cruises are also available.

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