



# THE WATER BOYS

IF IT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR HARRISON FORD AND CALISTA FLOCKHART, IT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR US. *GT* WENT ON A GAY-EXCLUSIVE CANAL CRUISE

If I say "cruise", what are you imagining? No, don't go there. If you add "canal", it doesn't get much better, in any context. Canal Street, maybe? Cruising a dirty, derelict, disgusting canal towpath? Still no better, is it? Anyway, what has any of this got to do with travel?

Well, this sort of cruise is different. It's an exclusively gay narrow boat hotel holiday, cruising the canals of the UK.

I and my lover, Simon, decided to celebrate our 21 years together by taking a week out to sample the pleasure and pampering provided by an exclusively gay crew. What we didn't realise was that we were about to become part of a TV documentary for Carlton Television. Well, I suppose it's easier coming out to millions of people at once rather than having to come out in dribs and drabs.

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 they are. It was two straight (and rather hunky) marine engineers, working on a nearby narrow boat as we were being filmed, who told me about The Pink Punter, a gay pub not far from the canal at Fenny Stratford. Later that week, we took ourselves along and had a great night out.

Of course, you won't find a gay venue near every route on the Exclusively Gay Cruising Company's itinerary. But then again, who needs any other gay venue when the hotel narrow boat is a "floating" gay venue 24/7? "When you're here with us," says co-owner Michael, "you get treated like a king – or 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 sit back and enjoy the scenery."

The holiday routes are 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 outset, were treated as though we were the only people in the world who mattered to the crew.

Once aboard, we were welcomed with chilled champagne before being given the Grand Tour of the two narrow boats, *Morpeth* and *Alnwick* (which we subsequently nicknamed "butch" and "bitch"). *Morpeth* is the powered "butch" boat, and provides the thrust to drive herself and keep "bitch" *Alnwick* in tow.

If you thought that narrow boats were dark, dirty and dingy, then think

Words and photographs by **RICHARD HILL**



again. *Alnwick* is fitted out with one twin-bed and two double-bed cabins, all en-suite. There are 240-volt domestic power sockets in every cabin, and very comfortable 6' 3" beds.

The gentle rocking motion while cuddled up with your lover is a delightful experience, but British Waterways insists no narrow boat should cause a breaking wave; so, frenetic, frenzied, frantic fucking should be synchronised out of time with couples doing similar in the other cabins, in order to cancel out any violent "rock the boat" tidal waves. However, I don't think that's what the British Waterways meant, so fuck it and sway away.

Each cabin is equipped with a radio/ CD/ cassette player, and the boat has a large collection of CDs. The shelf above the bed has inbuilt, individual bedhead lights plus a selection of books, sachets of lube and, as Michael delightfully described them, "things to put over your dick". But you're requested not to smoke in the cabins, so if you enjoy a fag after sex, then it's out on to the fore or rear decks.

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

Breakfast is served aboard *Morpeth*. The crew offers a refreshingly original "21st century" breakfast, before casting off and embarking on the next leg of your cruise. The dining area/ lounge has an innovative, informal layout, combining the historical aspects of narrow boats (such as a real coal cabin stove) through to a state-of-the-art hi-fi sound system.

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

We cruised at the leisurely pace of four miles an hour. And at that speed, in that setting, the country seems an entirely different place. 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 sluice gate paddles up and down, pushing or pulling the heavy lock gates, or bow-hauling (pulling on a rope) all 20-plus tons of *Alnwick* into the lock chambers. The crew will also teach you to take the tiller of *Alnwick* if you fancy getting your hands on something phallic. Conversely, if you simply want to sunbathe, sit, read and relax while enjoying 200 years of history and heritage of our inland waterways, let the crew do all the hard work – they're used to it.

Lunch is usually served while the boats are moored. It's a light but lus-

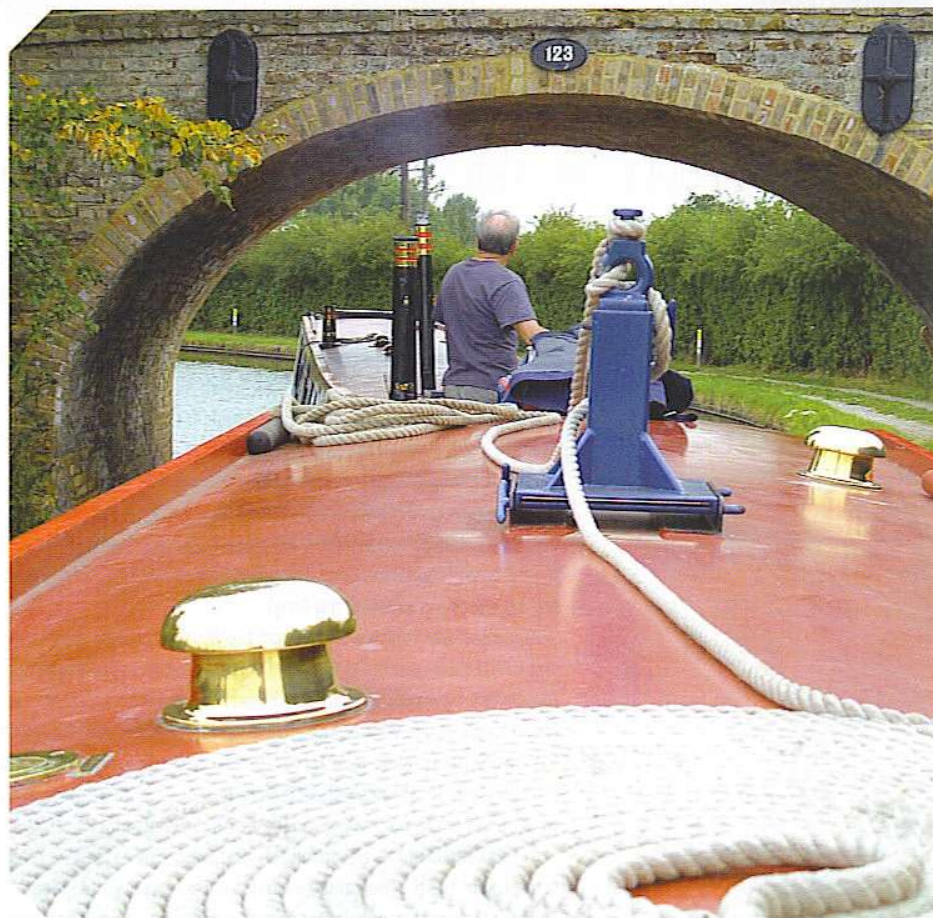
## THE GENTLE ROCKING MOTION WHILE CUDDLED UP WITH YOUR LOVER IS A DELIGHTFUL EXPERIENCE

cious affair, 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 are the crème de la crème of any similar, straight hotel boats, with the added luxury of being owned, crewed by, and catering for an exclusively gay clientele. However, if you want to spend time afloat with gay-friendly straight friends, this, too, is welcomed.

"We don't style ourselves as a gay hotel," says Michael, "we style ourselves as a gay holiday. We'll make every effort to make sure it becomes more of a week-long house party, rather than a hotel."

Weather permitting, Peter and Michael make one evening a canal ->







## WE WERE TREATED AS THOUGH WE WERE THE ONLY PEOPLE IN THE WORLD WHO MATTERED TO THE CREW

► side barbecue night, and are quite happy to host themed evenings to cater for every taste. Leather, schoolboy, drag, anything – but it's not compulsory.

During our barbecue evening, I happened to mention that one of the 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 (and fetishes) which make 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 are the bar drinks (open all day long).

One guest was Tony Woodhead from the Wirral. This was his 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," he says. "I find it's easy to relax in gay surroundings; because everyone's gay, 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 the food and the service are very, very good indeed."

Michael and Peter took a great gamble when setting up this business.



### TRAVEL DETAILS

For further details of all itineraries and routes, call 0115 930 2998 or e-mail [michaelandpeter@gayboats.co.uk](mailto:michaelandpeter@gayboats.co.uk).  
<http://www.gayboats.co.uk/>

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 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 are similar to the ones back home."

"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 guesthouse 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 with other hotel narrow boats, which can take up to 12 guests at a time, this means that there's plenty of space to move around, to relax, and to chill out in. Peter also highlighted the food. "It's quite simple, but it's made with quality ingredients." However, I'd argue that the food is far superior to just simple, as would Tony: "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 and served to me, I think is wonderful."

Although there's nothing obviously gay about *Morpeth* and *Alnwick*, I did wonder whether the company and crew might encounter hostility or homophobia once well known on the waterways. So, I asked around and spoke to other boaters, towpath users and canal enthusiasts, explaining the exclusive nature of the boats. No-one seemed shocked, surprised or disapproving.

One elderly woman even envied the fact that similar, straight hotel boats didn't provide such exacting, excellent and exclusive standards.

So, it seems my thespian acquaintances were right all along. The canals really are a great leveller. ■

