

Travel book review



Around the Weird in 80 Days
by Rich Smith

Bantam Press
RRP £9.99
Paperback

Having already travelled across the US, Rich Smith returns to give us another quirky and humorous insight to the land of the free and the home of the brave. Well, maybe not brave, more just plain odd as Smith travels off the beaten track to explore small-town America and the various 'cultural' aspects it offers - prison rodeos, who knew?

Smith's witty narrative entertains the reader by offering exciting alternatives to well-known events. His running translation of American-English comes in very handy. Despite the setting, a sense of 'Britishness' is there throughout and adds to the light-hearted tone of the book, which suits the subject matter perfectly and makes it a very enjoyable read.

TRAVEL INFO

www.waterscape.com provides a regularly updated guide to marinas and boat hire companies as well as information on UK rivers and canals. It is a fantastic reference for specific waterways detailing key attractions, ideas for holiday routes, services and details for non-boating canal users. The IWA also recommends hire companies on their website, www.waterways.org.uk. Canal holidays can be expensive so it is worth looking around to find the best deal available. Hiring a narrowboat for a week can cost up to £1250, depending on the number of berths, but as little as £400 for a shorter boat during less popular times of year. Prices are cheaper outside peak season (generally in line with school holidays). Booking in advance is also recommended as late deals can be hard to come by.

Rough Guide competition winners

In the last issue, to celebrate the launch of the Rough Guide to Europe on a Budget, we invited readers to tell us about their favourite European cultural experience under €15. Here are our favourites, who each win a copy of the guide (R.R.P. £15.99).

Mike Ricketts: 'Visiting the grave of Nico, chanteuse with the Velvet Underground, in the Grunewald Forest, Berlin. 1960s decadence meets sylvan Germany!'

Julia Shnaber: 'The square in front of Vienna's town hall hosts a number of events year round from the international food festival in summer to the annual Christmas market.'

Paula Solon: 'A €13 overnight in the weird and wonderful Amsterdam Downtown Flying Pig hostel is a cultural must for the budget backpacker!'

Narrowboat-minded?

Anne Hollowday on why we should all be taking to the water this summer

For many people canal holidays may bring to mind boring journeys, middle-aged people and weird narrowboat spotters.

But the age-old stigma associated with canals is beginning to break down as more and more people discover the enchanting side to this holiday option. Tardebigge, Hatton and Lapworth are no longer just sleepy towns in middle England, but famous destinations on England's extensive network of navigable canals.

Throughout my childhood I was dragged kicking and screaming to three weeks of boating every year. I was forced to endure week after week of serene beauty, painfully slow progress and endless bird spotting. I complained of monotony, a lack of foreign travel, cramped sleeping conditions and freezing temperatures in the depths of winter. But in reality, an active lifestyle, some phenomenal weather and thrilling near death experiences were frequent features of the dreaded 'boring' holidays.

It was only when we sold our canal boat share that I really began to appreciate my amazing experiences on the canals of England. Returning from canal holidays bronzed and toned, I was often the envy of school friends. As I relayed tales of almost drowning, my sister's leg being crushed by a lock gate, frighteningly long and eerie tunnels, boats sinking, quad biking and canoeing their faces turned sour when they realised my canal holiday trumped their two weeks in package holiday hell. Like all good things, I didn't realise how good the trips had been until they were taken away; bereft of family canal holidays for eight years now, my life has not been the same.

For all the canal virgins amongst the *London Student* readership, a quick lesson is probably required here. Locks are to navigate up and down hills, built when an aqueduct is not a feasible option. A boat sails into a chamber, the gates at both ends are closed and the lock is either filled or emptied to raise or lower the boat to the level of the water

in the next part of the canal. There is an unofficial etiquette among boaters, which dictates that you must slow down as you sail past moored boats, assist other boaters where possible and wait at double locks for 10 minutes for another boat to arrive to save water. Boating requires good teamwork skills as locks can be gruelling work. Most hire companies will brief you on these 'rules', as well as providing you with a

eliminate competition. Lacking regular usage and investment in maintenance the canal network fell into disrepair; many were closed and filled in.

It was not until the late 1950s that canals experienced a renaissance as a leisure site. Campaigns for their restoration led to the establishment of the Inland Waterways Association (IWA) which works to safeguard the ongoing use and maintenance of

(think spookily dark and nauseously narrow) which takes around 40 minutes to chug through. The Llangollen canal is the other main pick of the bunch. Cutting through the spectacular scenery of North Wales, it features the Pontcysyllte aqueduct, a fantastic Grade I listed building which is also the longest and highest aqueduct in Britain.

But there's more to canal holidays than serenity and beautiful scenery. A



Pontcysyllte aqueduct in North Wales, the longest and highest aqueduct in Britain

comprehensive safety and procedural briefing before letting you sail away with their boats. Their talk will also include instructions on how to use locks properly and general waterside safety.

Canals were first constructed in the 18th century as a means of transporting raw materials for the Industrial Revolution. Predating railways, the first boats to travel on canals were horse drawn and horses were still to be seen on the waterways until the 1960s. As the railways developed however, rail firms bought out canal haulage companies to

Britain's canals and rivers. Nowadays, thanks to the increasing vogue for waterside living, canals are here to stay.

The Grand Union is England's most famous canal and is therefore a popular location for newbies. With double locks throughout it is a challenge for first time boaters, but more experienced sailors are always willing to help out. The Trent and Mersey canal is also popular as it passes through several quaint towns of the West Midlands and connects with many other canals. It features the infamous one-way Harecastle tunnel

whole host of activities make the waterways a fun-filled space for a varied crowd. Sports such as kayaking, fishing, cycling, walking and swimming, and activities like photography and stargazing are all popular in the canal environment alongside traditional boating.

So if you're seeking a different kind of holiday, one where you want to be near to familiar spaces but greatly distanced from them at the same time, and crave a peaceful existence with pub grub every night, then get on board.

I love Paris in the springtime

Holidays don't always go to plan, but there's no need to despair, writes Jo Caird

My boyfriend and I had planned a romantic one-day whistle-stop visit to Paris and managed to secure free accommodation in a very central location. The Eurostar tickets were cheap and the relocation of the terminal to St Pancras meant that it would only take 20 minutes to get to the station. Arrive late the first night, one full day and night in the city of light, then back to London early the next morning – it was the perfect plan. Or so we thought.

After a restful night's sleep in our tiny studio flat and croissants as only the French can make them we set off. We had both been to Paris on previous occasions so felt no pressure to visit the

major sights. Our aim was to stroll romantically for a while before losing ourselves in backstreets and coming across bars, shops and restaurants full of proper Parisians who would welcome us into their midst, recognising in us the true spirit of Paris life.

Unfortunately it began to rain moments after we left the flat. A quick backtrack to grab umbrellas and change shoes and off we went again. No problem, we thought, we'll just pop into Notre Dame to experience a little bit of culture, and while we're inside marvelling at the medieval architecture the rain will stop and the romantic-strolling plan can begin in earnest.

But no, it was raining even harder by that point. Getting wetter by the second and being bothered by a large crowd of Gypsies outside the cathedral, we decided an early lunch was in order. A large cheese-based meal and a bottle of red wine later we emerged with a new plan: culture today, romance tonight; off to the Centre Pompidou.

Of course, being Tuesday, the Pompidou (and every other museum and gallery in the city) was closed. Our options were few at this point, but after much thumbing of Time Out Paris we settled on a Seine tour: perfect for the rain and fairly romantic in itself. What looked on the map to be about a 20-minute walk took us almost two hours as we paused to take shelter during particularly heavy showers, stopped for coffee, and were diverted by policemen

to avoid parades in honour of a state visit by the President of Israel. The river tour, chartered by Bateaux Parisiens (bateauxparisiens.com), was a great relief for our wet and weary feet and a charming way to experience the city, one that we wouldn't have considered if it hadn't been for the terrible weather.

By the time the boat docked it was time for aperitifs and dinner. Not wishing to stray too far from the flat and get cold and wet all over again we stumbled upon a nearby restaurant, Le Vieux Comptoir (au-vieux-comptoir.com). The tiny place was packed with locals, very noisy and filled with the delicious smell of cooking meat. The burgundy we drank and rare steak we ate there marked the perfect end to a day that although not quite what we had planned, turned out just right.

