



AllWays Traveller

Cruising the River Thames, UK

www.allwaystraveller.com

Cruising the river Thames into a different world

England's beautiful River Thames offers a wealth of historic towns and villages, ever-changing scenery and lots of nature to enjoy.

You'll sail past the sweeping lawns and mansions of pop stars, film stars and captains of industry.

And you will come into daily contact with the wonderfully free-spirited and almost universally friendly folk who choose to live on the river itself.

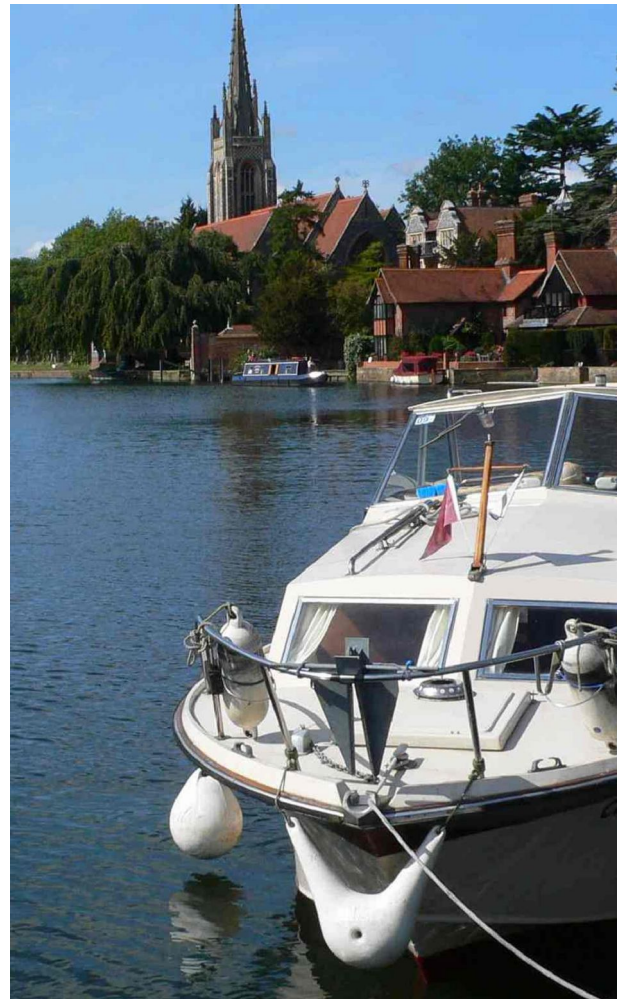
Your accommodation might be a tad tight space-wise but modern craft are exceptionally comfortable and well equipped and at least you can tour with no need to keep packing and unpacking each day.

There's all the appeal of a motor home vacation but none of the pressure of coping with hurrying traffic and endless congestion.

Alliance member Roger St. Pierre takes you along the Thames

Ashley Gibbins

The International Travel Writers Alliance
www.itwalliance.com



www.visitthames.co.uk

Winding back several notches

Afloat, everyone winds back several notches and the pace of life takes on an altogether more relaxed gait. You will not cover much distance but you'll enjoy a wealth of memorable experiences.



A personal perspective

Just what is it with water?



By Roger St. Pierre

If you've always wanted to try a water-borne holiday but fear you might not have the sea legs for it, then the river cruise option might be your answer.

You can, of course, cruise in the company of other tourists, with the professionals taking the helm.

Alternatively, get brave and opt for one of the well-appointed self-drive cruisers now available on waterways across Europe, and in America too.

It's a wonderful family holiday – even the teenagers will be won over. Your accommodations might be a tad tight space-wise but modern craft are exceptionally comfortable and well equipped and at least you can tour with no need to keep packing and unpacking each day.

A yearning to explore Old Father Thames



Ever since I read Jerome K Jerome's hilarious "Three Men In A Boat", I've always had a yearning to explore Old Father Thames from the water rather than just walking along the banks.

It took the arrival of a granddaughter to finally prod me into arranging what proved to be the perfect family holiday – enjoyable for granddads, toddlers and all ages in-between.

The facts

Where it all starts

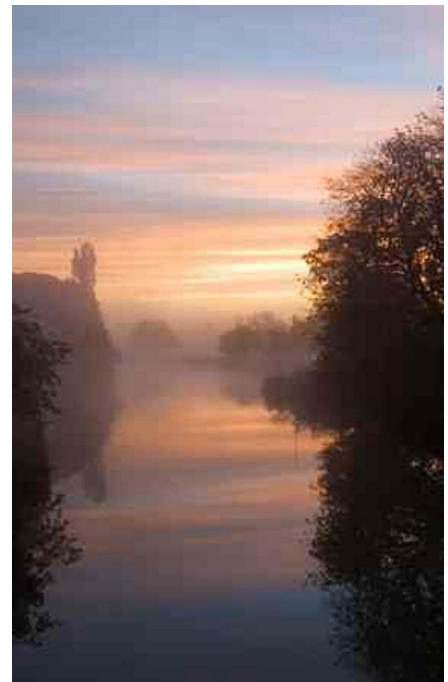


The officially recognised source of the River Thames is marked by a simple stone block inscribed:

*The Conservators of the River Thames
1857-1974'*

The location is in a corner of Tewkesbury Mead, a placid Cotswold Meadow some three miles south west of Cirencester.

From here and some 215 miles (344 km) later, the river spills into the North Sea.



As the song puts it:

*High in the hills
Deep in the dales
Happy and fancy free
Old Father Thames keeps rolling along
Down to the mighty sea.*

Stunningly beautiful



The trip was not totally packed with surprise. After all, as a family we've been taking boating trips for years and have become totally addicted to life afloat.

Our wake has washed the banks of the River Shannon, the Charente, the Mayenne, the Canal du Midi, the Grand Union, the Norfolk Broads and a host of other waterways.

What did take us aback though was just how stunningly beautiful the upper reaches of the Thames revealed themselves to be.

Of course, all the way from the towering Queen Elizabeth Bridge, much further downstream at the Dartford Crossing, through the heart of London, on to the dreaming spires of Oxford and beyond up to the headwaters, which are located on the fringe of the glorious Cotswolds – some 3 miles (4.8 km) south west of Cirencester – you can criss-cross the river by road while along many stretches there are tow-paths to be walked or cycled.

However, many of the most beautiful reaches are lonely spots that can, in practical terms, only really be reached by boat. And of all the canals, rivers, lakes and – yes – seas that we have negotiated through the years it was this waterway right on our own doorstep that proved to be the prettiest.

Starting at Benson

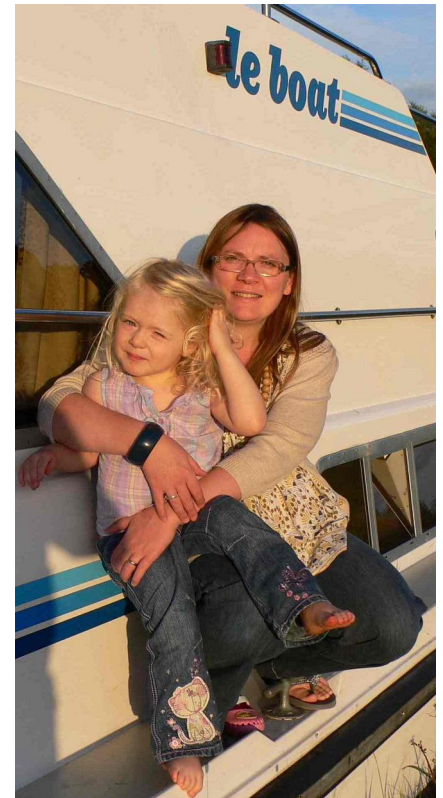
Our adventure started at the boatyard in Benson, a tranquil little village located roughly two-thirds of the way along the river's 191 miles (306 km) navigable length from the mudflats and marshlands of the Thames Estuary.

We'd laid in ample stores as previous experience had taught us that while riverside taverns and restaurants are idyllic and enticing, there never seem to be any around when you want them and, with speeds restricted to four or five knots and lots of time-consuming locks to negotiate, you can all too easily end up going hungry.

Self-catering is the safe fallback and, with a decent bottled-gas stove to hand in the galley, a full-blown Sunday roast is fully practicable and, given the right weather, there's a special delight to dining al fresco out on deck.

A tip: boats can be rather cramped, so it pays to be neat and tidy and do the washing-up and cleaning as you go.

Le Boat



Europe's number-one boating holiday company, Le Boat offers self-drive cruising experiences in France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland and Scotland.

Besides the Thames, UK offers include the popular Norfolk Broads and Scotland's Caledonian Canal, which takes in Loch Ness.

www.leboat.net

You can, of course, set your own itinerary, but Le Boat recommends a brace of week-long programmes.

The Scholars Cruise (Benson-Oxford-Henley-Benson) we opted for (though we got as far down river as Marlow), covering 116 miles (186 km), with 36 locks to navigate and 32 hours of cruising, and the Royal Cruise (Benson-Windsor-Benson), 96 miles (155 km), 36 locks, 30 hours,

If you've only got a long weekend, then there's the Willow Tree Cruise, a Benson-Goring-Benson round trip of 46 miles (75 kms), with eight locks en-route, during 15 hours of cruising.

The River Thames has a total of 45 locks located along its length.

Life on a boat is never boring



There's always something to do, be it getting dinner ready, tying-up for the night or just picking up the kids toys, but things that are chores ashore somehow seem to become part of the pleasure.

Le Boat are now the biggest river and canal cruising boat hire company in Europe, having absorbed such familiar brands as Crown Blue Lines and Connoisseur and with Irish-based Emerald also in their portfolio.

They provided us with their Thames fleet's top-of-the-range model – aptly named the Classique. It's a sleek-lined 42 ft (12.8 m) craft that sleeps up to eight in two rear cabins and two forward cabins.

There's a spacious lounge, as well as two separate showers and two toilets, and the craft can be driven from inside the cabin or from the top sundeck.

Features include a CD player, MP3 connectivity and a lockable safe. Don't be daunted. Driving one of these boats is easy – even a child can manage after a little practice.

It's important though to keep to the river user's code: follow the navigational signs to avoid running aground; keep speeds down, especially when passing moorings; give plenty of space to passing boats and riverbank anglers; tie up securely, and keep a regular check on fuel and water levels.

Those are just some of the easily followed instructions contained in the comprehensive user's manual

Starting the boat, turning round, reversing, mooring up and entering locks safely are skills soon learned and the lock routine quickly becomes second nature – with each member of the crew carrying out their assigned task – especially since on the Thames the lockkeepers do most of the work for you.

Don't try to do too much

Ten miles is a matter of minutes by road but can take two or three hours on the river, especially if there are weirs and locks to take into account.

Sometimes, as at places like Marlow, Henley, Reading, Wallingford and Abingdon, the shops were to be found a short stroll from where we tied up but on many stretches a veritable route march would be involved.

So it's worth accepting the option of bringing hire bikes aboard.

The lock-keepers

It is always worth sparing time to have a chat with the lock-keeper.

He'll not only keep you up to date with information on the river but will likely have a host of often amusing boating stories to tell.

Lock-keepers are usually in attendance from 9 am to 6 pm but these times vary slightly at different times of the year.

Besides managing water quality, flood defence, conservation and fisheries on an amazing 30,000 kms of waterways in England and Wales, the Environment Agency is the navigation authority for the non-tidal River Thames.

It licences all craft, keeps the channel clear and safe and maintains locks and facilities, as well as promoting the river for boating and other leisure activities.

www.visitthames.co.uk

Other interesting facts



The Thames is home to more than 30 species of fish – including fearsome pike and the much-prized sturgeon and boasts some of the country's best coarse fishing.

www.visitthames.co.uk/fishing

Bottoms up!

The low hills known as Wittenham Clumps are popularly known as Mother Dunch's Buttocks.

They offer beautiful views across to Dorchester Abbey and other sights.

Clambering ashore



It's nice to be able to now and again clamber ashore and ride or walk to the next lock or some local attraction – and there are plenty of those along a river that is steeped in history.

You could, for instance, spend a night under the imposing shadow of mighty Windsor Castle or visit the beautiful abbey ruins and gardens in Abingdon, while the quaint, college-lined streets of Oxford, with its venerable honey-coloured stone buildings, might entice you to spend a whole day, and maybe a night too.

Our trip was in late September so, with the nights drawing in fast, mooring up for the evening in plenty of time was always a priority consideration, as you are not supposed to navigate the river at night.

Indeed, on one occasion we were thrown into panic mode.

We were cruising into the setting sun, which was sinking fast.

But there simply were not any suitable places to moor up – which, on the Thames, can be done anywhere practicable except in the immediate proximity of locks and private moorings, though in some places a small charge may be levied for the privilege.

When we did at last find somewhere, the fiery ball had already sunk below the horizon, the sky was streaked with red and dark shadows made the hitting of hammer against mooring pin a rather hazardous performance.

Our resting place was, therefore a matter of necessity rather than choice but we awoke next morning to find a hauntingly beautiful mist hanging over the mirror-like water.

Circling buzzards and waddling ducks were the only company and not a human habitation in view, despite a view that swept across several miles of stunningly beautiful water meadows, woods and fields.



Town of history

Regularly featured in the popular *'Midsomer Murders'* TV series, picturesque Wallingford was fortified in Saxon times, held a royal residence of William the Conqueror and was sacked by Oliver Cromwell.

Royal swans

Swans are a familiar sight all along the Thames. Technically, they are the property of the Queen.

If you should come across a swan in trouble, call the Swan Rescue Service on 01753 859 397. You will probably also encounter kingfishers, red kites, voles and maybe even a now rare otter.

Rock on, Reading

A bustling commercial and shopping centre, the Thameside town of Reading is famed for its red brick buildings, abbey ruins, mediaeval churches and the massive rock music festival it hosts every summer.

Another popular annual spectacle on 'The King's Highway' is Henley's Royal Regatta, renowned as one of the key events in English high society's social season.

Wheely good routes



The Thames Path National Trail is one of the country's most used and best-loved walking paths.

It runs between the river's source at Thames Head to the Thames Barrier at Woolwich, covering a total distance of 213 miles (340 km).

There are also cycling routes to be enjoyed along many stretches of the river.

Especially enjoyable are the stretches from Reading to Sonning, through Oxford, and in Greater London between Hampton Court and Kingston.

The International Travel Writers Alliance



AllWays

AllWays is the consumer travel service from the International Travel Writers Alliance.

The International Travel Writers Alliance

The International Travel Writers Alliance represents travel writers, editors, broadcasters and photographers worldwide

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Roger St Pierre



Veteran travel writer Roger St. Pierre readily admits to not having very good sea legs, which helps explain why he has become so addicted to river cruising.

It is, he says, a holiday for all the family, with a wealth of locations to cruise from in Britain, Ireland, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium.

As people latch on to the idea of self-drive holidays afloat, canals are being re-opened and rivers revitalised apace, thanks to this fast growing segment of the holiday market.