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A ramble on the Thames aboard a hotel barge

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MAGNA CARTA: The barge ties up Hampton Court Palace for a private tour of Henry VIII's quarters.
European Waterways / Go Barging

I was zoning out in a deck chair when I heard my husband's startled voice: "Look! Something's happened." Squad cars, ambulances and policemen were scattered about in a clearing on the side of the Thames River. "There must have been a murder. Look at all the yellow caution tape wrapped around the trees."

I was upset by the sight of forensic investigators trudging along in their lab coats, and the stunned, round-faced policewoman staring out over the water.

But when we reached the village of Hurley, our mooring for the night, the captain announced that an episode of the TV series *Midsomer Murders* was being filmed. He, too, had been alarmed, and sent a crew member back to see what was going on.

Now excited that we could see one of our favorite shows being made, we scurried off the boat, and headed down the Thames Path, a national trail that goes from London to the Cotswolds. Detective Chief Inspector John Barnaby (Neil Dudgeon), clad in his usual blue suit, was in a swampy area under high trees. A cameraman was sliding back and forth (continued on next page)

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Click to zoom in. Double-click to open the article.

• BARGE, FROM U

on a trolley, alternately taking footage of Barnaby and a fellow wrapped in a wet blanket.

"Shh," said a guard, leading us around so we could get a good view. Later he told us that the director often uses the area for filming because there are so many parks, woods and villages with historic churches.

We were on a week-long European Waterways cruise on the hotel barge *Magna Carta*, and this was one of several dramatic, albeit unplanned, scenes on the meandering journey from Hampton Court to Henley. Morning, afternoon, and night brought a blend of intrigue, quiet contemplation of nature, and glimpses of small village life.

MESMERIZING VIEWS

The *Magna Carta* is essentially a floating luxury hotel with lodging for eight guests. Because it had been built into the shell of a Dutch gravel boat, it was much more spacious than the pencil-like barges we saw along our way or the regular sized barges we'd traveled on previously. No cubbies under the bed like other canal barges. Our 200-square-foot bottom level suite had antique dressers and shelves. And no lack of hot water for showers in our standard cruise ship size bathroom. We never turned on the large screen TV and rarely used the internet connection because we were too busy socializing upstairs or going on offshore excursions.

The top level had a large space for lounging with a dining area at one end. When we wanted to relax and soak in the mesmerizing views of the Surrey, Berkshire, and Oxfordshire countryside, we plunked ourselves down into leather-cushioned sofas and peered through the wide picture windows. Much of the time, the banks of the Thames were only a few feet away on each side. Though we were cruising in early June, it was too cool to laze about in the spa pool.

Some passengers spent most of their time inside reading while the boat cruised from one lock to another, but four of us pre-



INS AND OUTS: The saloon, left, and a cabin, right, aboard the *Magna Carta*. Below, Windsor Castle, where passengers toured the grounds on their own.



EUROPEAN WATERWAYS/GO BARGING PHOTOS

ferred to be outside. It was fun to follow a detailed map of the southern Thames and know where we were — approaching a major lock or village or winding around the island where the *Magna Carta* (the paper version) was said to have been penned.

Whenever the smallest bit of wind came up, the ever-attentive staff would rush to us with blankets and offer more tea. The *Magna Carta* has a crew of four — the captain, two hostesses, and the master chef.

Inside we would chat with other guests — from Pennsylvania, Florida, London and Israel — before and during meals and evening wine and cheese, or while gathering for the excursions offshore. The boat has an extensive library of books on England, and often one of us would pull one off the shelves and cite a sentence or two.

From the beginning we were drawn into the world of nature. Songbirds chirped overhead; swans and ducks took turns sliding along beside us.

LEISURELY PACE

We took the boat trip because we love traveling in Britain, and we love the serenity of hotel barging. The

boat seemed to glide across glasslike water, and it rose and fell effortlessly when we went through locks.

The pace was leisurely, with roughly half the day spent cruising and the other half sightseeing off the boat.

We began our trip at Hampton Court, 23 miles west of London. The river, which is about 1,200 feet wide and bustling with activity in Central London, narrows as it veers west. In a sense, it becomes a canal at Teddington, where a series of locks and weirs, or small dams, begin.

The landscapes along the way also change. At first we passed rows of connected houses with boats parked in front. Next, larger elegant houses with gardens and sloping lawns appeared, followed by an intermittent combination of open countryside, woods, and villages.

Near the open fields at Runnymede we passed *Magna Carta* Island — King John signed the document with the barons at a location right near this spot — and the John F. Kennedy Memorial. Further on when we entered the Chilterns, short puffy hills emerged on the horizon.

Spring was the perfect time to cruise into the wider space at Henley, our last

stop, because the town is right on the edge of the water. Tents and grandstands were up for the Henley Royal Regatta in July, but the plethora of boats had not yet arrived so we were able to swing around and get a panoramic view of the Edwardian houses and small streets with shops.

On that final day we also took a van up to Oxford for a visit to Christ Church, the university's oldest college and the setting for the novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; parts of the *Harry Potter* films were filmed here.

I did not expect the trip to be such a pleasant ramble through English history. The first night we slept at our mooring just outside the fancy gates of Hampton Court Palace. The next morning our captain, Dominic, gave us his own private tour of the sections that Henry VIII would have known.

At Windsor Castle, first built by William the Conqueror in the 11th century and now the home of the present queen, we wound our way up hills of flowers to the tower and walked around the enormous Queen Mary dollhouse and through the State Apartments.

If you go

Rates for a six-night cruise aboard the eight-passenger hotel barge *Magna Carta* are from \$4,350 per person in a twin/double en suite cabin and include all meals, wines, an open bar, excursions and local transfers. Full boat charters are also available from \$28,000.

European Waterways offers six-night cruises on its fleet of fully-crewed barges along the canals, rivers and lakes of France, Italy, Scotland, England, Ireland, Holland, Belgium, and Germany. The most popular hotel barge cruising destinations include Burgundy and the Canal du Midi in France, with rates from \$4,290 per person, and the Po Valley in Italy with rates from \$3,590.

Information: 877-879-8808, www.gobarging.com.

If I had to pick a most memorable site, it would have to be Dorney Court, said to be the quintessential medieval manor house in England. Parts of *The Other Boleyn Girl* were filmed there, and Ralph Fiennes recently used it as a set for *The Invisible Woman*. What atmosphere! An outside wall leaned to one side because, centuries ago, weakened beams were mortared up without being straightened.

The little 11th century church on the property had a Saxon "A" symbol on the side, which meant part of the building might have even dated back to the sixth or seventh century. The main house itself was a filmmaker's dream, crammed with furniture and mementoes from the last 500 years.

From Cookham Lock we walked into the centuries-old village and visited the gallery of Stanley Spencer, an experimental 20th century artist who gave biblical scenes a surreal edge. The gallery had once been a Methodist chapel, rather fitting since Spencer considered Cookham the "new Jerusalem."

This stretch of the Thames is the heart of *Wind in the Willows* country, with rows of tangled roots lining

the banks of willow trees. I kept thinking that Ratty and Mole could easily have been slipping in and out of their mud homes. Mr. Toad's fancy house is thought to be a composite of country houses in the area.

In misty rain we walked through the expansive woods and gardens at Cliveden, now a hotel. In the 1960s, before the Astor family turned the property over to the National Trust, the boathouse was the scene of the infamous affair between Conservative Member of Parliament John Profumo and Christine Keeler.

Back on the barge, the master chef triumphed with elegant meals fit for manor houses and castles. At our first meal I asked the captain if we would get printed menus at the end. "That's not possible," he said, "because the chef prepares meals individually according to the guests' dietary restrictions, and there are many."

At every meal the chef turned out freshly baked bread or rolls. We had breakfasts with huge plates of meticulously cut fresh fruit, cereals, toasts and jellies, and as complete an English breakfast as we wished. Lunches were two fancy courses.

Dinners included seafood gnocchi, haddock with summer greens, snow peas, chopped tomato and asparagus, and choices of roasted meats, all with colorful light purees, followed by dessert and a selection of cheeses.

At lunch and dinner we had two wines, one red and one white, paired to suit each course.

Often the guests had friendly arguments about which dish had been the best. Was it last night's or tonight's? Yesterday's lunch or today's?

Now home, I think of our times on the river whenever I drink leisurely cups of tea, savor wine, or try to replicate the smooth gazpacho, the fascinating pasta, or the handmade sorbet. From my study window I look out onto the green trees and notice that they remain in place rather than floating by.

I'd like to take the trip again and walk from village to village while others explore themes such as golf, antiques, or boatbuilding — or just sit by the wide windows being swept along.