

Treading the Broads

How does a tour of the UK's most popular inland cruising ground compare with similar trips in continental Europe? And are the ubiquitous hireboats really such an issue?



The attractive moorings at Somerleyton on the River Waveney are free to visitors.

Finalising arrangements to enter the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads from Lowestoft's yacht basin felt like a sort of homecoming for our Moonraker 36. This network of lakes and rivers, renowned as the birthplace of holiday boating, is also where Darius was built.

Some planning was required. We had to find out when the road bridge would lift to give us access to the inner harbour and Lake Lothing, and when the railway bridge would swing, to allow us up to Mutford Lock and into Oulton Broad. At the time we wanted to get through, the tide would be too high to allow us under the bridges. The road bridge would open at 0930 and I arranged to arrive at the lock 20 minutes later, at which time the railway bridge would also be open.

At one time, entry to the Broads via this route, rather than the lock-free alternative at Great Yarmouth, was time-consuming, frustrating and expensive. The bridges and lock only operated on Wednesdays, with a hefty charge of £44.

But now our passage through to Oulton Broad was simple and easy. We paid only £7 for the lock, and the bridge openings were free.

THE BEAUTIFUL SOUTH.

We stopped on Oulton Broad to buy a fortnight's licence at the harbourmaster's office, which is on the north side along with various boat yards and, close by, the shops and pubs of Oulton Broad village. When we told the harbourmaster that we planned to head up the River Waveney to Beccles for the night, he kindly offered to telephone and reserve a berth there.

The Waveney, like for the most part the other Broads rivers, meanders between reed-fringed banks. Stopping for lunch at one of the Broads Authority's 24-hour mooring places, we watched marsh harriers soar and swoop over the meadows on either side of the river, searching for prey on the banks of the many ditches which drain the flat landscape.

Beccles is a typical country town, with good facilities, including a Safeway supermarket within walking distance. The yacht harbour boasts showers and a laundry. Our reserved mooring was opposite a hireboat base, and I was amazed to see the rip-off price for red diesel of 55p per litre!

For Darius, Beccles was the limit of navigation, due to the high-water headroom of only 6ft 6in (1.98m) under the road bridge, but we took the dinghy up to the disused Geldeston Lock and the Locks Inn. The lock was a-



abandoned in 1934, but before then wherries (Broads sailing barges) traded to Bungay, a further four miles and two more locks upriver.

Only open during the summer, the inn has no mains electricity and for most of the time candlepower is the sole source of light. Over the huge fireplace is mounted a gleeve: a long-handled, four-pronged spear, which was used to catch eels until it was outlawed.

Back at Oulton Broad, we refuelled at NJC Boats. This small dayboat hire company is allowed by the local council to sell diesel to private boats at 28p/litre, about half what is charged by other hirefleets.

WORKING THE TIDE.

Via the New Cut, we headed for the River Yare and for Brundall, where Broom motor cruisers are built and, once upon a time, where Darius and other Moonrakers were produced. En-route we passed the chain ferry near Reedham with care, and made a mental note to explore the River Chet, a tributary of the Yare, on our return downstream.

Because there is no barrier from the sea at Great Yarmouth, the Broads are tidal and it is well worthwhile buying the Broads Tide Tables booklet, available throughout the network at the modest cost of 75p. As well as tide times and heights, it gives the headroom under bridges at high water.

Lowestoft to Beccles 12 miles / Beccles to Geldeston Lock and return (by dinghy) 6 miles / Beccles to Oulton Broad 10 miles / Oulton Broad to Brundall 19 miles / Brundall to Norwich and return 15 miles / Brundall to Loddon 12 miles / Loddon to Stracey Arms 22 miles / Stracey Arms to Potter Heigham 8 miles / Potter Heigham to West Somerton and return (by dinghy) 18 miles / Potter Heigham to Wroxham to Salhouse Broad 19 miles / Salhouse Broad to Lowestoft 42 miles. Total 183 miles.

Rise and fall, and tidal streams, are obviously greater the nearer you get to Great Yarmouth, but we had to take them into consideration all the way up the Yare to Norwich because of the restricted headroom under the Trowse railway bridge on the outskirts of the city. At high water there would be just a couple of inches clearance over Darius. The bridge can be swung, but apparently it's a major operation, so we timed our arrival for near low water.

We passed the Coleman mustard factory, a little sad to see that the transport of mustard seed is no longer by water and that the wharves where barges once unloaded are now abandoned. Under Foundry Bridge, we came to the Broads Authority's city centre moorings on the right bank, which were mostly full of hirecraft. A notice is prominently displayed instructing boats to drop their mud weights as well as tying to the bollards, in case they were cut adrift.

It would have been nice to stop here to explore Norwich, but that ominous warning notice, coupled with some rowdy jobs, deterred us. So we turned back downstream to Brundall, where we were made most welcome at Eastwood Marina.

From here we went into Norwich by train. With its mediaeval streets, its great cathedral and its castle, it is a beautiful city. To do it justice would have taken us more than just one day trip, but that was all we could spare.

ROAD WARNINGS.

Headed back downstream and turning into the River Chet, we were surprised to see a common seal, surely rather uncommon this far inland! It was basking in the afternoon sunshine on some recently refurbished piling. It gazed at us with large, sad eyes but never moved as we passed within a few feet of it.

The Chet is narrow and meandering, and except for some shallow water (down to 1m) at the junction with the Yare our depthsounder registered 2m all the way to Loddon, the limit of navigation.

The alongside moorings here are run by the local council, who are to be commended on their upkeep of the site

and the fact that they have refrained from imposing a charge to use the moorings.

The village, reached along a footpath across a couple of fields, sports a Co-Op supermarket as well as pizza and fish restaurants, which provided Karen with a welcome break from the galley.

Leaving the intimate Chet, we cruised back past Reedham to the large broad known as Breydon Water.



Moorings on the Broads are often busy, but in plentiful supply.

The broads from which this whole area takes its name are shallow lagoons, formed by peat workings that were subsequently flooded. Breydon Water is shallower than most, and is mostly drying at low water. Warning notices tell you to keep to the buoyed channel, and we were told that going aground was not a rarity, emphasised by the fact that Broads inspectors normally work alone but here have to be in pairs.

We waited until shortly before low water, when we could clearly see the exposed mud-flats on either side of the well-marked channel.

This was a birdwatcher's paradise; we saw curlews, oystercatchers, black-tailed godwits and, surprisingly, spoonbills searching for food on the exposed mud.

In too short a time we reached Breydon Bridge at the other end of the broad. We were

able to pass under the bridge, rather than having it lifted, and a few hundred yards further on turned into the River Bure.

Almost immediately we were faced by Vauxhall Bridge, the lowest on the Bure, with only 6ft gin (2.06m) head-room at high water, but it was still near low water, so we had room to spare as we passed under it.

Great Yarmouth Yacht Harbour lay on the starboard bank but it was full of hire boats, in some cases double-banked, so we continued on to Stracey Arms, the next safe moorings, lying in the shadow of a restored windmill. There is a small shop here, a free water point and a taxi service to Yarmouth. We were amazed at the general lack of rubbish disposal points on the Broads, but we found one at Stokesby, a mile past the Stracey Arms, just before the pub there.

SEARCHING FOR OTTERS.

We turned off the Bure up the River Thurne to Potter Heigham and its notoriously low bridge. Whilst its 6ft Sin (2.03m) headroom is only slightly less than Vauxhall Bridge, which we had passed under at low water, there is so little tide this far upstream that we would never be able to get through it. Again, we used the dinghy to explore the upper reaches of the river.

Stopping the dinghy's outboard and using the oars, we were able to enjoy Martham Broad's peace and quiet, and its sense of remoteness. We hoped we might see one of the otters that are now quite common on the broads, but none appeared.

Restarting the engine, we carried on to the head of navigation at West Somerton, mooring at the staithe there to explore the village and have lunch at the Red Lion, before returning to Potter Heigham.

There are many more craft on the northern Broads rivers than on the southern ones, and there is little doubt that the Broads is still largely the domain of the hireboat. It can get quite crowded at tourist resorts such as Potter Heigham and Wroxham. Nevertheless, elsewhere we found plenty of room for private boats, at least outside school holidays, and we had no trouble in finding pleasant moorings.

More numerous than I had expected are the unique Broads sailing yachts, many of which are quite ancient. Old established builders such as Martham Boatyard, above Potter Heigham, still refurbish them, and the hire-boat company Herbert Woods still charters them out.

FINAL VERDICTS.

We ran back down to the Bure and continued upriver towards Wroxham, passing through Homing, with its large houses, manicured lawns and purpose-built landing places; the only public moorings seemed to be in permanent occupation. Beyond Homing the scenery changed, with woodlands reaching to the river's edge, and virtually no tide.

We had planned to stop at Wroxham, and possibly to cruise up to the head of navigation at Coltishall, but there was nowhere to moor at the bridge, at 7ft 6in (2.29m) high and arched, was too low for us to go any further.

So we dropped back downriver for an overnight stop on Salhouse Broad. Here the mud weight we had purchased at Brundall came in useful; we anchored in the centre of this wood-fringed broad and watched the frantic manoeuvrings of hire boaters, some of whom had clearly just started their holidays from Wroxham.

CALLED TO ACCOUNT.

Three days later we were back in Lowestoft, awaiting a tide to help carry us back down the East Coast. Our first trip in British inland waters for a long time had been thoroughly enjoyable, although it was a pity, even with a non-flybridge boat, that some of the navigable waters of the Broads were barred to us by low bridges. Had the infamous hireboats been a problem? Not at all. We weren't run into, and we saw no bad behaviour from holidaymakers. The only downside was that cruising in Britain had proved more expensive than going abroad, so this coming summer we will go to Vienna, as I had originally planned!

FACTFILE.

MAPS.

'Broads Mini Guide' (Broads Authority, free).

PILOTS & GUIDES.

'The Broads & Fens' by Derek Bowskill (Imray). 'Broads Tide Tables' (Broads Authority).

LICENSING.

All boats visiting the Broads must obtain a Broads Authority licence. Fees are dependent on size of vessel and length of stay. In 2002, it cost £42.10 for a 10m (33ft) boat for two weeks.

MARINA FEES.

Marinas cost about £15/day, Broads Authority moorings £7.50/day. Mooring was free at Stracey Arms and Loddon.

FUEL.

Diesel cost 28p/litre at Oulton Broad.

CONTACT.

The Broads Authority 18 Colegate, Norwich, Norfolk NR3 1 BQ. Tel: 01603 610734.

CRUISE TIPS.

- Unless your boat has an air draught of under 6ft 6in (1.98m), a dinghy is essential to reach the extremities of the Broads rivers.
- Obtain the 'Broads Tide Tables' booklet, which also gives bridge heights.
- Do not stray from the marked channel along Breydon Water.
- Start cruising early in the morning and finish early, so you can pick a good mooring before the hireboats stop.

LAST MONTH.

Darius cruised the coastal rivers of Essex and Suffolk on her way up to Lowestoft, including the Crouch, the Blackwater, the Orwell and the Deben (see MBM Feb 03 p18).