

Exploring London by canal boat

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You're near the center of busy, noisy London, passing by parks, bridges and stately mansions, yet you're away from the tourist hordes and traffic jams. That's because you're gliding slowly, quietly along the Regent's Canal, a nine-mile waterway from west London to the River Thames.



Completed in 1820, the Regent's Canal ties into an extensive network of man-made canals that, during their heyday from the late 1700s into the early 1800s, carried timber, oil and coal to market. When faster and more efficient railroads—and later cars and trucks—began to supplant them, the canals became obsolete and fell into disrepair.

Now, leisure boats and houseboats sail where commerce once ruled. The paths where horses pulled canal boats and barges have been transformed into scenic pathways for walkers, runners and cyclists. The canal system is enjoying a rebirth.

Exploring the canals

The most convenient and pleasant way to sample London's canals is along a three-mile stretch of the Regent's Canal that extends from the amiable area known as Little Venice to Camden, site of Camden Lock. Several companies run regularly scheduled trips aboard traditionally styled narrowboats on this photogenic portion of the canal. While the narrowboats are covered to ward off the elements, they do most of their business in the warmer months.

The longest-running operation is [Jason's Canal Boat Trip](#), which makes several roundtrips per day from April to October (weekends only in winter) via the authentic century-old narrowboat Jason. The Jason has been navigating these waters for some 60 years and features open-sided views and lively narration. A roundtrip takes an hour and a half, or you can disembark at Camden Lock after a 45-minute one-way journey from Little Venice.

Another is the [London Waterbus](#), whose four glass-sided narrowboats travel from Little Venice to Camden (or vice versa) every hour or so daily from April to September, with reduced departures the rest of the year. Roundtrips are 110 minutes while one-way

voyages take 50 minutes. The Waterbus also offers a chance to stop at the London Zoo along the way, as well as making occasional all-day tours to Limehouse Basin, where the Regent's Canal meets the Thames. These latter trips ply much of the length of the canal and pass through a dozen locks en route. Some of the longer Waterbus trips venture into neighboring canals as well.

A third scheduled service is [Walker's Quay](#), whose narrowboat the Jenny Wren has been based at Camden Lock since 1969. The Jenny Wren runs up to four narrated 90-minute roundtrip tours per day from April to October (and weekends in March). One perk is that the boat passes through Camden Lock itself—the only one of the three companies to do so on their regular routes—before heading to Little Venice and later returning to Camden. The same outfit operates a floating restaurant, the My Fair Lady, which serves up dinner and Sunday lunch cruises on the Regent's Canal throughout the year.

Savoring the sights

Depending on which boat operator you choose, you can start either in Little Venice or Camden, both appealing destinations in themselves.

Little Venice is centered on the placid, duck-filled waters at the confluence of the Regent's Canal and the Grand Union Canal, which courses south from Birmingham to London. An artsy isle of tranquility just minutes away from the Paddington and Warwick Avenue Underground (tube) stations, it's an easily accessible—and atmospheric—spot to board a canal boat. The poet Robert Browning, who lived here between 1862 and 1887, is reputed to have first dubbed the area Little Venice, though others insist the credit should go to the poet Lord Byron. You can ponder this literary debate while admiring the local Regency architecture and perhaps fueling up for your canal trip at one of the neighborhood pubs.

Setting off from Little Venice, the tour boats pass brightly colored houseboats moored along the canal before approaching the 271-yard Maida Hill Tunnel, London's second-longest canal tunnel. As you slowly wend your way through the darkened passage, imagine yourself back in the day when the canal boats were transported by genuine horsepower. Since there was no towpath through the tunnel, the horses had to be unhitched and led over the top. The boats were then propelled more than 800 feet by men who lay on their backs while pushing against the tunnel walls, an ordeal called “legging.” (Modern-day calls for volunteers typically go unheeded.)

In the St. John's Wood area, you'll pass through a short tunnel, at Lisson Grove, just 53 yards long. Nearby stands the famous Lord's Cricket Field, where matches can last for days, but seem like years. Blow Up Bridge—so-called because a barge carrying gunpowder once exploded there, taking the original bridge down with it—is another landmark.



Camden Lock Bridge. © Visit London/Pawel Libera

As the boat meanders past leafy Regent's Park, watch for the golden dome of the Central London Mosque as well as impressive villas and gardens on both sides of the canal. And as you drift by the venerable [London Zoo](#), which lies within Regent's Park, you might catch a glimpse of a giraffe's head peeking over the bushes. Keep in mind that if you take the London Waterbus, you have the option to get off at the zoo's special canal entrance and enjoy a close-up view of the entire giraffe. (Buy a discount zoo admission ticket before boarding your boat, and reboard later if you like for an additional fee.) Zoo service operates daily from April to September and on weekends in March and October.

The Camden Lock, the last remaining twin lock on the Regent's Canal, is the end of the line if you're going one way in this direction. Those aboard the Jenny Wren can pass through the manually operated lock itself at the end of their trip. Otherwise, you can immerse yourself in an activity the locals call "gongoozling": sitting by the locks and watching the boats go by. If you're making the trip on a weekend, have a look around the nearby Camden Market after disembarking (or before your boat ride, if starting in Camden). Its shopkeepers hawk all manner of crafts and bric-a-brac, from jewelry to New Age paraphernalia, and cafés and food stalls abound. The area is an easy walk to or from the Camden Town Underground Station.

Tastes of history and luxury

If you're intrigued and want to learn more about London's canals—or just soak in the ambience a bit more—you can take a half hour stroll from Camden along the canal towpath to the [London Canal Museum](#), near King's Cross. The museum, formerly an ice warehouse, focuses on the history of the country's canals and provides a chance to peek inside a narrowboat cabin. On several summer Sundays, the museum sponsors special canal boat rides that pass through Islington Tunnel, the longest tunnel on any London canal at more than half a mile.

But maybe you're celebrating a special occasion, or just want to see the canals in style. Then charter the narrowboat Helix, operated by [London Canal Cruises](#), which accepts only two to six passengers per voyage and comes with plenty of personal service, complete with copious meals and drinks. The Helix's standard daylong itineraries take in sights along the lesser-visited Grand Union Canal along with a leisurely, comprehensive viewing of the Regent's, including passing through the Islington Tunnel and the Camden Lock and touring the Canal Museum. Evening cruises, best suited for April to October weather, are available as well. You can also request customized itineraries, which usually

cost extra. Standard itineraries alone run 140 pounds (about \$225) per person, compared to less than 10 pounds (\$16) for the Jason, Jenny Wren or London Waterbus. But if you've had a winning day at Ascot or chanced upon a bargain-priced Shakespearean first edition at a flea market, the Helix could be just your cup of very steep tea.

Clark Norton is a New York-based freelance writer who has traveled by canal boat in England, Italy, Holland, Belgium, Sweden, Thailand, India, Panama and the United States, without ever having to "leg it" through a tunnel.

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