

On the Thames

A floating hotel heads from Windsor castle through British history

By Iria Sanderson Jones
special writer

IT IS EARLY morning on the Thames River in England. The river runs smoothly between silent boats, moors over a weir and moves on, in a slimmer of ducks, toward the lock.

The ducks and geese are busy, as they always are, making public lines on the water, while smaller birds squawk in the trees above. But there are no morning sounds yet from the nearby village.

The Actiel is a 100-foot floating hotel barge that carries 10 passengers on one deck. It is a floating hotel barge that carries 10 passengers on one deck. It is a floating hotel barge that carries 10 passengers on one deck.

The Actiel is an 18th-century Dutch Upper cargo barge, 100 by 16 feet, with an small stove, a sitting lounge, a bar and a cheerful sun deck. It is worked, primarily by Americans, through an organization called Floating Through Europe, which also represents other luxury hotel barges in England, Holland and France.

I joined the Actiel at Windsor, a half hour drive from London's Heathrow Airport, about 115 by boat on if you call David Middlebrook (Windsor 60006), considerably higher if you call a taxi from the airport out.

Here is my Thames River diary.

SUNDAY: In the dark evening, with the lights of the town reflected gold and white in long glassing bank and white in long glassing bank from the bridge, and shafts of light flooding the river from locks on the opposite bank, ducks make wet gleaming lines down the Thames.

Here on the Actiel, the white wrought iron tables on the sun deck are silent. Dinner was simple and elegant, cooked by three attractive young women, now asleep in their forward cabin soap, perfectly cooked lamb chops, cheese, strawberry pavlova and coffee.

Captain Bill Almond, describing and charming, but full of the history of the river, has gone to bed, Young Andy, from Arkansas, is throwing darts in the dining room cabin-lounge.

MONDAY: At the end of the street, only a few hundred yards from our mooring, the town of Windsor leans over the water like a set from a Shakespeare play—peaked roofs, millstone windows, Tudor fronts and all. A low stone wall followed the river into town, where Windsor Castle rises in gray and glorious profile on the hill.

Queen Victoria, imperiously dressed in bronze, stands above the rear of the castle at the corner of High Street and Castle Hill. Her back is to the castle, and her gaze is down Peaseod Street, where people in suits and jeans, skirts and scarves, move past Elizabethan storefronts.

The crowds thin now, but they moved in rivers moments ago, inside the Henry VIII gate or up to the castle green, where the changing of the guards has just taken place.

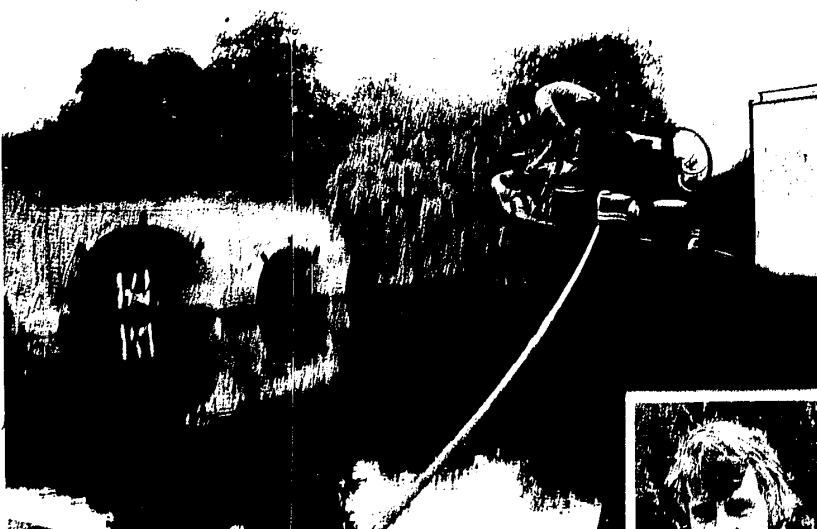
At noon, we pull silently away from our mooring, leaving Windsor castle with its crenellated rooftops outlined against the sky. One gliding moment upriver and we are between grass-and-stripe banks, with picnickers under striped umbrellas at bankside, other river boats gliding distantly behind us and only the deafening roar of a Concorde out of Heathrow to remind us of the 20th century.

By mid-afternoon, we have passed through Boveney Lock, Bray Lock and Boulter's Lock, each with a neat, red brick lockkeeper's house and a glorious lockside garden. Beyond Maidenhead, we point through a widening river to Clivedon Reach, where we will moor below the handsome Italianate mansion owned by William Waldorf Astor and willed to the National Trust.

Stanford University runs Clivedon now, and as we climb steeply uphill to where the house sits on a plateau of sculpted grass, we meet students arriving for a summer law course.

It's a small world, so I shouldn't be surprised that two of them are Dr. Frank from Southfield and Susan Lierke from Grand Rapids.

TUESDAY: The lock and canal to Cookham bypass the natural bend in the river, where a weir dams the water. A weir is a small dam with water rushing over it through sluices a few feet high.



The Actiel, piloted by Captain Bill Almond (right), approaches Sloughing Bridge.



provide deep water for fishing and float rafts, boats were either pulled upstream over the weir or launched downstream on a jet of water. Locks were eventually built near the weirs for navigation.

The red dingy of the Actiel takes us under the Cookham bridge, built at the site where the Romans crossed the river for three centuries, and past the yard of John Turk, boatbuilder and Swan Master to the Queen.

Swans, once prized food, were long ago branded for the royal family or privileged groups; the historic Swan Master still rules the river population from Cookham.

A walk through the site to Cookham village is a walk through British history. Here, the Romans crossed the river, the Saxons farmed, the Vikings plundered, the Normans recrossed the town in their Danubian Bark. The streets wind from the square stone tower of Cookham Church to High Street, where buildings cant and curve through the old village.

There are glorious lunch smells coming out of the galley when we moor upriver, past water gazers in falded chairs, a golf course and clusters of fishermen. Our itinerary runs from our glorious eating time to another hot coffee, breakfast, midmorning coffee, lunch, mid-afternoon tea and dinner, all home-cooked gourmet meals announced on the chalkboard over the tynbar.

Julie and Sue are old hands from New Zealand, Katie is a new arrival from the Cotswolds. All three are attractive young women who can move instantly, in a flurry of flying curls, from the kitchen galley to the ropes. The deck and docking crew as well are good cooks.

We usually tie up 100 yards further upstream in Hurley, but today the bank is full of summer picnickers, and Julie doesn't want to disturb them. So she waves Capt. Bill into the bank and ties the awkward boat from a high seat at the stern, shouting cheerful orders and making funny comments about his navigational situation as he goes.

The Thames is a do-it-yourself river, and every landing is a new experience. After the gangplank bridges the gap to shore, Bill leads us to the Old Bell Inn, said to be the oldest inn in England—"of which there can't be more than 100," he says cheerfully.

By 10 p.m., back aboard, the misted trees make dark shapes against the gray sky, with identical reflections in the steel-gray water. Only the gray-white hulks of neighboring cruisers break the blue-and-white lock, while late night ducks make V-shaped streaks against the steel river.

WEDNESDAY: At 5 a.m., the sound of raindrops outside my porthole are followed by the early morning launching of ducks. We go through Hurley Lock early in the rain. Julie opens the lock, Katie closes it as Sue handles the ropes and the captain steers. The lockkeepers have business hours but the Thames is a 24-hour public waterway, so any licensed boat person can open and close the lock according to instructions on the side of the lock weaver, as

long as she leaves the lock empty and the gates locked.

By midmorning, we hear the sound of the weir ahead before we see the danger sign. It is the work of the Royal Hurdley Regatta, and the river beyond Hurdley Lock and around Tronde Island is alive with racing shells.

The coxswains are small, with intense chanting voices, the rowers bigger, stronger, pulling, splashing, moving the shells like a knife through the water. The white racing posts make two

straight lines down the Thames, pointing like arrows to the square church that dominates the famous river town.

This is the expensive mooring on the river, right in the center of Henley, opposite the old curved streets. But today the viewing stands are up for the regatta and the tents are full of racing shells, so a man in a gray suit runs out waving his arms—"Actiel, Actiel, no mooring this week," Bill does a U-turn in the river, blocking it with our hull.

It's like parking a car on a busy street. The Thames is used now only for pleasure boats, but there lots of them. We find one long parking spot on the north side of the river, and are waved in, while ducks paddle lazily out of our way.

Bill agrees with great effort from the dining, shouting, "Wednesday. We're just going to have to stop all these navi-

gational acrobatics on Wednesday. OK, girls, lets try again. I'll put the nose into the bank.

The nose hits the bank softly, and Julie checks the tree we are closing in on and races back.

"Lack it up, Katie, but don't let us go anywhere." This is the most action we've had on the river so far. The Thames lined with cruising cruises to the skyline of Henley. The skills with their chants and splashing water, go by in a rhythm of races. Bill and the girls shout the boat into its parking space.

It is easy to stroll across the field and through the side gate to the town, where the 18th-century church tower gives a high view of the countryside. This is a light clean sandy town and the best stop along the river to get shopping.

THURSDAY: The 18th-century barge of evening has 11 hard seats on the floor. The table is heavy, so had to be put in the night when we left of the old boat shells and left behind of the bill of fare. Today we will see the industrial town of Reading and make a stop at Maidenhead, which is built on the old stone used for Henley Hall in the famous children's book "Mad in the Valley."

The lock at Henley was smoothly between boat head banks, with high rises on one side. After 10 minutes, with only the sound of the nearby or pressure to remind us of the world, we are once again in the peaceful parklike reaches of the river.

The Actiel still has two days to go, but I disembark tomorrow morning in Pangbourne, where I will catch a train to London. Tonight, as a farewell, we will Bill a pint in the Swan Hotel and the crew will toast our happiness over a special dinner.

It has been a very special way to spend a week in England—a casual and easy, no parking or unpacking, interesting cruise companion, a great crew, and an historic river that changes with every turn.

For information on the Actiel or other luxury hotel barges in England, Holland or France, contact Floating Through Europe, 211 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10016. Per person prices for two people sharing a room are \$900, including coffee, meals, etc., but not airfare, a \$20 tip is standard on such a cruise. The Actiel leaves either Windsor or Oxford on alternate Sundays.

4 DAYS FREE
PAY 7 - STAY 11
SUPER VALUE AT HARBOR ISLAND SPA

AS LOW AS \$39
D.P. incl. tax

Includes: 3 supervised daily A.P. & S. sessions - Golf (2 times weekly \$12) - massages - Tennis (day & night) - Mini Club (with 2000 ft. track & water) - A.M. & P.M. snacks - Yoga and water aerobic classes - Nightly entertainment - Shopping - Shows - Complimentary - Movies - 100% SATISFACTION

For information, reservations & car rentals
CALL TOLL FREE 1-800-327-7510

LARIY PASKOVIC
Harbor Island Spa
NORTH BAY VILLAGE, MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA 33141

FREEPORT
Includes round trip air fare, English hotel accommodations, transfers & meals.

from \$349 Can. or \$298 U.S.

SPAIN
Includes round trip air fare, 11 nights hotel accommodations, transfers & meals.

from \$969 Can. or \$829 U.S.

For information CALL 963-6104

ONE OF LEETE AT LEETE: All 3000 ft. Toured in 2000

TRAVEL HOTLINE CAN SAVE YOU UP TO 67%!

Stand-Buys, Ltd. is the unique travel service offering incredible savings on short-getaways vacations throughout the U.S. and abroad. For details, fill out and send in this coupon, or call (313) 352-4876.

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Stand-Buys, Ltd.
26,711 Northwestern Highway, Suite 310, Dept. GF
Southfield, Michigan 48034, (313) 352-4876

FREE BROCHURE ON BEAUTIFUL LEELANAU COUNTY

Please send me a free brochure:
Leelanau County Chamber of Commerce
Route 2, P.O. Box 466
Suttons Bay, MI 49782

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Leelanau

Come Visit Us

ESCAPE!

THE WHEELS INN MID-WEEK ESCAPE

- Swimming pool
- air conditioned ballroom and spa
- comfy, comfortable
- 1 hr. from Del. PL. Huron
- American Dollar never worth more

Wheels Inn

PACKAGES FROM \$18.25 CND PER PERSON DOUBLE OCCUPANCY

1-519-351-1100

15 MINS. FROM CANADA'S WONDERLAND

PASSPORTS AVAILABLE

Weekend Oasis

There's an island of calm, away from the hustle and bustle, where you'll enjoy a weekend just the way you want it... at the Bristol Place.

For \$48 per night (Canadian funds) enjoy 2 nights' deluxe accommodation, with children under 18 sharing their parents' room at no extra cost. Spend a relaxing weekend around our indoor pool. Enjoy our sauna and health club. Complimentary admission to our nightclub, Dr. Livingstone's.

For the children there's baby sitting available.

Come in any 2 nights on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday. The parking's free. We have 24-hour room service, and in-room movies for a nominal charge.

Your perfect weekend oasis... at the Bristol Place.

Member of HRI

The Bristol Place Hotel

At the foot of the Ford Car Wash

950 DIXON RD., TORONTO, CANADA G2S-9A44 • WATS LINE (CANADA ONLY) (416) 298-4027
U.S. (800) 498-7491 • NY STATE ONLY (914) 462-7330