

My wife has boating cousins in Ireland, so there has been talk of the Shannon for some years. Robert, Kittiwake and I decided on 2004, with encouragement and guidance from the cousins as there is very little published information on sailing the Shannon - the big business is hiring motor cruisers to Germans.

Introduction

The non-tidal navigable Shannon provides over 150 miles from Killaloe (just upstream from Limerick) to Carrick-on-Shannon (towards Sligo in the north) of magnificent sailing waters. There are loughs (L. Derg is the largest at 35 miles long and 10 miles wide in places), wide open, slow moving gently winding rivers (better than the best of Norfolk Broads), cosy little sheltered harbours, riverside quays with facilities; cattle watching you from riverside flood meadows; reeds and rushes providing shelter for waterfowl; always rounded emerald hills in the distance; 10 bridges (one swing, others with at least 15' headroom), 5 locks (12m fall in the 150 miles, and all manned costing £1.50 to pass), shops and pubs at the waterside villages or where roads cross the river.

Between the road bridges, which are built on ridges, or moraines of higher ground, there are miles of flat flood meadows over the renowned peat bogs, with no sign of human occupation - all very pastoral. After 120 miles going upstream the small scab bushes give way to more river bank trees demanding a little extra skill to pass under sail. North of Carrick the waterways become more tree-lined, the hills get closer and the river and its tributary, the Boyle, becomes very twisted - very beautiful, but not so good for sailing. The cousins came in useful, enabling us to sail upstream "with the wind" and get us back to our trailer. We managed to sail 95% of the way, motoring only because of impatience. In one word, it was lovely.

To get there.

We trailed to Swansea, ferried to Cork, trailed to Killaloe (119 km on not very good roads). There are good slipways in many places and Marinas - craft centres which can help with parking.

Facilities

We took our dinghy as we enjoyed anchoring in the Loughs and getting ashore in remote places for a walk and exploration. Except at harbours or quays, it is not always possible to get ashore on the bank due to shallows/rocks/rushes. You need to be self sufficient in food, water, fuel as facilities are quite far apart and there are few decent eating places. We were able to buy fresh bread, milk, veg and meat most days and had "dinner" aboard in lovely, peaceful evenings - it gets dark much later. Pubs are mostly just "bars" for booze but many have live Celtic music until late. The "porta potti" worked overtime, though many quays/harbours had quite good facilities (or bushes). As is well known, Kittiwake has a simple mast lowering system (six-part tackle on the forestay led to the cockpit). In the gentle stream our 15lb CQR anchor was sufficient, plus pegs and mallet when in

the wild. We had *Cruising Ireland Captain's Handbook* (as issued to hire cruisers) for navigation. This was not very detailed or accurate, but did show the navigational buoys/markers. Surprisingly, there are lumps of rock sticking out of the peat here and there, so accurate navigation is recommended and we needed to set compass courses in the Loughs to ensure that we were in the right channel. Binoculars are necessary to spot the buoys markers, as they are not consistent in size and difficult to see at times. We also had ordinance survey maps for our explorations. We needed to register Kittiwake with the Inland Waterways, but no fee was payable and we paid no marina or mooring fees. Life jackets are required by law. To assist with my research of the sex life of the Shrimp I took an echo test, a hand held echo sounder no bigger than a torch, that is held in the water to show the depth - well worth £100 and we didn't go aground once.

Features

Apart from an abundance of flora/fauna/wildfowl there are also a lot of historical remains and monuments. Ireland, being the land of "Saints and Sinners", there are many religious relics - Abbeys, Nunneries, Friaries, Chapels, Round Towers - some dating back to 500 AD, but some ruined by the Vikings. There are later Norman Castles, some used by Cromwell, then 19th century forts built to keep out the French; they all make interesting visits. The Shannon forms a natural border between Connaught and Leinster, causing much armed activity over the centuries. We are advised (unofficially) not to fly the red ensign - the saddest part of the trip.

Voyage

We planned to sail with a prevailing wind, but against the slow current, and sped along under good winds covering the 150 plus miles in 10 days, leaving plenty of time for exploring, walking, drinking and resting. Sailing north to south would be harder work. We voyaged in early June and were lucky with little rain, at times there was a lot of cloud, but it was warm. The thing that struck us was the almost total lack of other sailing craft - just a few on the Loughs at weekends, but with very little activity at the yacht clubs - and all that wonderful sailing water! The hire cruisers are well designed, modern boats mostly hired by Germans, but also a few French and Dutch. Quite often we were out of sight of any other boat.

Shrimpering on the Shannon is definitely recommended; a Shrimper Week would be fun, but too many would overload the facilities.

References

Irish Inland Waterways Service, St. Stephens Green, Dublin 2.

Email: info@waterwaysireland.org Website: www.waterwaysireland.org

Captain' s Handbook Killaloe Beleek Pub by E R A - Maptech, 36 Darn Street, Dublin 2 or any cruiser hire company.

Ted Palmer, for help and advice - 01635 578585 (Kittiwake - Cornish Shrimper, 6hp outboard)

The Shannon Navigation System

