

Fear & Covid on The Norfolk Broads

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With more than 120 miles of navigable, lock-free waterways, the Norfolk Broads tick all the boxes for a socially distanced staycation in these strange days. What better way to escape the rolling boil of everyday isolation we're all enduring than to go boating, out of season, through the jewel in East Anglia's crown? A lattice of man made lakes and rivers that slice through the flat landscape, flanked either side by a corridor of reeds, that somehow makes the sky seem taller. There's more room to breath on the broads, and a palpable sense of slowing down too. Admittedly, all this was hard to believe when we pulled up in a desolate, overcast concrete boatyard in Potter Heigham.

For more than 90 years, Herbert Woods' boats have been ferrying sheltered city folk like me out into the dense network of around 63 Broads. For them, if not the rest of us, 2020 was an successful year. The recent summer season saw a colossal surge in Broads boating holidays, and with most of us now crying out to go *anywhere*, and do *something*, the company is now offering affordable winter breaks for the thermally adventurous among us.

Our vessel for the wet weekend has exactly the kind of nautical name you'd hope for - *Ruby Light*. Far from being a dinghy, she comes complete with a double bed, kitchenette (gas oven and hob), shower, and yes, that long forgotten dream - Freeview TV. Match this with the generally weak phone signal, and there's a welcome Digital Detox on the cards. Ruby is also equipped with a substantial heating system - which is useful given that it's mid-december - and even some outdoor seating lit up by blue LEDs. It's as close a Guardian journalist can ethically get to an oligarch's yacht. Though looking up at the leaden skies, *Prosecco on the deck* seems unlikely.

We're given a brisk boating induction, and warned about Broads' speed limits (a blistering 6mph). Naturally, I take in none of it - my head is too busy screaming "They're letting you drive a boat!" over and over. Luckily, my partner, Dee, has taken notes, and we're released. Only when a run of eclectic waterside shacks, monied boathouses and the odd windmill

conversion thin out, does the true beauty of the Broads in winter reveal itself. Toffee reeds, half chewed by the hard season, stretch out into the distance as leafless trees crane out over murky, placid water that snakes out in front of us, slicing up a flat, martian horizon. The bleak weather and lack of human life offer up an unusually appealing sense of apocalypse. This is England laid bare, showing its belly instead of it's neat, post lockdown hair-do.

Birds are in abundance, and have reclaimed the largely unpopulated waterways. Alongside the pensioner-like presence of paired up Mallards, and the legion Seagulls, Grey Herons sit sentinel on every other corner, as though they've been put on the payroll.

Short winter days cut down our cruising hours, and so we moor up for our first night by an abandoned mill that looks out over the vast fens. Next morning - with the thermostat registering 5 degrees until Ruby's heater kicks in - we shift down the river Bure and pull in for a walk at the nearby ruins of St Benets Abbey. Once a medieval monastery, St Benets was the only Abbey not dissolved in the Reformation, and was instrumental in the creation of the Broads themselves, as the centre of lucrative peat digging. Today, a few remaining ruins are scattered around the water's edge like the crumbs of stale bread left for the ducks. There's time for a kitchenette lunch of tea and cheese on toast, and then a push down river, each twist in the river manned by speed-cop swans.

We moor up, wrap up, and take a short walk through South Walsham village to the Fairhaven Water Gardens. With four miles of walkable woodland (and a 900-year-old oak tree to boot), Fairhaven can - in season, at least - feel like a descent into Narnia, though I'll admit, in the wet depths of December, it's more mulch than magic, but still a pleasant detour. Besides, we've caught the boating bug by now, and even a single step on land feels like an illicit affair. We spent the afternoon pootling along, roof slid back, sipping mulled wine and playing the only board game I own - The Simpson's Chess.

Night draws in quick, and we moor up fast. The darkness eats up that mammoth sky, and after hours, it gets a little eerie. The creaking trees, and lurking wildlife bring with it a heightened sense of being surrounded. Though, with an unpolluted starry sky, we do get the pleasure of seeing the

lights of villages in the distance, making their own residential galaxy on the black horizon.

The village of Ranworth, which consists of a pub, a church, and a row of thatched cottages with fashionable fringes. The Ranworth Maltsters, like many pubs right now, still smells of renovation paint, and has the tentative air of an athlete who's just got back on the track after injury. We eat pie and chips quick, as truth be told, we're itching to be back on-board, cocooned and surrounded by the dark, quiet night. Although, our plans are soon punctured by the arrival of two boats clumsily mooring up beside us, then loudly setting about commemorating the freshly loosened covid restrictions into the small hours. I can't blame them. It's almost a pleasure to hear a group of people drunkenly talk over each other again.

Fittingly, we're awoken at 7am the next morning by a gaggle of screeching Canada geese. Dawn on the water is what you're paying for here - with dew on the reeds, and the low light yawning over still water. The ducks on the back of the boat get breakfast before us, snapping cracker shards from our fingertips, the biting, fresh breeze a better wake up hit than any espresso.

"This is just like camping but better," Dee says, making a legitimate bid to put me out of a job. We pull in for lunch at the Cockshoot Nature Reserve, a five-hectare area offering glimpses of the Broads diverse birdlife. Unexpectedly, it's been sealed shut, presumably due to the pandemic - a stark reminder that in Covid-land, rambling is no longer an option. These days, it's all about the 'Pre-book'. By the time we've stretched our legs in the pretty village of Horning, it's almost time to turn back and begin the long float home.

Dinner's booked back where we started, at the mouth of Thurne River, and after negotiating a Sunday sailing group hell bent on running us aground, the ominous clouds finally crack. Rain pummels the roof, and strong winds force the reeds back on themselves, until the Broads start to resemble a windswept toupee. We push the engine against the growing current, scattering cumbersome Simpsons' chess pieces over the floor. By the time we moor up for the night, the wind is howling through the wrapped up sails of shackled boats. There's even a haunting cowbell ringing out somewhere in the fog. It's all gone a bit *Heart Of Darkness*.

We brave the elements, lighting the way with an ailing phone torch, until we reach *The Lion* at Thurne. In true Covid dining style, we're shown a patch of land outside the pub, and into a greenhouse 'Dining Pod'. Unlike many other less imaginative attempts at distanced dining, *The Lion* has turned this Sisyphean task into an opportunity, each pod themed, stylishly decked out and candle lit. Every detail has been considered - hot water bottles to keep you toasty, and even a buzzer to summon seconds. Ours was the 'Mediterranean' pod - fitting as my partner's part-Italian – and what with the last year of shielding, lost income, and broken travel plans behind us, we are as surprised as anyone to feel transported back to sun-soaked Italy via a windy pub car park in Norfolk. The food is delicious - a classic Sunday roast but expertly executed, fancy and filling. The greenhouse 'Dining Pod' is the perfect way to round off this unexpectedly romantic Winter getaway.

Early the next morning, with Dee still asleep, I fire up the engine and steer us back to the boatyard as the sun climbs behind us. Over the whole weekend, we've barely encountered another boat, let alone human-being. When we have, we've waved, because on the Broads, everybody waves. It's a novelty, it's a part of the deal. Yet, within the context of this last year, the simple act feels genuinely nourishing.

Jonnie Bayfield and his half-Italian partner take an emotional 600-mile grand tour up the spine of the country to the birthplace of her late father

Ahead of me in the arrivals hall at Lamezia Terme airport, buried in the sun-soaked province of Calabria, is a typical Italian sight: five generations of one family erupting as one of their own emerges from the gate. It's a flurry of hugs, kisses and back-patting, and a fitting sight with which to begin our 10-day, 600-mile Italian road trip.

Family, after all, is the reason I am here. My partner, Daniela, is half Italian. About 18 months ago, her father, Lorian, died following a difficult, drawn-out battle with dementia. Italy, roots and destiny have played on her mind ever since, and it was high time we made a pilgrimage from southern Italy, where Lorian worked for many years, to his Tuscan birthplace, Montecatini Terme. A long-overdue family reunion awaits us at the other

end, but before all that we need to figure out how to fit an abundance of luggage into the matchbox boot of our rental car.

Bags crammed in, we burst out onto the impressive autostrada, which runs up the country like a spinal cord. We soon notice the similarities between Italy's road system and its national staple – slip roads fold over each other like cooked spaghetti, and cannelloni-esque tunnels are blown into the hillside every other mile. We are travelling in early October. Beauty is not in short supply. Though the summer season has officially ended,

Calabria sits in a state of thirsty burnt orange. In little over an hour, we've reached the small seaside resort of Praia a Mare, in the province of Cosenza.

Little known to foreign tourists, the beach town is favoured by Italians.

By the time we've reached the cool waters of the

Tyrrhenian Sea, workers are busy dismantling pop-up bars and chaining up pedalos. We swim

in the shadow of the town's main draw, the 120-acre Dino island. Its underbelly of limestone caves and grottoes, accessible by boat, is visible from the window of our B&B: a 13th-century Norman castle. From its crumbling ramparts, as we watch the sunset twist into purple, it's clear why the Castello di Praia has become a coveted wedding venue (doubles from £79, B&B; castellodipraia.it).

Next morning, after a dawn dip in the sea and the ritual game of luggage Tetris, we set off along the coast. The sat nav, in

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Le Sirenuse, Positano; above, San Gimignano

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his wisdom, takes us to a motorway that in reality is just a dead end on a 45-degree incline. We find ourselves stuck between a rock and a brick wall, to attempt a demon ill start is to risk being crushed against the brickwork.

Tensions rise, and Daniela shouts at me (not for the first time) for never having learnt to drive. Luckily, some locals take pity on us. Together, we hold the car back from the wall as Daniela is soothed by an octogenarian woman: "Stai calma, stai calma." Stay calm, stay calm.

We make it out alive and, soon enough, we've hit the razor's edge of the Amalfi coast. Houses perch like migratory birds

on sheer cliffs, which are bridged by busy roads and pick'n'mix towns: pretty Ravello and Cetara are among the best. Positano is a place of vintage glamour and staircases, beautifully captured on canvas by a local artist, Nazario Fusco, who we find on a tight backstreet. We pocket a print to remember it by.

From the breathtaking terrace of the posied Le Sirenuse hotel (doubles from £266, B&B; sirenuse.it), Positano appears to be clambering over itself like paparazzi. Somehow its buttonhole beach once rivalled Naples as a trading port, with the locals dragging galley ships ashore by hand. That night, for dinner, we wind high into the hills for a twist on



Lemon products for sale in Sorrento

the traditional at il Ritrovo: flame-grilled octopus and wild-fennel liqueur (mains from £14; ilritrovo.com).

We head on to Sorrento (where Villa Manning has doubles from £133, B&B; villamanningssorrento.com) for a host of lemon-based souvenirs and, at Scogliette, the best tiramisu for miles (mains from £7, Via Accademia 12). The drive northwest is stalked by the spectre of Pompeii and the hanging shadow of Vesuvius. We navigate the manic centre of Naples and head for the calmer Posillipo district, where, at Isola Due Frati, our host, Lydia, leads us through a door and down into a network of caves. Eventually, we reappear in an apartment jutting out of a cliff face, with stairs down to a private beach on the Bay of Naples (from £68 a night; airbnb.co.uk). The flat above, Lydia tells us, is where Oscar Wilde lived in exile.

After a day off the road, we press on with a flurry of short stopovers, visiting Gaeta, the Marigata of Italy (Vico 1 starts at £60 a night; airbnb.co.uk); and the stupendously beautiful Renaissance gardens at Villa d'Este, in Tivoli (entry £10; www.villadestetioli.info). We bed down that night at Locanda Rosati, a farmhouse in the lush Umbrian hills (doubles from £106, B&B; locandarosati.it). Dinner is served Italian-style – at a single table for all guests, overseen by the eccentric proprietor. We're family for the night.

Next morning, with sore heads, we cross into Tuscany. Famed for its twice-yearly Palio horse race, Siena is a blissful stop-off, with a traffic-free centre. Our hotel is the no-frills il Conso (doubles from £65, B&B; ilcorsobedandbreakfast.it).

But it is our lunchtime stop in the scow town of San Gimignano that offers the most staggering view so far: cypress trees dart like brushstrokes out of hazy olive groves, sliced up by perfect lines of vineyard. Driving out, roof down, through the hills of Chianti, we feel as if we are on a victory lap.

In Florence, we find ourselves in a city that is, in essence, an open-air gallery, where the statues are more frequent than the litter bins. Inevitably, though, the main sights are oversubscribed. We avoid

“Positano appears to clamber over itself like paparazzi”

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CLIFF HANGER Positano, on the Amalfi Coast

the duomo – with a queue the length of the building – and opt for a rambling tour of the backstreets that lead away from the Continente hotel (doubles from £186, B&B; lungarnocollection.com). It would be rude, though, not to stop and stroke il Porcellino, the city's lucky boar; his snout has to be replaced every two years because of over-rubbing.

Finally, we roll into Montecatini Terme, where the “healing” thermal waters once made it a fixture on the Grand Tour. We've been joined for the reunion by Daniela's English mother, Lyn, and her brother Alex, and are welcomed in by three generations of the Pasquini

family. Plates of homemade pasta are handed around, two decades of gossip exchanged. The pidgeon Italian I've picked up en route is affectionately laughed out of the room.

It reminds me of our first day – of that airport outpouring of love. Family really does run in Italy's veins, and for a stranger like me, it has an impressive knack of making you feel like one of its own.

Jonnie Bayfield was a guest of Ryanair, which has return flights to Lamezia Terme from £54 (ryanair.com), and Rentalcars, which has five days' car hire from Pisa airport from £86 (rentalcars.com)