



Caprice moored up beneath a vivid red evening sky at Lanesborough Marina

Beginners' luck

For two inexperienced river cruisers, a charter on the Shannon was the perfect way to enjoy the very best of Ireland



the authors

Wendy Johnson and Gary Blake

Wendy and Gary are yachting photo-journalists with more than 20 years' boating experience, but limited history of motor and river cruising.

the boat

Caprice

A 39ft cruiser in a 4+2 sleeper arrangement. Emerald Star offers vessels sleeping up to 12, in various configurations.



Seven days' cruising through the heart of Ireland gave us everything we could have hoped for. On a smooth, wide, peat-black river bordered by soft, grassy banks, we travelled through loughs with a mesmerising black wake. At times, we imagined it was a froth of Guinness that spilt out behind us, a reminder of the great pubs awaiting us at every stop.

For a cruise on the Shannon, it's hard to know what to leave at home. We wished we'd packed our golf clubs to enjoy the courses that surrounded us; at other times we were happy we had binoculars, as we travelled through what seemed like a nature reserve. With so many fish teeming the rivers, it's silly to forget the rods; with so much history and tourism, bicycles and guidebooks are the order of the day. Above all, bring your sense of adventure and a readiness to gaze in wonder at this remarkable, unique landscape.

Our first glimpse of Ireland was through the aeroplane windows on touchdown in Dublin, before being met by the Emerald Star minibus. The plan was to take a week's trip from Carrick-on-Shannon, running downstream

around 100 miles to Portumna. Other airports are nearer to both towns, but we viewed the 164km drive as a pleasure rather than a penance, particularly as it allowed us to combine our holiday with a long weekend in Ireland's inspiring capital.

Relaxing on the bus, I immediately noticed the rich, green landscape. No wonder the epithet, Emerald Isle, has stuck so firmly. We'd chosen mid-October for our trip, taking advantage of low-season prices and quieter waterways. Although inclement weather was a possibility, we knew we had onboard central heating, a TV for forecasts, and the promise of warm evenings in quirky pubs, combined with that famous Irish hospitality.

When we arrived at Emerald Star's marina, next to the company's base in Carrick-on-Shannon, our boat was there waiting for us. A 39ft flybridge cruiser called *Caprice*, in a 4+2 sleeper arrangement, it also included dual steering positions, a spacious interior, two showers and toilets, and a microwave. As fairly inexperienced motorboaters, we began by watching an instructional video on boat handling

over the next six days), Paddy gave us a practical driving lesson, with Wendy at the helm. She was soon circling, turning, reversing and going through the designated arch of Carrick's four-arched stone bridge. We were ready for the off.

The estimated voyage time for the journey from Carrick to Portumna was 20 hours, so six days to meander down the route seemed ideal. We'd asked for two bicycles for sight-seeing and shopping, and were glad we had.

After listening to the staff at Carrick, we made an immediate change to our plans, and decided to take a short trip upstream to Boyle at the head of Lough Key. As well as allowing us to see the reputedly beautiful lough itself, this would allow us to sort out any problems that came to light when we passed Carrick on the way back downstream.

With an evening to kill in Carrick, we checked out Cryan's pub on Bridge Street. As with many Irish pubs, live music is a speciality here, and by 10pm, session musicians had arrived. As I stood at the bar, one of them looked at my black tripod bag and said, "Would you be playing yourself tonight?"

Smiling, I felt happy to be a part of such a friendly gathering. The next morning, we set off for Boyle and our first attempt at a lock – only to make a hash of it. And what a spectacular hash.

We were heading up current and into the wind, so there was no excuse. Can I blame it on the lack of a bow thruster? Probably not, but the result was that we banged our way into the lock and

ended up straddling it sideways. Being Sunday and late season it was early closing for the locks, so we were particularly grateful to lock-keeper

Catherine Lynch, who persevered with us, took our lines and helped us to secure. This, we later discovered, was one of only two locks on the Shannon still manually operated.

"When will they switch over?" I asked. "Well, they've dug the hole for the machinery, but they haven't done any more. I hope they do soon," she replied. Considering her diminutive size and the huge lock gates, I hope so too.

Lough Key itself lived up to its promise: a beautiful lake with tree-

At 240 miles, the Shannon is the longest river in Ireland



in the visitors' room. We'd already been posted a 'Captain's Handbook', which included advice on handling, along with our booking confirmation forms and charts, so we were feeling confident as we leapt aboard. But, as you all know, there's nothing more dangerous than a confident novice!

Then followed an on-board briefing from Emerald Star engineer, Paddy Gockiam.

"Keep to the dotted lines on the charts," he told us. "Don't get in the shaded area in the loughs or you'll be in the reeds, weeds and shallows. Keep red buoys to your right downstream, and black ones to your left.

"Buoys are numbered in the loughs, so that in case of breakdown we can easily locate you. And watch out for those low bridges – the ones with restricted air draught are listed on stickers by the helms!"

"How hard can it be?", we thought. To ram the message home (and ramming would become our trademark

“We ended up straddling the lock sideways”

covered islands, some with a church or castle on them. At the south-western end is Lough Key Forest Park, which has a bog and wetlands walk, suspended tree walks and a visitors' lookout tower, which looks like a firestation platform. You'll also find a mooring quay here.

Our choice of the larger, heavier boat rather than a smaller one was perfect for the crossing of loughs. It sat extremely well in the water and held its path, without being knocked off course. The boat performed perfectly, doing six

Traditional Irish music at Cryan's Pub in Carrick





The spectacular 12th-century monastic ruins at Clonmacnois



Entering majestic Lough Ree with its bays and islands

knots at 2500rpm, thanks to a governor on the engine.

Boyle Harbour is a 'blind end' concrete walled marina, entered via a purpose-made canal next to the river off the lough. Again, this was a learning curve, as we struggled onto the windward side of the finger berth with a Force 5 following wind.

From here, a 15-minute cycle ride took us to the town of **Boyle**, at the foot of the Curlew Mountains. Boyle Abbey, an impressive 12th-century Cistercian monastery, lived up to its description in the 'Michelin Green Guide' as 'one of the loveliest sets of abbey ruins in Ireland'.

The Royal Oak hotel offered an excellent value dinner (€32 for two

courses) and we were advised to visit King House, the Palladian mansion and home to the King family from 1730 until the late 1770s. It's now an Irish history museum, including interactive exhibitions for kids in which they can try quill writing or wearing period costume. For the military-minded, this was also the former barracks of the Connaught Rangers, the legendary Irish regiment that fought under the Union Jack until the 1920s.

Back at Carrick, we reported that one of the bikes had faulty gears, the log was not recording – and we asked for more lessons on reversing! One fault that unfortunately hadn't come to light yet was the windscreen de-mister. As



King House in Boyle, where children can try out traditional instruments

soon as we left Carrick heading south, it poured down and we had our first 'windscreen wiper test'. Peering through the gloom from the lower helm, our main window of vision was one big blind spot for the wipers. The only solution was to don rain jackets and waterproof trousers, and to change to the flybridge driving position for entering locks and bridges, where good visibility was paramount.

Entering locks became easier once we'd got used to the wind pushing on the high freeboard of the boat. We got better and better at working as a team; in the locks the 'crew' would pass the aft mooring line to the helm on the flybridge, who could use it as a brake. This method still left enough time for the 'crew' to rush forward to attend the forward lines.

Even in the mist, marker buoys every 250 yards were clearly visible, allowing us to follow the navigable route easily. Identifying which arch of a bridge to go under was just as simple, and we found a courageous burst of power halfway under the bridge prevented us being

caught in any lurking eddies. It also kept us up with our planned average speed in the short, autumnal days.

It was easy to miss our surroundings in the enveloping rain and mist, but when we peered through it we could see grass right to the water's edge, with spongy, soft peat banks. Even the weeds had been cleared, so it wasn't just the abundance of marker buoys for which we should thank the Irish Waterways Authority.

At **Dromod**, we circled around the marine harbour entrance and decided the modern waterside housing development wasn't worth stopping at. We did notice an adjacent creek and were later told that it was free to moor here, next to a good pub. As much as we wanted to escape the wet, pub stopping would delay our average speed, so we didn't pause at Roosky, the next riverside town.

An interesting detour was into the Camlin River, which U-bends off the Shannon and rejoins a few kilometres later, thus avoiding the Tarmonbarry Bridge (which would have to swing open for us) and Tarmonbarry Lock.

It was like taking a boat along a wet country lane. We sat up top, ignoring the drizzle, cameras at the ready, and passed wildlife feeding on the river banks. Left and right directional arrows took us into an arbour of green shrubbery and out into a lonely, manually operated lock, with a temporary office for the lock-keeper and a tin hut for the generator.

There was no one in sight. We blasted the horn and were surprised to see a sodden figure amble out of the office in oilies



Athlone Lock with a formidable weir to its left

and a sou'wester. The lock-keeper used the generator to work the hydraulics for the flood doors on the lock gates, with manpower for opening the gates themselves. When I asked him how many people had passed through that day, he said, "A few."

"How few?" I asked. "Two. Including you." Back on the Shannon, **Lanesborough** was just visible in the misty, murky twilight. The guidebook said to enter the town marina, which

is free, by curving back up into the current before entering it. We did this perfectly, as if starring in an RYA training video. It was all coming together at last.

After a fruitless walk around town – the restaurants had already closed – we made do with on-board spagbol and heaters on high, while we watched the weather forecast. The evening sky had turned a vivid red, a portent for fine weather ahead, we hoped.

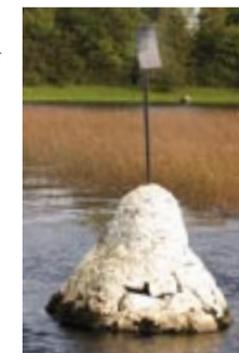
The following day's plan was the crossing of Lough Ree, the largest of the loughs

It was all coming together at last

Lough Ree is known locally for its 'eels on wheels' truck



A lichen-covered cairn buoy marks the shallows



A traditional cairn buoy marker on Lough Ree

Old town Athlone with its brightly painted houses

we'd face. We'd been told to overnight immediately before the crossing, so that we could set off in the morning light. That way, if we did have an engine breakdown we could be rescued the same day. We'd also allowed one day in hand in case we couldn't cross, as we were told it can 'chop up' on the loughs.

The following day's cycle ride into Lanesborough took us to the largest supermarket in the area. Up to a hundred boats pass through here every day in the summer, and it's well known as 'the' place to stock up.

Chatting with other boaters while waiting for locks was a good way of getting pub recommendations. We heard mention of Sean's Bar in Athlone – reputedly the oldest pub in Ireland – and paid it a visit. This was a traditional pub with sawdust on the flagstones and peat bricks on the fire. However, after all the fresh air that day, we couldn't keep awake for the session musicians who were due to arrive at 10pm – or more likely 11pm in 'Irish time'.

Another 'must see' for pub lovers is Killeen's Pub along Shannonbridge's High Street. In this grocer's-cum-pub, the regulars sit behind the shop counter



Boyle Marina is a peaceful spot just off Lough Key



The romantic Castle Island on Lough Ree



Old town Athlone with its brightly painted houses

5 Roosky

15 miles

6

Lanesborough

1 mile

2

Lough Ree

18 miles

3

Athlone

15 miles

CRUISING THE SHANNON



The Emerald Star base at Portumna – and the end of a truly memorable Irish cruise

while supping their evening drink. They kindly let me intrude on their huddled group to take photographs. They wanted a photo of themselves; I wanted one to remember this scene forever.

Being more used to seafaring than ditch crawling, we found **Lough Ree** a more familiar experience for us, with space all around and even a slight chop. There were several islands, several bays and several routes to take in the lough, which would make an ideal holiday destination for at least a few days. It's also perfect for photography, thanks to all those castles, fishermen, swans and reed beds.

Continuing on from Lough Ree, **Athlone** appeared in the distance like a medieval Mediterranean town, where the church completely dwarfs the town itself.

Athlone is the urban capital of the Irish midlands, strategically positioned in the centre of the country. It's a town steeped in history and dominated by the imposing St Peter and Paul's Church, which is often mistaken for a cathedral. Equally impressive is Athlone Castle, a Norman fortification that once commanded the gateway to the west of Ireland.

We were advised that the safest and most convenient place to moor was the town marina, between the town bridge and the railway bridge. For €10 per night we felt secure and within easy walking distance of the town's landmarks. With so much to offer the visitor, we felt as if we'd moored in the middle of London!

One look at the flooding current the next day was enough to inspire trepidation in our novice souls. We walked 300 yards downstream from our mooring to the lock-keeper, to discuss the safest way to continue

our passage. A formidable weir lay to the left of the lock, with bent scaffolding poles bearing witness to boats that had strayed too close. We made our way through and down a drop of some 5ft, and the strong current dissipated into the wide river.

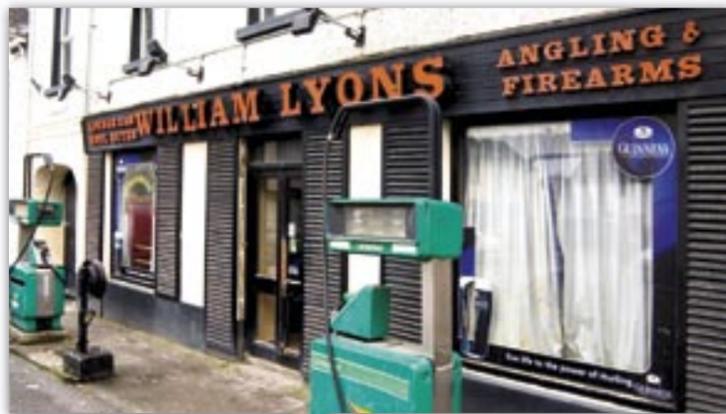
For the perfect spiritual stopover on a long summer evening, take a look at the ancient monastic site of Clonmacnois further downstream, an Irish early Christian settlement that dates back almost 1500 years. We had a quick peek around, but were pressing on before the autumn dusk to

Shannonbridge, 9km

Ireland has an incredible 9000 miles of navigable waterways



A grocery shop in Shannonbridge also doubles up as a well-stocked local pub



Everything you could want at this Banagher store!

further on. The reason? Boaters had recommended a trip to the delightfully restored Old Fort by the stone bridge. Constructed in 1810 as a fortification against Napoleon's army, it is now a reputable, romantic eatery.

The following day – after a quick investigation of Shannon Harbour – we headed south to **Banagher**, where we got the bikes out again. We noted numerous signs to yet another 'oldest pub in Ireland' and continued to the final lock of our journey, Meelick. From here, it was just 10km to **Portumna**, and the end of our cruise.

We made a VHF call to Emerald Star Portumna to confirm our arrival and secure a berth for re-fuelling and handing over the boat. No breakages, no bumps, outboard and tender still intact – our entire deposit was returned.

That evening, we cycled into Portumna Town, found another convivial pub for dinner and reflected on a truly wonderful journey. From boat handling to understanding the fabulous Irish accent, it had been a voyage of discovery – and we'd loved every minute of it.

factfile

Mooring

Generally free, except for private berths. Athlone Town Marina costs €10 per night. Dromod Marina is private and expensive, but the adjacent Dromod Harbour is free.

Fuel

Emerald Star provides boats with ample fuel for a two-week cruise, fuel capacity permitting. We were charged €0.90 per litre used.

Qualifications

None needed, but one person is appointed as skipper to take full responsibility of the boat (and of passengers) and signs a declaration at handover of the boat.

Chartering

Emerald Star, The Marina, Carrick-on-Shannon, Co Leitrim, Ireland
www.emeraldstar.ie
email: info@emeraldstar.ie
Tel +353 (0)71 9627633.
There are other bases at Belturbet and Portumna.

Charter companies

Loughree Cruisers
www.loughreecruisers.com
Silverline Cruisers
www.silverlinecruisers.com
Carrick Craft
www.carrickcraft.com
Waveline Cruisers
www.waveline.ie
Shannon Castle Line
www.shannoncruisers.com

Costs

For a seven-day charter in October, we were charged €1200. Transfer from Dublin cost €64 return per person. We also paid a €1500 returnable deposit, with the option of non-refundable insurance costing €75-105, depending on the size of boat. Total fuel cost: €133.

total 112 miles

4 Shannonbridge

8 miles

5 Banagher

13 miles

6 FINISH Portumna