

Cruise the River Thames from Oxford to London in a camping skiff



How long do I need? Two to seven days

Where is it? The River Thames flowing through Oxford, Abingdon, Wallingford, Goring and Streatley, Henley, Windsor and Teddington.

Highlights

Jerome K Jerome's 'Three Men in a Boat' experienced both magic and mayhem on their epic journey up the River Thames in a camping skiff. The magic is still there, in days on the water and nights spent under the stars.

Rowing the river is an intimate affair, bringing close encounters with wildlife, glimpses of private houses and gardens and views of waterside towns and villages that other visitors simply never see. The traditional wooden camping skiff is a companionable craft, with rowing positions for two people and a third working the tiller ropes that steer the boat. You can go with the flow, or row upstream like Jerome's heroes, and progress is as leisurely as you care to make it. Most people cover from 12 to 20 miles a day but an energetic dash downstream can manage even more than this. No previous experience is needed – getting the hang of it is all part of the fun. Camping is a memorable part of the experience - at night a canvas cover converts the entire craft into a snug tent with room for three people to sleep aboard. If needs be, the cover can also provide protection from the weather during the day. Most people combine nights on board with nights on shore, at welcoming waterside inns or at campsites located beside locks, on islands at the locks or other scenic spots beside the river.

Hire a skiff for a weekend, a week or longer to row your chosen section of the River Thames on a return trip or a one-way voyage with boat delivery and pick-up provided for an extra fee. The usual season for making this great escape is May to the end of September, but this can be extended when the weather is kind.

Cruising from Oxford to London

Spend two days following the leisurely 30 mile route '[Explore the historic heart of Oxford](#)' or go the distance with a six day, one-way voyage from Oxford to Teddington Lock in London, where the River Thames becomes tidal. If you are taking your own provisions, like the 'Three Men in a Boat', don't forget the tin-opener!

Oxford to Abingdon – slip away from Oxford with views of distant spires across Christ Church Meadow, following the Isis (Oxford's name for the local River Thames) along the route of the Eights Week college rowing course to picturesque Iffley Lock and Sandford Lock – refreshment at the waterside is provided by the Isis Farmhouse and Kings Arms pubs. From Sandford it's on through open fields to Abingdon and the welcoming Nags Head pub on the island beneath the bridge.

Abingdon to Wallingford – more signs of habitation pop up along this stretch, with quiet countryside in between. Through Culham Lock, and past the well-kept gardens of Burcot, Clifton Hampden lies ahead. Its beautiful red brick bridge, thatched cottages (and Barley Mow pub) make this one of the prettiest scenes on the River Thames. After Clifton Lock comes Days Lock (with its island campsite) then the distant spire of Dorchester Abbey comes into view. Next comes Shillingford Bridge, where the Shillingford Bridge Hotel sits back from the river on broad green banks, then it's on via Benson Lock to the ancient town of Wallingford.

Wallingford to Goring and Streatley – enjoy a peaceful 'pull' through an agricultural landscape, where the Chiltern Hills meet the North Wessex Downs. The Beetle & Wedge at Moulsoford will slow you down here, with riverside refreshment and enticing rooms. Cleeve Lock announces the approach to pretty Goring and Streatley, linked by the bridge which straddles much-photographed Goring Lock and Weir. The four-star Swan at Streatley hotel has a perfect setting here, right on the riverbank. Now wide views give way to the dramatic hills of the Goring Gap, where the River Thames squeezes through a channel cut deep into the chalk by the retreating Ice Age.

The Swan at Streatley

Streatley-on-Thames, Berkshire, RG8 9HR

Opening hours: All year round

Costs: Costs vary – see website or call for details

Tel: +44 (0)1491 878800

Web: www.swanatstreatley.co.uk

Goring and Streatley to Henley-on-Thames – emerging from the Gap, the Thames provides a waterside frontage for Beale Park Wildlife Park and Gardens, a great day out for the family. The river here takes on a *Wind in the Willows* feel – it's writer, Kenneth Grahame made his home in the attractive little town of Pangbourne, facing the village of Whitchurch across its lock and weir. Pangbourne, beside the river, also marked the finale of the friends' journey in *Three Men in a Boat*. The next real

landmark is Mapledurham, the mellow manor house on the banks of the river which inspired E H Shepard's illustrations of Toad Hall. The busy bustle around Caversham Bridge marks your arrival in Reading, where The Crowne Plaza Hotel enjoys a prime position beside the bridge. Sonning might be your next port of call, to visit The French Horn restaurant and hotel or The Mill at Sonning, the 18-century flour mill restored as a dinner theatre. After Sonning, Shiplake and Marsh Locks, the next highlight is Henley-on-Thames, home of the waterside River & Rowing Museum and the prestigious Royal Regatta.

Beale Park Wildlife Park and Gardens

Lower Basildon, Reading, Berkshire, RG8 9NH

Opening hours: February 14th to October 31st, 7 days a week.

Costs: Costs vary – see website or call for details

Tel: +44 (0)844 826 1761

Web: www.bealepark.co.uk

Crowne Plaza Reading

Caversham Bridge, Richfield Avenue, Reading, RG1 8BD

Opening hours: All year round

Costs: Costs vary – see website or call for details

Tel: +44 (0)1189 259988

Web: www.crowneplaza.com

Henley-on-Thames to Windsor – leaving Henley-on-Thames, you'll row the famous Royal Regatta course past Temple Island then it's on to Hambleden Lock (and the Flowerpot pub set just back from the river at Aston) and Hurley Lock, with its popular island campsite. Landmarks (and riverside pubs) come thick and fast as the river reaches its broad best: Marlow and its elegant suspension bridge, overlooked by the Compleat Angler hotel; the waterside Bounty pub near Bourne End; Cookham, with the Stanley Spencer Gallery and The Ferry gastro pub; magnificent Cliveden in its cliff-top National Trust grounds; Boulter's Lock, where the island setting of new Boulders Riverside Brasserie & Bar gives guests uninterrupted views down the Thames towards Maidenhead. The village of Bray adds another highlight with fine dining at The Waterside Inn, The Fat Duck and the Hinds Head Hotel. Between Bray Lock and Boveney Lock, the river passes the end of Dorney Lake and the Eton College Rowing Centre. All eyes will be on this lake in 2012 as the setting for the Olympic rowing events. After Windsor Racecourse come Windsor and Eton themselves and their majestic guardian, Windsor Castle.

Macdonald Compleat Angler

Marlow, Buckinghamshire, SL7 1RG

Opening hours: All year round

Costs: Costs vary – see website or call for details

Tel: +44 (0)844 879 9128

Web: www.macdonaldhotels.co.uk/compleatangler

Boulters Restaurant & Bar

Boulters Lock Island, Maidenhead, Berkshire, SL6 8PE

Opening hours: All year round

Costs: See website for menus

Tel: +44 (0)1628 621291

Web: www.boultersrestaurant.co.uk

Windsor to Teddington – Here you find historic Runnymede, where the Magna Carta was sealed, and the stunning family-friendly Runnymede-on-thames hotel and spa - set right on the banks of the river, and with wonderful restaurants and an award-winning spa, it's perfect if you want to moor up and explore the area further. From this point, the river raises the tempo to weave a busy course through Staines, Chertsey and Shepperton – still with green spaces dotted along the route. You'll be rowing then between the reservoirs at Molesey, and past the former Hurst Park Racecourse, to Hampton Court Palace and grounds in their handsome riverside setting. Now comes the final pleasant sweep, following a tree-lined left bank under the mellow stone bridge of Kingston-upon-Thames and on to Teddington Lock - the largest weir and locking system on the whole length of the River Thames. Tide End Cottage pub is handily placed to celebrate the completion of a splendid journey. Trains from Teddington Station will take you on into London and back to base.

Hampton Court Palace

East Molesey, Surrey, KT8 9AU

Opening hours: All year round

Costs: Various ticket costs - see website or call for details

Tel: +44 (0)844 482 7777 (from UK) (09.00 to 17.00 GMT), +44 (0)20 3166 6000 (from outside the UK) (09.00 to 17.00 GMT)

Web: www.hrp.org.uk

The runnymede-on-thames hotel

Windsor Road, Egham, Surrey TW20 0AG

Opening hours: All year round

Costs: Costs vary – see website or call for details

Tel: +44 (0) 1784 220 960

Web: www.runnymedehotel.com

Where to hire your skiff

[Oxford River Cruises](#), Belsyre Court, 57 Woodstock Road, Oxford OX2 6HJ.

Tel: +44 (0)845 2269396. Oxford River Cruises provide the boat, cover, mooring pins, ropes, buoyancy aids, a map, a guide to the river (including distance charts and navigation advice), the relevant licence and insurance. You will need to bring your own camping equipment.

[Thames Skiff Hire](#), 64 Carlton Road, Walton-on-Thames, Surrey KT12 2DG. Tel: +44 (0)1932 232433. Thames Skiff Hire also provide sleeping mats and equipment for camping onboard the boat - including the tin-opener!