

QX30

DRIVING DELIGHT

Martin Gurdon took INFINITI's **QX30** to explore the twists and turns of the roads around the Berkshire and Oxfordshire borders, and he wasn't disappointed

The road arced beneath a big, rippling canopy of trees, snaking left and right, running in a straight line for a while then diving into another set of corners.

Sunlight punctuated the foliage as the car, an INFINITI QX30, followed the twists and turns, tyres pattering softly on the undulating tarmac as its suspension dealt with the road's cambers and surface imperfections.

This is the sort of driving you might associate with some of Britain's more out-of-the-way places; rural spots where our crowded, busy island gets a little less hectic – in the Cotswolds perhaps, or North Wales.

In fact, I was on a road not so very far from Reading (or more specifically Caversham), driving on a weekday afternoon, enjoying the experience just as much as if I was exploring roads that went through officially scenic, tourist-friendly locations. If you know the lanes and roads that criss-cross the Berkshire and Oxfordshire border, you will also know that they're as beguiling as any you'll find in Britain.

I write about cars for a living, and have driven them in some delightful and occasionally exotic locations as a result, but often car launches drop you into these places and don't leave much time for interacting with them. I began having a pleasant fantasy about mixing the fun of driving with really being part of the areas I was driving through.

Then I got the chance to borrow a QX30 crossover from luxury car maker INFINITI's flagship Reading Centre. This is a British-made and engineered compact five-door sports utility



OPEN ROAD
Tackle several
snaking bends

that boasts a distinctively curved and creased body, all-wheel-drive, a seven-speed self-shifting transmission and a willing 2.2 diesel engine. I decided to use it to explore the countryside within striking distance of Reading.

I planned a more or less circular route, deciding that it should involve about an hour-and-a-half behind the wheel, with plenty of distractions along the way.

My starting point would be Reading's Caversham Road, for no better reason than I once worked there. Way back in the Eighties I was a PR executive for a local public relations company. There was nothing executive about me. In reality I was a very junior copywriter, whose lack of dress sense and tact meant I was a bit of a liability when dealing with clients. I also had a habit of breaking things, managing to destroy 18 office telephones in the space of a year. Happy memories.

Being chained to a desk churning out press releases about soya milk and motor oil (not a good combination on your breakfast) meant that I never had much chance to explore the area, and 30-odd years later I was delighted to put this right.

I began my journey on Bingham Avenue, round the corner from my old workplace, having first taken a look at the River Thames, which can be found at the bottom of the street and offers an island and tranquil prettiness.

After a brief walk along the Thames Path, I climbed back into the INFINITI, turned right and headed for Caversham Bridge. Once a place of pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Caversham, whose exact origins aren't known, but who





SMOOTHNESS RATHER THAN SPEED IS THE KEY TO GETTING THE BEST FROM THE INFINITI

dates back at least to the Norman Conquests, Caversham was visited by Catherine of Aragon for the purpose of seeing the shrine. These days, visitors are more likely to be people en route to Reading's re-built, and rather impressive, station.

RIVERS TO CROSS

I was heading for Sonning (nearly programming the INFINITI's sat nav to take me to Sonning Common by mistake), and drifted over Caversham Bridge, a surprisingly elegant structure opened by Edward, Prince of Wales, in 1926. Rewind a few years and during the Civil War, one of the bridge's predecessors was the scene of fierce fighting. Today it's a crossing point for joggers and commuters.

Trickling through Caversham's bustling high street, I turned left and climbed out of Reading on the A4155 Henley Road, passing an ancient, pagoda-roofed wooden bus shelter that looks a bit like a giant doll's house, dates from the early 1930s, and is a slightly unsung local landmark. Long may it remain.

A couple of minutes later, I swung right at a roundabout and made for Sonning Eye and Sonning itself, location of some lovely houses, good pubs, and sometime resident

George Clooney. The road leading to the pair of narrow, traffic controlled bridges is slim and twisty, and there's usually a short wait at the first bridge. Looking at the buildings, mature willows and rippling water was no hardship. The sun was shining, the INFINITI's stop/start system had shut down its engine, and with the windows open, the loudest things to be heard were some ducks having a row.

Sonning was the residence of the Bishop of Salisbury, who could travel up to London by Thames barge. In the Second World War the village was filled with US and Canadian troops preparing for D-Day, and even General Eisenhower stayed there.

The lights changed, I squeezed the throttle and nosed the INFINITI through Sonning's heart, up and out to a roundabout that punctuates the A4 Bath Road, crossed this and bowled down the A3032 to Twyford, which is also rather charming.

The name is apparently derived from an old English word for 'double ford', so the place had two river crossings, something that Alfred the Great appreciated when escaping from the Vikings by fording the River Lodden at Twyford after the Battle of Reading. William Penn, who founded Pennsylvania,

called Twyford home before emigrating and later still, the place went on to become a centre for milling, with the last mill only shutting in the 1970s.

My next destination was Wargrave, which meant taking the London Road, crossing the A4 again and plunging onto Mumbery Hill. I appreciated the QX30's precise steering and pliant riding qualities as we wriggled into a lush valley. Reaching Wargrave, I turned onto the amusingly named Dark Lane and made for the village of Crazies Hill, for no better reason than anywhere with a name like that definitely deserved to be seen.

A WRONG TURN MADE A RIGHT

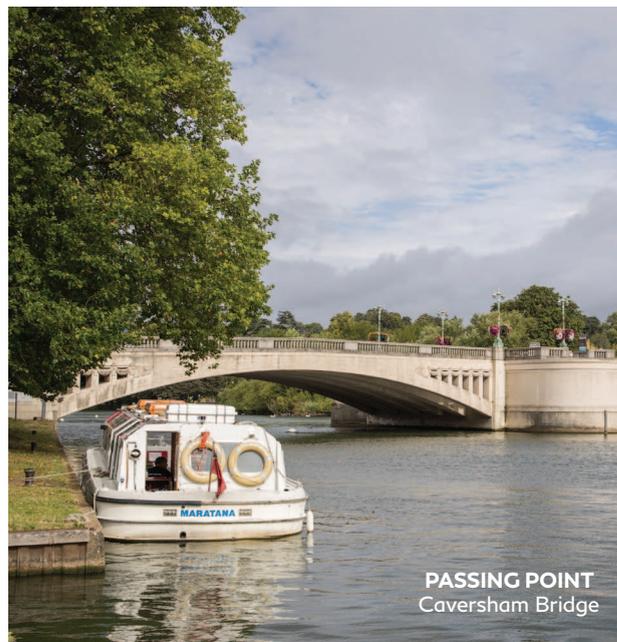
Getting there meant negotiating little lanes with passing places and switchbacks, where the QX30's compactness was a boon. The village itself sits on a hilltop, is pretty and was never a magnet for crazy people. The name apparently comes from long defunct local dialect for 'CRAY-WY-ZEATH hill,' or hill of 'the fresh clean water of the waterless place,' as drinking water came from a nearby woodland spring, which until 1870 was a muddy hole in the ground. Now things are more genteel.

'Genteel' is a description that fits Henley-on-Thames, which I reached by further tiny lane manoeuvring, then crossing Henley's elegant stone bridge, which dates from the late 1780s and has a painted warning which reads: 'Engine drivers must only take one loaded truck at one time over this bridge.'

Feeling that the QX30 and I were unlikely to fall foul of this missive, I pressed ahead and we ambled into Henley with the Thames stretched out on either side of us, before making our way into through bustling streets, with their plush shops and charming buildings.

Sonning Common was officially my next destination, but instead of taking the Gravel Hill road, I wrong-slotted and headed away from Henley on the A4130 towards Nettlebed. The technical term for this is 'going the wrong way', but I'm glad I did because this is a great driving road, making an arrow-straight departure from Henley, with impressive town houses to the left and sloped fields to the right. Soon the road dives into woodland, where it switches from dual to single carriageway in places and has a pleasing mix of open corners and tighter bends, interspersed with straights that allowed a momentum to be built and a rhythm of brakes, accelerator and steering employed as the QX30 made light work of the road.

Near Nettlebed we swung left onto the B481, and the fun continued. The INFINITI's interior, with its mix of soft touch plastics, leather and quality fabrics has a cocoon-like quality,



PASSING POINT
Caversham Bridge



COMPACT
The QX30 was
the ideal partner



EXPLORE
Unmarked tracks
are a pleasure to
investigate

which seemed to be echoed by the dense woodland through which we were travelling. This road also offered plenty of entertainment, ducking and weaving through the trees, skirting Peppard Common, then jinking and curving its way down to Sonning Common, which as locals will tell you, is an entirely different Sonning from the one I'd passed through en route to Twyford.

A SCENIC ROUTE

Every so often, I would ignore the sat nav and plunge down an unmarked track just to see where it would take me, which is why I made for Gallows Tree Common, a hamlet where hangings took place at a tree that stood apart from the rest on the green. Its last victim was found guilty of sheep stealing in 1825. More cheerfully, the local Methodist chapel became well known for serving cherry teas, as cherry orchards were once a local feature.

You need to concentrate when navigating the smaller lanes in this part of Oxfordshire, as some of them have the feel of tree-lined culverts with tight little passing places. That doesn't make them anything less than a pleasure to spend time on, but they are best suited to pottering and taking in the scenery. At one point I began wondering if I was on a farm track, a

spine of moss and grass growing in the middle of it as it slowly wound through dense, mature woodland, but the sat nav seemed confident I was going the right way. In due course it deposited me on one of the faster, flowing roads that took me ever closer to Pangbourne, something which involved a spirited drive, where smoothness and being on the right place on the road rather than speed were the keys to getting the best from the INFINITI.

I reached Pangbourne using the B471, which eventually becomes the High Street, running past houses of vastly differing styles and periods, but which mostly shared a pleasing 'it would be nice to live here' desirability and a near-universal antiquity.

TAKING ITS TOLL

There's a price to be paid for entering Pangbourne in this direction. It's 60p, which I handed over to a smiling lady in a small tollbooth that boasted a pair of electric barriers. An act of parliament in 1792 promoted building a toll bridge at Pangbourne to replace a ferry, and I crossed the current, third bridge, which opened in 1902.

Pangbourne has numerous connections with the sea, as this was the home of Lord Nelson's favourite bosun, Tom



IMPRESSIVE
Pangbourne
Church



Carter, who is buried in the churchyard.

Pangbourne College, which opened in 1917, was originally conceived to train boys for the Royal and Merchant navy, but also offered a rounded education for those who decided a life at sea wasn't for them.

This would have been a nice place to stop and explore, but thanks to some human pilot error – or ignoring the sat nav – I knew that time was getting short, so instead I pointed the INFINITI's rounded snout towards the Reading-Oxford Road, which more or less runs parallel with the River Thames and the railway, and began my final meander back to Caversham.

A drive for pleasure should offer good roads, a car capable of making the best of them, interesting scenery and the opportunity for some gentle cultural and historical displacement activity.

My Berkshire to Oxfordshire and back again odyssey had certainly provided those elements, and I'd enjoyed the whole thing so much that I'd completely forgotten to stop and have lunch. I'd simply been too busy driving and taking in my surroundings.

I was quite tempted to do it all over again, until greed got the better of me and I decided that my next journey would definitely start with searching for a sandwich. ■