Your Guide to WIDE-BEAM BOATING

BUYING THE PERFECT BOAT
► WHICH DESIGN?
► WHERE TO CRUISE
► FINANCE CHECKLIST

5 TESTED WIDE-BEAM BOATS REVIEWED

LIVING AFLOAT
The phrase ‘Dutch barge’ has become synonymous with elegant wide-beam craft. Yet there are some 40 genuine Dutch designs – never mind the countless other wide-beam craft often lumped in with them. Which one should you choose?

**LUXEMOTOR**

This is the most common Dutch barge style. When first introduced, between the wars, they were among the first designs of motorised craft: barges had previously been sailed or hauled. They had more generous and comfortable passenger accommodation at the stern. Hence the two words: ‘luxe’ and ‘motor’.

A modern-day luxemotor follows the same general design, but with living accommodation instead of the cargo hold – purpose-built for a new craft, or converted from a historic carrying craft. The luxemotor is notable for its...
Choosing your design

adorable lines, with a pointed, angular bow, gently sweeping gunwales (sides) with a slight dip, and a curvaceous stern sometimes referred to as a ‘duck tail’!

New-build luxemotors can be as short as 35ft – a far cry from the maximum-capacity carrying craft of old, which might be a full 100ft or so. They are a good compromise between graceful appearance and bluff practicality, able to maintain a steady speed through the water and undergo short coastal voyages. For a cruising boat with excellent live-aboard potential, there are few better.

**TJALK**
The sailing tjalk, sometimes described as looking like a Dutch clog, was the main sailing predecessor of the luxemotor. Its lineage as a sailing craft is striking; the bulbous bow and stern are an obvious contrast to the luxemotor.

Modern tjalks are generally not sailing craft, of course, but rather steel cruising boats with more pronounced lines than a luxemotor. These are imposing craft guaranteed to make an immediate impression on the river.

**WIDE-BEAM NARROWBOATS**
It might sound like a contradiction in terms, but the wide-beam narrowboat is an increasingly popular sight on Britain’s waterways – though little favoured abroad, and with limited coastal ability.

The steel narrowboat has become the most popular craft on Britain’s canal system, its simple but robust construction able to cope with rough handling at locks and moorings, and its 6ft 10in beam narrow enough to go anywhere – inland, that is. The box-like cabin construction is simple to build, and makes excellent use of the limited space available.

Now, many narrowboat builders have started to build craft to the same design – but wider. These are unable to navigate the smaller Midland canals, but do offer very spacious interior accommodation while remaining affordable. They are especially popular as ‘apartment boats’, mostly residential but with the option of weekend cruising.

Narrowboats are differentiated by their stern deck, whether long and open (‘cruiser’), long and enclosed (‘semi-trad’) or short (‘trad’). The cruiser style is favoured, but not universal, for wide-beam narrowboats. One other difference in the wide-beam craft is the roof style, which can be almost entirely flat – even accommodating a temporary seating area – or curved to give maximum headroom in the centre of the boat.

**PÉNICHE**
A péniche is a French barge, known in the Low Countries as a ‘spitz barge’. They were built to 125ft length (38m) especially to fit those French waterways which were enlarged from the 1880s onwards.

Its slab sides, blunt bow and simple round stern are utilitarian and hardy. Though still used to carry cargo in France, hundreds have been converted into residential and pleasure craft, and a walk around a French inland harbour will show you some luxurious examples of the art.

The word péniche is sometimes now used for larger, more modern French barges too, but pleasure boats tend to be of the 38m (‘Freycinet’) standard, thanks to the ready availability of craft for conversion and the ability to cruise more scenic waterways.

**TRADITIONAL BRITISH CRAFT**
For the true traditionalist, you could consider a carrying barge of British design. A few have been converted for residential use and others are preserved as leisure boats. Most have now been fitted with engines.

With the near-extinction of the traditional barges of the Mersey (the ‘flat’) and the Severn (the ‘row’), the two types you might see are the Thames barge and, more common, the Humber keel. Numerous keels survive in various states of conversion and make spacious residential craft.
A barge is possibly the second biggest investment you’ll make in your life – and like buying a house, there are certain safeguards you should take to protect yourself.

Boat purchases can go wrong on occasion, just as with any comparable purchase like an overseas holiday home, a house extension or a sea-going craft. But although house-buying advice is easy to come by, boat-buying advice is rarer. To get the full picture, make sure you have all the information to hand. Start with:

■ **the Canal & River Trust**
  (call 0303 040 4040, or visit www.canalrivertrust.org.uk/boating/a-boat-of-your-own)

■ **the British Marine Federation’s How to Buy a Boat for Canal or River**
  (call 01784 473377, or e-mail postroom@britishmarine.co.uk)

■ **the Waterways World Annual**
  (call 01283 742970, or visit www.waterwaysworld.com)

Do as much research as possible: read magazines, scour the Internet, and buy every book you can. The extra time and money will be as nothing when you’re buying an £150,000 boat that might take six months to build.

These points are for people buying a new, fully-fitted boat. You will need to take different precautions if you’re buying a second-hand boat, a share in a boat, or (of course) fitting out a sailaway or shell yourself. If you are buying a 100% off-the-peg boat in one lump sum, the need for staged payments may of course not arise.

Remember, too: you’re more likely to have a successful purchase if you are a good customer. Just as a minority of boat-buyers have horror stories about unscrupulous builders, so will builders occasionally tell you about the customer who wanted the windows moved after the shell was cut, or who cancelled an order after all the materials had been ordered and the workshop booked. A healthy, respectful relationship between customer and builder will maximise your chance of getting the boat you want, on time, on budget.

And most of all – do enjoy buying your boat.

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**Jargon-buster**

**BSS:** The Boat Safety Scheme, a little like the MoT. Optional, but good practice, for new boats. Compulsory for all boats over four years old.

**HIN or SIN:** Hull (or Shell) Identification Number – a number unique to your boat, which should be established at the start of the build.

**RCD:** The Recreational Craft Directive, a compulsory set of European boat-building standards to which your barge must be built. Be careful – if you employ the shell-builder and boat-fitter individually, you might be deemed the ‘project manager’, and become directly responsible for the RCD documentation.

**Staged payments:** Paying for each part of your boat as the work is done, rather than giving a large lump sum upfront.
Choosing a builder
- Visit at least one boat show, bringing your list of requirements with you. The London Boat Show (January), Birmingham Boat & Caravan Show (February), and IWA National Festival (August) are all places where you can see new barges for sale
- Draw up a shortlist, ideally with at least three builders
- Visit the yards or dealerships, and meet the proprietors or boat sales staff
- Ask if open days are staged, and attend one if so
- Check that the builder has experience of everything you want on your boat
- Speak to other owners (including recent ones and those having boats built at the moment)
- Inspect at least one of their previous boats
- Ask who will build the shell (if different), and satisfy yourself with their reputation and quality
- Ask around to find the builder’s reputation (find local boat clubs at www.awcc.org.uk, and try Internet discussion forums)
- Research company details (use WebCheck at www.companies-house.gov.uk, and read through old magazines to see how long they’ve been trading)
- Check that the builder is registered for VAT (call 0845 010 9000 to verify a VAT registration number)
- Compare prices with others you see in magazines (ask if it’s much more, but also be wary if it’s much less - genuine “too good to be true” deals are few and far between)

Dealing with your builder
- Check they use the standard British Marine Federation staged payment contract for a variation/alternative with which you’re 100% happy - view the contract online at www.britishmarine.co.uk
- Agree the deposit and schedule of staged payments, each to be made after work is complete (as specified within the contract) - be wary of large deposits, advance payments, and any payments in cash
- Arrange a meeting in the flesh (not over the phone) to confirm final design
- Draw up a final plan of the boat layout, using a 1ft-square grid to remove uncertainty about measurements
- Find out what equipment will be fitted (heaters, battery management, etc.), check you’re happy with it, and specify alternatives if not
- Agree a final price, design and exact specification within the contract, including materials to be used; making changes later will mean the boat is less likely to be finished on time or budget
- Agree exact transfers of ownership and legal relations - for example, the shell-builder should be a sub-contractor to the boat-fitter. (Is any other work sub-contracted? What if you’re buying through a broker/dealer?)
- Agree a realistic rather than ambitious completion date, allowing for over-runs
- Arrange finance (usually with a marine specialist)
- Receive a Hull Identification Number (HIN) for the boat, and check it is marked on the hull
- Consider engaging an independent surveyor to monitor the build - choose one yourself, rather than following the builder's recommendation (get a list from the Yacht Brokers, Designers & Surveyors Association on 01730 710425, or www.ybdsa.co.uk)
- Visit regularly throughout the build, including at least one visit 'just passing’ without appointment

Do you need to pay VAT?
If you’re buying a wide-beam boat to live on, you might have a very pleasant surprise in store: you may not have to pay VAT.

In autumn 2009, HM Revenue & Customs confirmed that live-aboard barges are no longer subject to VAT. The exact phrase is “Dutch barges and similar vessels that are designed and supplied for use as the permanent residence of the customer”.

Although the guidance doesn’t specify what “similar vessels” might be, most wide-beam boats should qualify. The minimum size for what HMRC call a “qualifying ship” is 15 gross tons. A gross ton is in fact the length, beam and depth (in metres) multiplied together, then by 0.16. (This means that narrowboats will not qualify, as HMRC says the depth is that below the gunwales.)

The decision came following a High Court victory by boater Colin Stone. Dutch barges were often ‘zero-rated’ in the 1990s, but in 2004, HMRC had issued a policy suggesting that a cargo-carrying hold was required. The new policy reverses that. There has always been an exemption for ‘houseboats’ - floating structures designed for use “solely as a place of permanent habitation”, incapable of being adapted for propulsion.

Also zero-rated are repairs and maintenance to the boat (though not to the domestic equipment and fittings), modification and conversion work, and all parts and equipment for the propulsion, navigation, communications and structure of the boat.

The full guidance can be read at www.hmrc.gov.uk by searching for 38/09. Your builder will be aware of VAT issues, and you should discuss them in advance before signing any contract.

Accepting your new boat
- Receive all Recreational Craft Directive (RCD) documentation and check it for completeness
- Consider getting a Boat Safety Scheme (BSS) examination as well
- Formally accept the boat

What happens if things go wrong?
- Set out any complaint in writing, backed up with reference to your original contract, describing where the boat has fallen short
- In case of an RCD dispute, contact your local Trading Standards office, which is responsible for enforcing it. Cases can only be brought under the RCD for 12 months after purchase
- If your dispute can’t be resolved informally, consider the BMF fixed-cost mediation scheme (call 01784 473377, or visit www.bmf.org.uk)
Living on the water is a seductive notion. To wake up in such a beautiful setting, with nature on your doorstep, and the ability to take off on a whim and cruise downriver… it’s a wonder more of us don’t do it.

But if you’re thinking of moving onto the water, stay grounded. It’s not the right answer for everyone, and it’s not as easy to accomplish as you might think. Let’s look at what’s involved.

**THE MOORING**

Most important of all is the decision where to moor your boat.

The stereotype of the ‘water gypsy’ is that you drift along until you find a spot which you fancy, and then tie up there until you decide to move on. In reality, all but the most committed nomads will need to find a permanent mooring – and one which is explicitly approved for residential use.

Moorings are either ‘online’ – either beside the towpath or on the opposite, ‘offside’ bank – or in marinas or basins. On canals, towpath moorings are generally run by the navigation authority (usually Canal & River Trust); on rivers, most online moorings are controlled by the adjoining landowner. Marina moorings are operated by private companies.

Residential use is not allowed at all moorings. A marina might have 300 berths, only ten of which are available for residential boats. (This is often a condition imposed by the local council.)

Many new marinas have been built in the last five years, but mostly for cruising boats on the most touristy canals. They have released some of the pressure, but residential moorings are still rare. In areas like London, this inevitably means they’re expensive, too.

In practice, this means that you need to start looking for a residential mooring early – certainly before your boat is ready. You should recognise that it may cost you more, and not be in the exact location.
location you want. If you have a job in a fixed place, or kids at school, you may need to change your arrangements.

What if you really want to keep moving? On the parts of the network run by CRT (most canals and some rivers), you can moor in the same place for 14 days before you need to move on. Popular mooring locations will have a shorter time limit. You must then move on (rather than just shuffling between two spots).

This is known as 'continuous cruising', and is the only circumstance under which CRT will issue a licence to a boater without a permanent mooring. It isn’t an alternative to a permanent mooring, but a distinct lifestyle choice. If you’re new to boating, you should get some experience on a hire-boat – including at the depths of winter! – before deciding whether this is for you. Moorings are advertised in the classified pages of Watersways World every month. CRT lists its own vacancies online at www.crtmoorings.com, and a handy search option enables you to look for residential moorings.

THE LEGALITIES
You’ll need a licence for your boat. This is issued by the navigation authority who control the waterway on which it’s moored, and allows you to keep a boat there (subject to mooring) and, usually, to cruise the authority’s other waterways.

Almost all canals, plus the rivers Trent, Severn, Yorkshire Ouse, Lee, Stort and Weaver are run by CRT. If you’re just using their rivers, you can save a bit of money by buying a River-Only Licence. (If your boat doesn’t move, but is a static ‘houseboat’, you should buy a Houseboat Certificate instead, but this still costs the same.)

The rivers Thames, Great Ouse, Nene and Medway are run by the Environment Agency – though its Thames, Anglian and Medway licences are separate. There are a few smaller authorities, such as the Avon Navigation Trust for the Warwickshire Avon, the National Trust for the Wey, and the Broads Authority.

The bigger your boat, the more expensive the licence. You’ll need third-party insurance as a minimum, and contents insurance is highly advisable. Your boat will need to pass the Boat Safety Certificate every four years. (New boats are initially exempt, because they’re already built to the European standards.)

If you can’t afford a boat outright, you will need to consider finance carefully. Standard mortgages are not available for boats, but specialist providers offer marine mortgages.

Residential moorings are generally subject to council tax at the lowest band, though the situation varies from county to county. Unfortunately, this doesn’t mean that the council will collect your refuse as it does for home-owners – you’ll still need to take it to the waterside rubbish disposal!

THE PRACTICALITIES
There are three questions which passers-by always ask of boat-dwellers: “Is this your boat?”, “Do you live on it?”, and “Isn’t it cold in winter?”.

A roaring fire, carefully placed, can heat the boat very effectively. Modern wide-beam craft and narrowboats will often have both a stove and a diesel-fired heater powering a set of radiators. You can be as warm tucked up on a well-built, properly maintained boat as you would be in a house. But forget to refuel, or suffer a breakdown, and yes – it can be very, very cold.

The follow-up question is usually about toilets. You won’t have a permanent sewage connection, so your toilet has to include its own tank which you empty. This can either be a ‘cassette’ toilet, which is a small plastic unit to be carted to the disposal point, or a ‘pump-out’ toilet, which is a standard domestic unit with a large holding tank beneath. The tank can then be pumped out at a dedicated location.

Cassette toilets are more rudimentary, but easy to empty. Pump-out toilets offer home comforts, but you’ll have to move your boat to the pump-out point every time the tank fills up – not much fun if the canal is ice-cold! Many residential boaters have one of each.

A large water tank can be refilled at any canalside tap, and most marina berths now have a tap alongside. Electricity may come from a permanent 240V hookup at a marina berth, or be generated from the engine or a dedicated generator, perhaps with solar panels to top up. Bear in mind that washing machines and the like can be very energy-hungry, and you will need to consider your installation carefully if you don’t have 240V at your berth.

Telephone and even Internet access is now easily available through mobiles. Post is more of a challenge, and a definite advantage to marina berths. Continuous cruisers have it hardest of all, especially because banks and insurers will often insist on a permanent address.

If you need to keep a car, consider where you’ll park it. Marinas may have parking spaces, but towpath moorings often don’t, and a glut of boaters’ cars is a sure-fire way to annoy local residents.

Finally, think about space issues. Wide-beam craft are much more spacious than narrowboats, but they’re still smaller than houses or most flats. You’ll need to ‘declutter’ your life before moving afloat – not easy for the hoarders among us. And if you’re moving with a partner, consider how your relationship could be affected by living in such close proximity.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?
So is it cheaper to live on a boat? No, not necessarily – but what’s more important is that you shouldn’t move onto a boat if you’re just simply looking for a cheap place to live. Life afloat is not like anything else; it’s a distinct community with its own customs and traditions. You should understand all the pros and cons before taking the plunge.

Living on a boat can be immensely rewarding. You wake up with the birds and the gentle sound of water lapping at the hull. At the end of the working day, you slip out of the rat race and return to a more civilised world. If you have the persistence to find a mooring, and you can cope with emptying the toilet and refuelling the stove, it’s a great way to live.
La Bella B was one of the stars of the Crick Boat Show this year. At 70ft in length, with a 12ft 6in beam, it is nearing the cruising limit of a wide-beam on Britain’s inland waterways.

**EXTERIOR**

The substantial steel shell is of 10/6/5/6mm plate; the thicker-than-normal cabin top supports the wider cabin roof, without the springiness that thinner steel sometimes has. The hull also has a chine in the underwater hull, which avoids the “wide-narrowboat” boxiness that can give poor handling.

The exterior of the boat has a swept up bow. Around the side of the hull, substantial wooden topped steel rubbing strakes give lots of protection against grazing lock sides, without having to run around with fenders.

**ON DECK**

The foredeck is quite short but manages to pack in the hydraulic anchor windlass and a large under-deck locker. The cabin sides lean
in, giving additional tumblehome. Gunwales are wide, flat and covered in teak. There are folding steps on the cabin sides, as well as the forward bulkhead, to enable easy access to the roof. The centre bollards are sensibly mounted on the cabin roof edges.

A wooden mast carries the horn and an all-round anchor light, as well as a pair of very bright LED work lights, one facing forward, another aft. There is another pair of work lights on the forward edge of the cabin roof, and another pair just in front of the wheelhouse.

**AFT COCKPIT & WHEELHOUSE**
The full-width aft cockpit has a wraparound seating area, with deep water-resistant upholstery seating eight people, while secure lockers provide a huge amount of storage. The aft cockpit can only be entered from the wheelhouse, which itself has folding sides, along with three stable-type doors, with the forward windscreen lowering hydraulically. Along the back of the wheelhouse is a bench seat, while the helm is to port, with a large instrument panel including depth sounder, VHF radio, electronic compass and engine controls.

**GALLEY AND SALOON**
Stepping down into the cabin is a revelation. Ahead of you the bulkhead is covered in dark smoked glass, while a huge cream leather corner settee makes a striking visual impact. The white painted ceiling is set off by thick vertical solid oak T&G panels on the cabin side, with oak veneered ply on the hull side. The light interior has large double-glazed windows and a huge glazed dog-box over the saloon. Opposite the sofa is a large entertainment unit; at the push of a switch, a 50in TV rises out of the sideboard. The galley is set back against the aft bulkhead. This boat is a gas-free one, so set into the granite work surface is a Gaggenau induction hob, with matching Gaggenau double oven, integrated fridge-freezer and dishwasher. Under the floor in both the galley and the saloon is a large locker, capable of storing vacuum cleaners.

**GUEST CABIN & MAIN BATHROOM**
Next there is a guest cabin. An L-shaped day settee pulls out at night to a good-sized double berth, with a bedside cupboard, wardrobe and under-berth storage to give plenty of space. The main bathroom follows: a large fully enclosed shower sits next to a vanity sink on a granite worktop. The Sanimarine macerator toilet pumps to a large holding tank and a cold-water bidet hose is next to the toilet.

**MASTER BEDROOM**
The forward master bedroom feels very private. A dressing table against the starboard cabin side faces the king-sized double bed, which has a memory foam mattress, and has LED lights under the lip of the bed. Bedside cabinets either side give more space.

In the corner, another curved bulkhead accesses the ensuite facility, which has all the features of the main bathroom, just in a slightly smaller space. As through the rest of the boat, the heating (here, a towel rail) is powered by a Kabola pressure-jet boiler.

**SOPHISTICATED ELECTRICS**
To supply all these systems, the boat needs its own power station. For general cruising, a pair of 8000W Victron Quattro inverters can provide up to 16kW peak power, drawing from Rolls 6-volt heavy duty batteries, which can provide 460Ah at 24V. However, even these substantial batteries can only provide power for a limited length of time with high-consumption appliances like the induction hob in the galley. To overcome this, a 14kVA Vetus generator is installed in the cavernous engine room, with its own sound insulated cocoon.

**ENGINE AND ANCILLARIES**
In the engine room, in addition to the generator to port, is the large Vetus D66 engine, which is based on a six-cylinder Deutz block. At 170hp, this is quite large for a boat this size; however, it enabled a larger hydraulic pump to be installed. Although the main propulsion is through a conventional gearbox, with shaft, water lubricated stern tube and four-bladed prop, substantial hydraulic power is needed for the 160kgf bow and stern thrusters.

**UNDERWAY**
At the helm, as well as the usual engine instrument panel, there is a LCD screen for the engine controls. This engine has electronic systems, which feed even more data back to the helm. The throttle and gearbox controls are also electronic, rather than using push-pull cables.

The steering itself is power-assisted, which means that the wheel is very light; the electronic display includes a rudder indicator, which compensates for the lack of feedback to know when the wheel is centred. And there’s another steering system: to the left of the wheel is a joystick. This is the control that allows you to move the boat anywhere, almost like playing a computer game. The joystick controls the Vetus Pro-Docker systems and this is the first boat to have it fitted in the UK.

**VERDICT**
This is an innovative craft, superbly fitted with every conceivable appliance. (01926 811699, www.bluewaterboats.co.uk)
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BUCK CABI
Moving forward, there is a corridor to port; a low cabinet contains flyscreens that can be placed into the opening windows. A fairly large cabin houses two sets of bunk beds, plus two wardrobes.

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**THE DETAILS**
- Northwich Boat Company
- 60ft by 12ft wide-beam
- £150,000

**KINGSLEY**

Mark Langley looks at an interesting design which combines a Dutch barge with British spaciousness...

The **Northwich Boat Company** has built over 200 boats since it began in 1994, making it one of Britain’s most prolific boat-builders. With both wide-beam narrowboat and Dutch barge designs in their range, Northwich decided to add a new, ‘hybrid’ build, close to a Dutch Barge but with the spaciousness of a flat-bottomed craft. Northwich boats are built in the Czech Republic under the watchful eye of the UK company. We took a look at the first of these Kingsley class boats, which provides a permanent home for its owners.

**EXTERIOR**
The immaculately finished shell of **Grace and Favour** is built in 12/6/5/4mm plate. At 60ft by 12ft, it will not pass through some Yorkshire locks but will fit comfortably in most others on the wide waterways. The 8ft 6in air draft of the wheelhouse can be reduced to about 6ft 4in, which should get it under the lower bridges of the Trent & Mersey where it is based.

The bow is quite sharp, and although the gunwale is fairly level, it rises up quickly to meet the bow in a nod to traditional barge style. The stern is a square transom, with a sturdy stainless steel pushpit which extends forward almost the full length of the wheelhouse. The handrails and, more unusually, the toe rail, are composed of stainless steel tubing, which goes well with the modern look of this boat.

The paint scheme is very muted, but the light colour of the roof will help keep the boat cool in summer. In common with most barge-style boats, windows are fitted in the aft cabin side, with portholes further forward.

**ABOVE:** Great living space complete with LCD TV.

**LEFT:** The cabin takes up most of the boat’s length.
WHEELHOUSE & ENGINE ROOM
The wheelhouse provides a pleasant, sociable space and is manually removable. For many waterways it will not be necessary to take it down for day-to-day cruising – so check the bridge heights in the cruising guide!

The engine bay is accessed by two steel hatches. Crawling space access is provided to the weed hatch and to the auxiliary systems. The engine is a Beta Marine 75hp engine, which should give ample power for cruising, and has a large battery charging capacity for the six 110Ah gel batteries (plus two more batteries for the 95 Kgf bowthruster). A Travelpower 230V alternator is also fitted, giving up to 3.5kW of power for domestic items on board. When the engine is off, a Sterling combined 2500W inverter/charger takes over the job of supporting the mains electricity. The Webasto diesel central heating boiler is also mounted here, which also heats the twin-coil calorifier and the radiators throughout the boat.

GALLEY
Entering the boat by the doorway to port, you arrive in a large galley with a U-shaped arrangement, and a long but thin worktop opposite. The galley has solid oak units, with a reformed granite worktop. Despite the presence of a slimline dishwasher, a full size 230V fridge and freezer hidden behind the cupboard doors, there is still lots of storage throughout. The stainless steel hob is matched with a large oven and grill underneath. The Webasto diesel central heating boiler is also mounted here, which also heats the twin-coil calorifier and the radiators throughout the boat.

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The addition of a mid cabin gives a flexible space, both for overnight guests and as an office/room to escape to. There is enough space for a decent working area with a proper office chair, as well as power supplies for laptops and TVs.

BATHROOM
A quadrant shower is fitted against one bulkhead. Northwich followed the owners’ suggestion of bending the waterproof membrane on one side into a curve, to give more elbow room without adding to the floor space needed. It extends into the cupboard which contains the washer-dryer – a Miele unit, an upgrade on the standard. The owners concede that this was expensive, but expect it to outlast them!

A macerator toilet is fitted, with a large holding tank forward and a washbasin on a small cupboard in the corner. Very chunky sliding doors close off the mid cabin and bathroom, which is both practical and avoids wasting space by having to leave clear areas around each door.

MASTER CABIN
The head of the bed is under the small glazed escape doors, which lead to the forward deck. Drawers and cupboard surround the bed, including a 9ft wide set of wardrobes against the loo wall, and a small bedside chest of drawers each side. Underneath the bed is more storage, as well as some tank space.

UNDERWAY
In our experience, wide narrowboats from Northwich prove relatively easy to handle once you get used to them. This barge crossover is no exception and the owners have found no difficulty in turning the boat and handling it.

VERDICT
The boat is both good value and comfortably fitted. The Czech craftsmen have done a good job in adapting an Anglicised version of a semi-Dutch barge. The external steelwork is robust, and the cabinetry above what would be expected for this price range.

Emperor King
Mark Langley examines a particularly practical, value-for-money vessel...

Stepping aboard a wide-beam, narrowboat-style boat makes you realise how much more space you get for your money. The New Boat Company’s Emperor is the latest incarnation of its value-for-money craft which comes packed with everything you need for life afloat. You can see why most end up as residential boats, though they are perfectly capable as cruising boats in their own right. The test boat was £107,905, including a few extras over the £104,950 standard boat.

EXTERIOR
The 60ft by 12ft beam boat is built for the New Boat Co by Collingwood in Liverpool. The outside shows the distinctive roof, which is higher than the handrails. This does give even more volume to the interior while still being able to get under bridges. The bow deck is quite large in volume, but short compared to the length of boat. It does look a little odd, but a longer deck would not serve any more useful function. The aft deck itself, meanwhile, is massive, with a taff rail round the stern that half a dozen people could probably perch on!

ON DECK
Under the deckboards, the sizeable 2.2-litre Canaline 52hp engine looks quite tiny in the engine bay. In here, you easily have enough space for fitting a generator, storing a couple of bikes and all the tools you might need. The large calorifier is also in here, saving space inside the boat, while being close to the engine and Webasto diesel heating system.

GALLEY & SALOON
Not that space would need to be saved. The 12ft beam gives you the floor area that would need at least a pair of 70ft narrowboats to match! Down the wide steps into the boat, you have a galley to port, with a dining table space to starboard. In the galley, a stainless steel hob unit is set into a very attractive wooden work surface, a hard-wearing alternative
to the current fashion for granite. The deep Belfast sink is much larger than on most boats, while there is a huge amount of storage around the galley and a large fridge. The eye-level grill and oven has a stainless steel microwave fitted above.

To starboard, a loose dining table for four people felt about right, though a bigger one could easily be accommodated. Against the aft bulkhead is a dresser unit, with drawers, shelves and the electrics cupboard. A second dresser is in the saloon, backing onto the galley bulkhead. The cream effect T&G roof is an option, and one probably worth having, along with the chrome pack, which gives a sophisticated air to the boat.

The enormous saloon had a three-seater leather sofa and coffee table fitted; you could probably add another two-seater and a chair without it feeling crowded. A large single white radiator to starboard is under one gunwale. The area under the opposite gunwale is a space crying out to be filled with some shelving, which could add even more flexibility to the space.

Against the forward bulkhead is a Morsø Squirrel solid fuel stove, set in an enclosed hearth, which meets the code of practice. However, the ‘chimney’ which contains the flue is open, and has two roof vents as well, and I would expect that much of the heat generated would just go straight out! This could be solved by boxing in the flue slightly more. That said, with the black tiling and LED lighting (fitted as standard throughout the boat), it does look stylish. More cupboards and shelves flank the stove, with useful 230V sockets all around the saloon.

BATHROOM & BEDROOM
The bathroom comes next. However, as the boat is so wide, in the corridor there is a work surface with the optional freezer fitted here, as well as space for a washer/dryer and another cupboard. Remove one of the cupboard doors, and this would make a useful desk. The bathroom itself has a large shower, along with a full-height airing cupboard, lots of smaller cupboards, a pump-out toilet (with a large holding tank) and a washbasin set into the counter top.

The forward bedroom has a large walk-round double berth against the bathroom bulkhead, giving a great view out through the glazed forward doors. Storage is everywhere: three large wardrobes, a dressing table, bedside cabinets and drawers abound. Still, the cabin retains a bright and spacious air, partly due to the generous headroom. The boat makes a comfortable floating apartment for two people. A second cabin can be fitted (from around £1,450) which could have a double berth with wardrobe and dressing table, or even with bunks and office space, to give a family enough space to live and cruise afloat.

ENGINE
The standard Canaline engine is more than powerful enough: probably the upgraded 70hp would only be needed if you regularly frequented fast flowing tidal waters. The engine installation is quiet even without any sound insulation fitted. The boat tested had an optional bow thruster tube, but without the thruster – allowing the owner to upgrade in the future without major surgery to the boat. Underway, the boat produced little wash and was easily handled in the marina without a thruster; the engine having lots of grunt to move the boat as needed.

VERDICT
This is a practical boat that makes cruising or residential sense on the wider waterways. (01604 859376, www.newandusedboat.co.uk)
Can an all-porthole boat still feel light and airy? Richard Fairhurst finds out...

The phrase ‘apartment boat’ had probably never appeared in Waterways World until ten years ago. Today, they’re one of the fastest growing species on our waterways. Spacious, comfortable and contemporary, they aim to combine the dream of city-centre living with the appeal of the waterways – at a more affordable price than a bricks-and-mortar apartment. One example of this new breed is Perula, from Tristar Boats based at Redhill Marina at ’Trent Lock.

EXTERIOR
Perula’s 10/6/5 shell was built by Soar Valley Steel Boats, formerly of Chesterfield, but now back in the Soar Valley at Redhill. The lines are fairly typical for a “wide-beam narrowboat”, or “fat boat” as they are more unkindly known. Perula is 10ft wide, which does not depart too wildly from the proportions of the modern narrowboat, though its 60ft length will prevent it from passing the locks of the Yorkshire waterways, which seems a shame for the sake of just 2ft. Of course, this is not really a boat designed for extended cruising, but the flexibility to relocate is part of the appeal of an apartment boat.

The stern is cruiser-style with standard tiller steering and a pillar-mounted single-lever control. Lockers are provided on either side of the steps down into the saloon – and yes, this, like so many these days, is a reverse-layout boat. Steps up to the roof are a welcome touch, in the absence of any helping hand from benches.

SALOON
Perula is an all-porthole boat – but you might not guess it on stepping into the bright, airy saloon. Four
factors combine to prevent the boat feeling too dark. Most obviously, the walls, ceiling and units are all white. A generous side-hatch provides a lot of light when opened, with the reverse layout also giving the option to open the rear doors. The saloon and galley are one room, demarcated by eye-catching Formica-topped units. And finally, there is a straight-through corridor on the starboard side, which does give the boat a more open feeling when the doors are left ajar.

The white walls mean there is no need to disguise the radiators, which are supplied by a Mikuni MX40 diesel-fired boiler. The owner made a point of calculating the exact heat loss from the radiators and matching the number to the size of boat, eventually settling on five.

The pine floor is left bare for free-standing furniture, currently bar-stools and a sofa which again provides a welcome splash of colour. Pull-out drawers towards the stern give unobtrusive storage space.

**GALLEY**

The boat has an understated retro theme to its design, and this is nowhere more apparent than the galley. The work-surface is a sky blue Formica throughout, with rounded corners and a swooping edge to divide it from the saloon. Beneath the Formica are three layers of half-inch birch ply, with each sheet offset from each other to give strength, screwed and glued together.

The appliances are fairly standard for this level of boat, with a twin oven, five-burner hob, fridge and microwave. The oven is mounted in a central pillar, which looks appealing but does leave a dead corner on the port side.

**STUDY**

Perula has initially been fitted out as a single-bedroom boat with study. The study is a real home office, generously sized enough for someone who works as a freelance to consider their main space. The through corridor is slightly offset from the starboard side. This gives the opportunity for extra shelving and avoids the cramped feel of a side corridor. The angles and corner detailing in these bookshelves give a '50s aviation feel to the unit, chiming with the Formica in the galley. This room could be converted to a second bedroom if required, and with that in mind, the bathroom is situated between the two bedrooms.

**BATHROOM**

The retro styling and sky blue colour return in the bathroom. The enclosed shower compartment is a real attention grabber, with a metal-edged, curved-corner entrance. The toilet is a Dometic vacuum cassette unit, which can be pulled out from under the small hand-basin. As is now becoming standard practice, the pumps are easily accessible by removing small panels.

**BEDROOM**

The full-size fixed double is on the port side, with the steps and door to the bow staying to starboard rather than returning to the centre. The rounded shelving and sky blue Formica make another appearance here. Pull-out storage is provided under the bed, with gunwale-height cupboards opposite. One omission is any reading lights: though there is an LED in the ceiling directly above the pillows, a lower-level light would have been welcome.

**BOW**

A disadvantage of reverse layouts is that the bow can become the forgotten part of the boat, almost a ‘back yard’ which remains unused most of the time. This is especially true when, as with Perula, there is no window through to the bedroom, visually breaking the progression through the boat. Perula does have bench seating on either side of the well deck, but most of the time, we would expect the cruiser stern to be used as the outdoor ‘social space’.

One welcome innovation here is an opening cabinet set into the cabin, which contains a Morco Eco-Plus instant gas water heater. In the 1970s and ’80s, no narrowboat was complete without a Paloma instant water heater – but as with gas-fired fridges, the safety-related requirement for such appliances to be room-sealed has made them almost extinct. Fitting the heater in an exterior cabinet is a clever answer to this and the convenience of instant hot water on tap is hard to deny; this is something we wouldn’t be surprised to see in high-end boats.

**ENGINE**

Propulsion is provided by a Barrus 50hp Shire-series engine. The 10ft beam makes for a much less cramped ‘engine hole’ than in a narrowboat, with good accessibility for maintenance. The PRM-150 gearbox connects to a Centaflex flexible coupling. Though Perula has been designed to minimise energy consumption, a full six 110Ah domestic batteries are fitted plus a starter, with two alternators (160A and 50A). A Sterling galvanic isolator should offer some protection against corrosion. There is no bow-thruster, but Tristar’s future boats will be fitted with a tube to keep it open as an option. The river-capable engine, cruiser stern and inverter make it appealing for weekends away and occasional longer breaks, and the 10ft beam should be okay on nominally wide but under-dredged canals.

**VERDICT**

For the price, this is a good combination of live-aboard space and cruising craft that will suit a couple keen to move onto the water. (07976 097042, www.tristarboats.com)
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* (07976 097042, www.tristarboats.com)
The central attraction of a wide-beam is the extra space. Mark Langley looks at a boat that provides ample room for living afloat...

The boat-builders at Lancashire company Burscough Boats have been creating boats for over 25 years, and are particularly proud of the quality of the materials used in the process. The company produces a full range of narrowboats, wide-beam boats and Dutch barges, and among those that were exhibited at the 2012 Crick show was Ansuka II, a 60ft by 11ft wide-beam boat.

Ansuka II sports a particularly generous wheelhouse and attractive claret and cream colour scheme. Wide side decks and raised handrails make moving around the boat easy, with plenty of space for working lines in locks and when mooring. By only having side-entry doors, this allows a full-width seat across the back of the wheelhouse, thus providing a very sociable space.

The handling of the boat should be easy – as well as sensibly placing the wheel centrally, the 65hp Vetus diesel engine not only drives the propeller, but also a hydraulic pump that supplies power to bow and stern thrusters. This should allow four people to comfortably dine and is a useful extension to the galley space. The galley itself has a large domestic sized fridge with separate freezer, plus a washing machine. The large lounge has a solid fuel stove with a glazed corner sideboard against the hull side. The owner has added a pair of two-seater brown leather sofas, which blend well into the attractive finishes, including the wooden floor.

A large private double berth cabin comes off the corridor and is complete with storage and dressing table/desk, giving plenty of space. This second bedroom gives any guests their own privacy and is one advantage of having a wide-beam boat. The corridor running to port has both large arch-topped windows, plus glazed sidemdoors, which both let in a good amount of light.

The bathroom follows, which has a huge shower, as well as the usual amenities, which befit a cruising home. Sensibly the owner has specified a cassette toilet, rather than a pump-out; the Dometic unit had a large ceramic bowl, looking more like a conventional loo than other plastic units.

The master cabin is in the bow, with lots of storage and, as elsewhere in the boat, designer radiators that are effective and blend in well. Unusually, there is a solid bulkhead forward, without windows or doors onto the foredeck. This makes the cabin feel very private. As in the rest of the boat, the white panelling on the ceiling gives light and space, and the oak panelling on the sides gives a warm feel to the interior. A superb boat built to the owners exacting requirements.

VERDICT
Lots of room for living afloat, with all facilities needed for comfortable cruising, with the ability to give guests their own space.
(01704 891675).

www.burscoughboatcompany.co.uk.)
WHERE can you go?

Britain has hundreds of miles of barge waterways, from famous rivers to secluded canals.

All Britain’s navigable rivers are open to the barge-owner, from the royal River Thames, to the mighty Severn and Trent. There are many canals to help you get from one to another – and which provide enjoyable cruising in themselves.

Each waterway was built to its own size: some have slightly narrower locks than usual, others have lower bridges. Often, the locks get smaller and the bridges lower as you continue upstream – on the Thames, for example, a low bridge at Oxford stops large boats from cruising upstream.

So if space is important to you, it’s vital to choose your cruising grounds before getting a boat built to the maximum possible size. In particular, the more historic canals may have low bridges and shallow channels.

There are four main ‘cruising grounds’ for the barge owner: London and the South; East Anglia; the Severn waterways; and the Trent and North. You can’t get from one to another by canal, because the connecting locks are too narrow for barges. But if your boat is good enough and you have some experience, you can make the passage on coastal waters.

**AIRE & CALDER NAVIGATION**

**Goole to Leeds:** 34 miles/12 locks

**Selby Canal Branch – Knott Ingley to Selby:** 12 miles/4 locks

**Wakefield Branch:** 7 miles/4 locks

This ancient navigation begins with a fascinating set of locks from the tidal River Ouse into the now greatly under-used docks. Of most interest to the leisure boater will be the Waterways Museum & Adventure Centre, close to Goole Boathouse where pleasure boats cluster, away from the more commercial area of the docks.

The canal is then wide and deep, but can also be a bit bleak as it traverses the flat open landscape. There is, however, the anticipation of meeting commercial vessels, and also the junction with the New Junction Canal and two locks to add interest before Knott Ingley is reached. Here the delightfully different Selby Canal branches off, which for half its length back to the River Ouse follows the tortuous meanders of the River Aire.

Knott Ingley is interestingly industrial, and the navigation suddenly and surprisingly narrows as it cuts through the town. Then come the coiling towers of Ferrybridge to where, sadly, coal is no longer delivered by water.

Now following the river, the navigation is wide as it wends its way through various Ing’s – waterfilled wildlife reserves – to Castleford. Here the Wakefield Section takes you across the impressive Stanley Ferry aqueducts to the eponymous town with its restored historic warehouses where you join the Calder & Hebble Navigation.

The main AdC continues past more flooded areas, one the infamous St Aidan’s open cast pit, into which the canal disgorged itself with disastrous results in 1988.

One of the results was the new Lemonroyd Lock which replaced two previous locks. Most of the locks show evidence of enlargement, but this is a completely new build. Soon a spate of factories announce the approach to Leeds, but the much older industry of Thwaite Mills Industrial Museum is well worth a visit.
The Leeds waterfront has changed dramatically in recent years, mostly for the better. The Royal Armouries Museum and other modern developments bring life to the waterside as it approaches its end-on junction with the Leeds & Liverpool Canal.

**RIVER AVON (WARKS)**

**Tewkesbury to Stratford:**
42 miles/17 locks
Shakespeare’s Avon is undoubtedly one of the brightest jewels in the inland waterway crown. The river drifts deliciously through a seemingly timeless landscape, its progress punctuated by a series of immaculate towns and villages.

Tewkesbury – a classic English country town – sets the tone for this most memorable of river voyages, having recovered remarkably well from the catastrophic floods of 2007. Here you join the Avon from the Severn and, passing Bredon Hill and 16th century Eckington Bridge, arrive at Pershore, a Georgian town of immense charm, best known perhaps for its tasty red plums. There are a wealth of individual shops and restaurants to enjoy, and pleasant moorings are provided at the recreation ground. Evesham, some 11 miles upstream, boasts a fine waterfront and a host of convivial pubs and restaurants – once again good moorings are provided by the local authority close to Workman Bridge.

Henceforth the river adopts a somewhat less manicured air, but its loveliness never wavers. Bidford - weekend playground of West Midlanders - offers excellent moorings and good facilities and then you’re on the final approach to Stratford. To arrive in this internationally renowned town by boat represents one of the great inland waterway experiences. You can moor right at the heart of the action, opposite the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (currently undergoing major renovation works), whilst the Stratford Canal is accessed some 200 yards upstream. There are super shops, plush restaurants, cosy tearooms, museums, open top bus trips, the list goes on and on. Enjoy your time in Stratford!

The Avon, meanwhile, is navigable for a further three miles or so up to Alveston. In the early 1980s plans were published advocating extension of the navigable section up to Warwick, some ten miles distant, where a link could be made with the Grand Union Canal. Wealthy riparian landowners wasted no time in blowing the whistle on these plans and a potentially exciting project was stillborn.

**BASINGSTOKE CANAL**

**Woodham Junction to Greywell:**
29 miles/29 locks
Finally reopened in 1991 following years of campaigning and restoration work carried out by the Surrey & Hampshire Canal Society and the two county councils, the Basingstoke Canal represents an oasis of calm in the densely populated south-east corner of England.

Leaving the River Wey at Woodham, the Basingstoke climbs steadily up to the Deepcut flight of locks, where 14 chambers elevate the canal by a further 90ft within the space of a couple of miles. There follows a series of lakes - or flashes - before the final lock is reached at Ash. Thereafter, despite the brooding presence of Aldershot and Fleet, the canal succeeds in preserving its mainly rural identity for the remainder of the journey to its terminus shortly before Greywell Tunnel.

Water supply problems and other maintenance difficulties have plagued the waterway in recent years but perseverance is recommended – this is a surprisingly lovely canal, especially at its western end where a visit to the lovely Georgian town of Oldham can provide a fitting climax.

**THE BROADS**

The Broads is the accepted term for the self-contained navigational area based on five rivers: the Ant, Bure, Thurne, Waveney and Yare, plus various branches and the Broads themselves. These are a series of shallow lakes which have resulted from peat extraction in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Boatage on the Broads began in the last century and this has always been an extremely popular cruising area, attracting, it has to be said, a different type of clientele from that of the main waterway network, including many first-time boaters. The Broads should not be despised or avoided on that account, however, for there are many remote corners to be discovered, as well as prolific wildlife and fascinating local architecture. The importance of the Broads was officially recognised in 1988 when the area was designated as the marine equivalent of a national park.

In essence, the northern rivers (Ant, Bure and Thurne) are by far the busiest, and indeed Wroxham, Horning and Potter Heigham can resemble Skegness and Rhyl in the height of summer. But even on the northern section there are plenty of places to escape the crowds, and to cruise (or, even better, sail) gently across Hickling Broad on a warm summer’s evening beneath a vast Norfolk sky is a memorable experience. Horsey Mere and Martham Broad are similarly remote outposts, and from the latter it is an enjoyable walk to the beach at Winterton.

To cross from the Northern Broads to the Southern requires passage across Breydon Water, which is an invigorating voyage but one requiring care and attention to avoid stranding at low water. It could be said, at least from a canal enthusiast’s point of view, that the southern rivers are the most rewarding, the Waveney and the Yare being perhaps prettier than their northern counterparts; they also offer the opportunity to visit Norwich, Beccles and Lowestoft, the latter by way of passage across Oulton Broad. The former is one of the finest small cities in the land, while Beccles is an unspoilt riverside town teeming with quaint shops and intriguing nooks and crannies. Provided your craft can pass under Beccles Bridge, then don’t miss the last few navigable miles of the Waveney up to Goldeston, a sleepily picturesque village which perfectly epitomises the lesser known side of the Broads.

Many narrowboaters have preconceived ideas of Broadland boating, and wouldn’t touch the area with the proverbial barge pole. They don’t know what they’re missing!

**CALDER & HEBBLE NAVIGATION**

**Wakefield to Sowerby Bridge:**
20 miles/33 locks (including flood-locks)
The C&H is part-canal, part-river – originally the River Calder and Hibble Brook, though since the old branch closed into Halifax, it no longer uses the latter.

It seamlessly joins the wild Pennine countryside of the Rochdale Canal to the wide horizons of the Aire & Calder, with branches at Salterhebble (the stub of the Halifax Branch) and Dewsbury. The Huddersfield Broad Canal is little more than a branch to Huddersfield, where the Narrow Canal begins its climb.

Few boaters choose the C&H as a destination, more usually treating it as a transit to be endured on the way to the Pennines. In truth, some of the scenery...
here is very attractive in itself, and the upstream canal section from Brighouse to Sowerby Bridge is most appealing. The locks are broad (14ft) but short (57ft 6in). Boaters with 60ft craft do occasionally attempt passage, but it requires great patience to align the boat diagonally in the lock, and is only recommended for the experienced. Several locks still require use of a traditional ‘handspike’ – a long piece of three-by-two wood – to raise the paddles. The locks are full of interest, from basic flood-locks where the canal cuts join the river (at most times you can breeze straight through) to the attractive spot of Salterhebble. Here there’s a rare guillotine-gated lock and the site of an old two-rise staircase.

**CHELMER & BLACKWATER NAVIGATION**

**Heybridge Basin (Maldon) to Chelmsford:**

14 miles/12 locks

Now operated by Essex Waterways Ltd (a subsidiary company of the Inland Waterways Association), the Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation is a comparatively little known but immensely enjoyable waterway. Far removed from the helter skelter of ’estuary Essex’, it offers delightful cruising for private and hire boaters alike. Furthermore, since its takeover by new owners, standards of maintenance have improved immeasurably and a wider range of facilities are available.

Heybridge Basin is one of those places – like Glasson Basin in Lancashire – where salt water and fresh meet. There’s a mingling of sailing craft and narrowboats, of yachts and canalers. It’s a gloriously unspoilt, atmospheric location, and a handful of good pubs serve to make a visit even more enjoyable.

The historic town of Maldon is carefully skirted and then the waterway charts a lovely course through the Essex countryside, its route punctuated by regular locks but few signs of civilisation. The banks are lined in many places with willow trees, the wood from which is still used to make cricket bats. Villages, like Little Baddow and Woodham Walter, are set well back from the navigation but repay exploration. Eventually tiring of the rural idyll, the C&BN runs alongside the busy A12 before terminating at Springfield Basin on the outskirts of Chelmsford. It would provide a fitting finale to the route if the waterway could be extended into the town centre, but plans to achieve that objective have so far made little progress.

**FOSSDYKE CANAL & RIVER WITHERHAM**

**Torksey to Boston:** 43 miles/3 locks

**Witham Navigable Drains:** 42 miles/2 locks

The Fossdyke Canal runs from the River Trent at Torksey through somewhat flat, featureless scenery to Lincoln, from where the River Witham may be navigated to Boston and thus the Wash. The Witham Navigable Drains offer a further 40 or so miles of navigable waterways traversing an archetypal - and eerily remote - Fenland landscape.

Admittedly not everyone’s cup of tea, and far removed from the mainstream boating areas of the Midlands, there is nevertheless much to enjoy on both the Fossdyke Canal and the River Witham. Aside from the opportunity of visiting Lincoln - Brayford Pool, historic cathedral, excellent shopping etc - and Boston by boat, the principal appeal of these waters probably lies in their astonishingly remote nature: away from the madding crowd etc. You won’t be queuing for locks on these waterways!

**GLOUCESTER & SHARPNESS CANAL**

**Gloucester to Sharpness:** 16 miles/0 locks

The Gloucester & Sharpness Canal is surprisingly little used. Only a relatively few miles removed from the popular Avon Ring cruising circuit, the G&S attracts relatively few pleasure boaters to its charming waters - which is a shame, for a wealth of interest and some lovely scenery are packed into its short length.

Once Gloucester’s fascinating docks but somewhat dreary suburbs have been left astern, the waterway traverses a gloriously remote landscape beside the broad waters of the River Severn, with far ranging views across to the Forest of Dean. Numerous highlights vie for your attention: pretty Saul Junction; the immaculately kept swing-bridges (all manned); the world renowned Slimbridge Wildfowl Centre, established by Sir Peter Scott on the marshes between the canal and the Severn; and dense Flampton-on-Severn, one of the most attractive villages in Gloucestershire, with its huge village green and cluster of pretty pubs. The canal concludes its journey to the Severn Estuary at Sharpness Docks, where moorings are provided for pleasure craft and you can linger awhile watching, if you’re lucky, a coaster or two arriving from some far corner of the globe.

**RIVER GREAT OUSE & TRIBUTARIES**

**Kings Lynn - Ely - St Ives - Huntingdon - Bedford**

Non-tidal river: 72 miles/16 locks

**River Cam to Cambridge:** 14.5 miles/3 locks

This fine river into Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire has a fantastic variety of scenery and a host of delightful riverside towns and villages. Several smaller rivers form tributaries: the best known is the River Cam to Cambridge, where numerous residential barges are moored.

The Great Ouse is navigable up to Kemptson Mill, a couple of miles above Bedford. The county town is not a major tourist mecca but it certainly turns its best face to the river and a short stay here is enjoyable enough. But the prime attractions are to be found downstream, as the river flows through an understated but delightful landscape. Picturesque villages and elegant market
towns provide frequent distractions: Hemingford Grey, Houghton, Godmanchester, St Neots, Huntingdon and, best of all, St Ives, with its 15th century arched bridge complete with tiny chapel.

At Ely the tidal New Bedford River heads off, straight as an arrow, to the north-east but most boaters continue along the winding Old West River to Popes Corner, confluence with the River Cam. Henceforth the Great Ouse continues through typical Fenland scenery, passing Ely and Littleport, to Denver Sluice and thus a link with the Middle Level Navigations. But don’t rush too much, for Ely and Littleport both repay leisurely exploration. The former is a fascinating little city, with numerous quaint shops and tearooms and an attractive waterfront; plus, of course, its magnificent cathedral, which dominates the Fens for miles around.

After Denver Sluice, the Great Ouse is tidal to Kings Lynn and the Wash. A connection is available to the Nene from Salters Lodge, near Denver, via the Middle Level. Locks are of varying sizes, and as a general rule, are wider downstream; the restrictive 10ft 4in limit applies to boats seeking to reach Bedford.

KENNET & AVON NAVIGATION
Reading to Bristol:
93 miles/104 locks
It’s impossible to overstate the appeal of this wonderful coast-to-coast waterway. Reopened throughout in 1990, the K&A passes through some of the finest scenery - and elegant market towns - that central southern England has to offer.

Bustling Reading - at the River Kennet’s confluence with the Thames - gives little indication of the delights to come further west. Soon, however, the K&A establishes itself as a rural waterway par excellence. Part canal, part river, it traverses a low lying landscape of water meadows and marshland. Features of interest come along thick and fast, including Aldermaston Wharf with its visitor centre. Plentiful locks and a host of swing bridges serve to exercise the crew.

Newbury is a thoroughly welcoming town, full of fine shops, restaurants and wine bars situated conveniently close to the canal. Hungerford - though smaller - is equally attractive, with tea shops, pubs and antique outlets galore.

But however much you may have enjoyed the journey thus far, the best of the K&A is just beginning as you cross the county border into Wiltshire. Little and Great Bedwyn are delightful canalside villages set amid the gentle hills of East Wiltshire. Then comes Crofton Pumphouse, open to the public daily in season - steam weekends are held from time to time. Perhaps the finest section of all lies between Pewsey and Devizes, as the canal traces a delightful course through the Vale of Pewsey, overlooked by the chalky Marlborough Downs. And the Long Pound - all 15 miles of it - gives the boater the chance to relax and enjoy it to the full.

The famous Devizes lock flight lowers the canal 237 feet into the Avon Valley - a fabulous feat of engineering set amid fabulous countryside. Bradford-on-Avon is followed by two fine aqueducts: Avoncliff and Dundas. And so to Bath - quite simply the most beautiful city in the UK. Any visitor to this Georgian treasure trove is lucky, those who arrive by canal boat are luckiest of all. Enjoy the Roman Baths, the Abbey, Pulteney Bridge, Georgian crescents, tea shops and fine restaurants etc etc.

Thereafter, several miles of pleasurable cruising on the River Avon are on the agenda before your arrival in the ancient seaport of Bristol. There’s much to enjoy here too (some even put the attractions on a par with those of Bath), including the mighty SS Great Britain, located in the Floating Harbour. Don’t miss the Clifton Suspension Bridge either, together with its informative visitor centre.

LEE & STORT NAVIGATION
Limehouse Basin to Hertford:
27 miles/19 locks
River Stort, Felide’s Lock to Bishop’s Stortford:
14 miles/15 locks
These two rivers to the east of London are always considered as a single entity and offer some interesting cruising possibilities in an area less visited than many, despite their proximity to such a huge population. That it is an area where open countryside is scarce has resulted in its designation as the Lee Valley Regional Park. Starting in London’s East End, most boaters access the rivers from Limehouse Basin and Limehouse Cut rather than directly from the tidal river opposite the O2 Arena. The lower section of the Lee was be in the spotlight this summer with the London Olympics taking place beside its banks, and many cosmetic improvements were made to the waterway ahead of the event.

As the Lee heads northwards, through Hackney, Tottenham and Enfield, the pressure of the industrial areas to the west are not helped by the many reservoirs to the east, for the boater’s view is often only of their vast embankments. Around Waltham Abbey, an historic town well deserving of a visit, true countryside begins as the river passes a series of flooded gravel pits, skirting around Hoddesdon, past the confluence with the Stort, then through Ware to its terminus at Hertford.

The Stort is an altogether more attractive river, and fortunately twice as long as the Lee above their confluence. It winds its tortuous way past attractive towns and ancient mills, through Harlow and Sawbridgeworth to Bishop’s Stortford, and amply justifies the passage through some of the less appealing areas of East London.

LEEDS & LIVERPOOL CANAL
Liverpool - Wigan - Blackburn - Burnley - Skipton - Bingley - Leeds
127 miles/93 locks
The longest single canal in the country, the Leeds & Liverpool links the wide waterways of Yorkshire with those of Lancashire and the River Mersey – and has recently been ‘extended’ by the construction of the Liverpool Link, allowing boaters access to the very heart of the city.
The canal was built for a local form of freight-carrying barge called the ‘short boat’, and wide-beam craft are still well suited to this waterway. Frequent locks and swing-bridges do, however, mean that your crew should be fairly agile.

The highest reaches of the canal, around Skipton, are twisty Pennines and Yorkshire Dales and have suitably magnificent scenery. The famous ‘Marton Pool’ section is truly the most dramatic section of upland canal anywhere in the UK, as it twists and turns back on itself across awe-inspiring moorland. Industrial Lancashire’s conurbations are less immediately appealing but have a certain raw appeal.

Finally, in Liverpool, Stanley Dock Locks drop boats down into the old docks and boaters pass in front of the Three Graces to moor in the splendidly located Salthouse Dock, close to the famous Albert Dock and the new shopping city of Liverpool One.

**RIVER MEDWAY**

Sheerness to Tonbridge: 19 miles/10 locks (non-tidal section)

Way back in the mists of time, the Medway boasted several hire bases and was relatively popular with pleasure boaters. Not so today, for its waters are relatively quiet for most of the year – although the Environment Agency has recently installed additional facilities for boaters in an attempt to promote additional use of the river. And it’s certainly well worth making the effort to see something of this delightful river – not least because the EA has also improved the range of amenities in an attempt to attract more boaters.

Allington Lock marks the beginning of the non-tidal section. Just upstream lies Maidstone – Kent’s bustling county town – but thereafter it’s a rural theme as the river threads its way through the Garden of England, with lovely scenery everywhere you look. There are a number of beautiful medieval bridges, attractive villages – notably East Farleigh – and timeless water meadows to enjoy before the head of navigation is reached at Tonbridge. It’s a pleasant town with good pubs and restaurants and well worthy of exploration before returning downstream.

**MIDDLE LEVEL NAVIGATIONS**

March and the Fens

The Middle Level offers a link between the Great Ouse and the Nene. Be sure to visit March, Ramsey and the twin ‘Dutch style’ villages of Upwell and Outwell. This is remote and adventurous cruising, with vast Fenland skies, unpolluted air and charming towns and villages. Mooring is limited on most of these drains, and turning space is restricted at the furthest-flung corners.

**RIVER NENE**

Northampton to Dog-in-a-Doublet (Peterborough): 62.5 miles/38 locks

The Nene is an astonishingly lovely river; and unspoilt and uncrowded too, many boaters being put off, it would appear, by the 38 locks to be tackled within its 62 miles. However, most of the once-feared guillotine gates have been electrified so there’s no excuse for staying away!

Northampton is a distinguished county town which certainly repays exploration, but the river’s prime attractions lie downstream, as it flows through rural England at its best: a timeless landscape of watermeadows, weathered mills and quaint villages, most set well back from the river because of the threat of flooding.

Thrapston and Wadenhoe are pleasant places to linger, before you come to Oundle, a delectable stone-built town, famous for its public school. Further downstream is Thoreingham, forever associated with Mary Queen of Scots (she was imprisoned here and executed in 1587) and boasting a wonderful riverside church. Many regard this as the most beautiful village on the inland waterway network and you can moor virtually within the shadow of the historic church.

More Fenland scenery is on the agenda as the river approaches Peterborough, a thriving city with a fine waterside promenade equipped with all necessary facilities for boaters. Passing the entrance to Stanground Lock – which gives access to the Middle Level Navigations - the river flows as straight as a die for a further five miles to the sluice and lock at Dog-in-a-Doublet.

**RIVER OUSE**

Humber – Goole – York – Boroughbridge – Ripon

33 miles (non-tidal including River Ure and Ripon Canal), 7 locks

37 miles (tidal)

Not to be confused with East Anglia’s River Great Ouse, the Yorkshire Ouse is the river around which York itself was built, and extends via the Ure and Ripon Canal to the picturesque city of Ripon. The very intrepid (or those with full length boats) will enter at Trent Falls, the slightly less intrepid at Goole, but the safest and simplest route is via Selby from where, provided you get the tides right, it is a relatively easy run to Naburn and non-tidal water.

This is generally a quiet and unspoilt river navigation, gently meandering river past a series of delightful villages and stately houses only marred by poor mooring facilities.

**REGENT’S CANAL**

Hayes - Greenford - Paddington - Camden - Islington - Hackney - Limehouse

21 miles/13 locks

The famous Regent’s Canal and Grand Union Paddington Arm together form an east-west route through London, from the Hayes/Southall area on the Grand Union Main Line to Limehouse on the Thames. (From Southall to Paddington it’s the Grand Union Paddington Arm; from Paddington to Limehouse, the Regent’s Canal.) This route is particularly popular with residential barge owners, and at the classic canal location of Little Venice, near Paddington, you’ll see a beautiful collection of boats large and small. Residential moorings are keenly sought after, and consequently these are the most expensive inland moorings anywhere in Britain; and just as with the rest of the London housing market, you’ll need to be quick to snap up one of these sought-after berths. Most moorings are ‘online’ (on the canal itself) but some former freight basins have been converted for mooring purposes.

The lock-free Paddington Arm can seem a little down-at-heel with its unglamorous suburban surroundings. But Little Venice is a hugely desirable address, while Paddington Basin is all modern architecture and gleaming offices. After ducking under the Edgware Road in a tunnel, the canal emerges by Regent’s Park to form the northern boundary of London Zoo – so you can take a gander at the animals as you pass!

Camden Lock and the canalside market need no introduction, and the towpath is always thronged here. The St Pancras area has long been home to a friendly boat club, and the area is being spruced up with new developments such as the Eurostar.
Where can you go?

ROCHDALE CANAL
Sowerby Bridge to Manchester: 33 miles/92 locks
This is a breathtakingly beautiful canal: not an easy one, and not without its problems, but with a raw, natural appeal.

Unlike the nearby Huddersfield Narrow Canal, restored at a similar time, the Rochdale goes over, not under, the Pennines. The parallel railway dives into a tunnel; the nearby village is called Summit; old quarries are dotted all around; but the Rochdale twists, turns and climbs as it surmounts one of the greatest geographical challenges of the canal age. It’s one of the most memorable experiences on the network.

The descent to Yorkshire is a pleasure, too, through friendly little towns such as Todmorden and the surprisingly bohemian Hebden Bridge. The canal-side architecture is little changed from its commercial days, and the Pennines are ever-present until the Sowerby Bridge terminus, where it gives way to the Calder & Hebble. The 92 broad locks, all built to the same rise, are exercise enough in themselves, but if you have any calories left to burn, this is ideal hiking country.

The western side, as the canal descends to Manchester, is like the curate’s egg: good in parts. Littleborough continues the theme of the eastern side, and the newly repaired Irk Aqueduct is a delightful spot. But Rochdale itself has yet to appreciate its canal, and the Manchester sprawl is no better. Canal & River Trust staff will assist you through the locks here (booking required).

The canal looks up (literally) past the imposing mills of Ancoats, to end on a high with the Rochdale Nine – a final flight burrowing past the back-streets of Manchester. Part of the Cheshire Ring, and so never officially closed to navigation, it emerges blinking in the sunlight at the Bridgewater Canal’s basin of Castlefields.

Like other newly restored canals, the Rochdale is as yet light in facilities and still arguably under-maintained; but if you have the stamina, it’ll repay in spades.

RIVER SEVERN
Gloucester to Stourport: 42 miles/5 locks
Boaters emerging onto the mighty Severn from the bucolic Avon at Tewkesbury might be tempted to misquote Crocodile Dundee. “That’s not a river – this is a river!”

The Severn is Britain’s longest river, though the upper reaches are off-limits to boats: the rapids of Wales (where they call it Afon Hafren), Shrewsbury and Ironbridge. But once you reach Stourport, the cruising starts in earnest, as a strong resident population of fibreglass cruisers will reassure you. From here, you can cruise this wide, lightly locked river down to Gloucester, where the Gloucester & Sharpness (Ship) Canal takes up the story.

The river has a tendency to distribute the rains of Wales over the farmland of Worcestershire, so the banks can be high and the views restricted. But the scenery has occasional highs – steep gorges and wooded slopes – and much of the appeal of the Severn is what’s on the banks: the historic cathedral cities of Gloucester and Worcester, the market towns of Tewkesbury and Upton, the frequent riverside pubs with good moorings. (From the Angel at Stourport to the Boat at Ashleworth Quay, the pubs of the Severn are a match for any waterway in Britain.)

The locks are operated for you: all you need to do is wait for the green light. If you have a powerful enough engine, you’ll find the miles just drop away as you make your way along the river. Be careful after rain, though. The Severn can swell at the slightest provocation and you’ll best to stay moored up until it subsides.

SHEFFIELD & SOUTH YORKSHIRE NAVIGATION
Keadby to Sheffield: 43 miles/28 locks; (New Junction Canal) Bramwith Junction to Went Junction: 5.5 miles/1 lock
This commercial waterway offers huge contrasts to the leisure boater: from small barge locks not long enough for a full-length narrowboat to the most modern series of locks built by Canal & River Trust; and from former sites of heavy industry to splendid countryside.

It begins at Keadby where the barge-sized Stainforth & Keadby Canal leaves the tidal Trent. In the shadow of the new gas-fired power station, the unique sliding railway bridge releases boats onto the long straight to the former shipbuilding town of Thorne. The canal then follows the River Don to the junction with the New Junction Canal, which offers a link north to the Aire & Calder.

The SSYN now adopts a more twisting course as it follows the Don closely through Doncaster, above where it uses the river channel itself, along its surprisingly attractive valley through Sprotbrough and Conisbrough, with its hilltop castle, well worth the climb. Industry returns around Swinton, along with the long-established Waddington’s boatyard at the junction with the erstwhile Dearne & Dove Canal. The modernised locks continue through to Rotherham, but beyond here the original barge locks are retained for the intensive climb up to Sheffield. En route you pass...
Where can you go?

beneath the M1’s Tinsley Viaduct with Meadowside Shopping Centre close by, and the Don Valley Stadium. At the canal’s terminus, the restored basin, with its imposing warehouses, makes a fitting destination and a good mooring for the city.

RIVER SOAR
Leicester – Loughborough – Trent
26 miles/16 locks

This tributary of the Trent could be Britain’s most under-rated cruising river. It is navigable downstream from Leicester to Trent Lock, on the Trent near Nottingham. The Soar is innocuous enough at first, slowly disentangling itself from Leicester’s suburbs. By the time you reach the villages of Mountsorrel and Barrow, it has taken on a green, unhurried air interspersed now and then by deep locks and friendly pubs. After Loughborough, it becomes better still: water meadows roll away to the sides, spires are sighted both distantly and (at Normanton) right by the river, and you might believe you’re only here on sufferance of the wildfowl.

Leicester itself is a lively, confident city with much to discover: the most authentic market you’ll find in Britain, narrow shopping arcades, and a surprising amount of history from Roman times onwards.

Barges and wide-beam narrowboats are very common sights, particularly below Loughborough, and several are used as house-boats. The Soar remains quiet but has a few marinas, including a new one at Loughborough. Few people moor in Leicester itself, but the suburbs of Birstall and Thurcaston are pleasant.

Barge owners can also continue to Market Harborough via the Grand Union Canal’s Leicester Line - a further 24 locks and 24 miles - though this stretch is mostly used by narrowboats. Unfortunately, the connection via Foxton and Watford to the Grand Union main line has narrow locks, though the bridges and tunnels are wide.

RIVER THAMES
Teddington to Lechlade:
125 miles/44 locks

With all due respect to the waterways of the Norfolk Broads, the Thames is unquestionably Britain’s premier ‘cruising playground’, where pleasure boating first became popular in the 18th century. The river flows seductively across southern England, through a rich and varied landscape, its banks lined with the homes of the rich and famous. Teddington marks the lower limit of the non tidal navigation. Travelling upstream you encounter all manner of craft, from large trip boats (including those of Salter Bros – Thames operators for over 100 years) down to punts and dinghies. The scenery is never less than gorgeous, and the roll call of riverside towns makes impressive reading: Kingston, Hampton (with its palace, park and maze), Sunbury, Windsor and Maidenhead are just some of the ports of call on the lower reaches. A feature of the river is its admirably maintained locks with their colourful and well tended gardens – and what more the locks are normally worked for you, making for an especially relaxing holiday.

Selecting the most beautiful section of this delectable river is virtually impossible. But, perhaps the length between Cliveden and Reading may just shade it. Here the waterside houses are at their grandest, the lovely towns of Marlow and Henley need little introduction and Sonning’s ancient bridge and village are exquisitely charming.

But the Thames continues to enthral, through Pangbourne, Goring, Dorchester and Abingdon. Goring is especially enchanting - a riverside village of quiet beauty. It was the final home of Sir Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris - chief of RAF Bomber command in World War II – until his death in April 1984.

Then there’s Oxford. The world famous university city doesn’t necessarily turn its best face to the Thames (you’ll have to hire a punt and explore the Cherwell for that), but the reach just above Osney Lock is a good place to moor for a few hours and explore all the sights at your leisure.

Above Oxford the character of the river changes, becoming quieter, narrower and altogether more intimate. Some 32 lonely miles (and there are those who find this section the best of all) take you to Lechlade and the end of a river journey with no equal anywhere in the British Isles.

RIVER TREVENT
D wermoutsho to Cromwell Lock
(limit of non tidal section): 40 miles/11 locks; Cromwell Lock to Keadby Lock (South Yorkshire Navigations): 84 miles/13 locks

Rising in the Stoke area, the Trent is overshadowed as a navigation by the Trent & Mersey Canal until it comes into its own at Shardlow. It soon meets the River Soar and the Erewash Canal at the site of the 2009 National Waterways Festival before the navigation leaves the river to divert through Nottingham on the Beeston Cut. The city has regenerated its waterside and it is now a popular thriving area of clubs, pubs – and the law courts!

At Meadow Lane Lock the river is rejoined and remains the navigation all the way to the Humber. It gently meanders, boats passing through several large keeper-operated locks, to the delightful historic market town of Newark with its dominating waterside castle.

Cromwell Lock marks the beginning of the tidal river. This needs careful planning to navigate and to make the most of the tides, but it is an essential through route to the Fossdyke & Witham at Torksey, the Chesterfield Canal at West Stockwith and the Yorkshire waterways at Keadby. En route, the historic town of Gainsborough, setting for George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss, offers just about the only mooring opportunity other than the adjoining navigations.

RIVER WEY
Thames Lock (Weybridge) to Godalming: 20 miles/16 locks

The River Wey flows unstentationally through Surrey’s stockbroker belt, providing an oasis of peace amidst the hectic skelter bustle of the South East. Never outstandingly lovely, the river nevertheless boasts a number of attractive reaches and offers a quiet diversion from the River Thames.

Wealthy Weybridge – with more millionaires per square yard than any other town in England – sets the tone for the entire journey. Nearby Coxes Mill – long derelict and reputedly haunted – now serves as luxury flats. Beyond the M25 crossing, the Basingstoke Canal leaves on its journey into Hampshire as you proceed south to Guildford – a relaxed city with a small town feel and numerous cultural attractions and numerous good pubs and restaurants. Several more miles of quiet, well-wooded Surrey countryside then accompany you to the limit of navigation at Godalming, where you can relax, enjoy a meal out and a little shopping, and then retrace your steps back to the Thames.