



narrowboats



what are they?

A narrowboat is a boat for living in, transporting cargo and/or travelling on canals and inland waterways. Modern boats are generally made of steel, though some are aluminium, and many older craft are wooden. They're 6ft 10in (2.1m) wide, up to 70ft (21.3m), can cruise almost any waterway, but are not well suited to tidal rivers. 'Wide beam' boats (barges) also exist, and are, as the name suggests, wider steel craft. They are more spacious, but are unsuited to navigating canal locks, which are usually 7ft (2.13m) wide.

Most of Britain's canals were built in the 18th century to transport industrial goods and raw materials. Cargo boats were drawn by horses until after WWII when they were finally replaced by engines. They could pull much bigger loads on water than by road and the leap in productivity led to an explosion in canal freight, reduced the price of coal and powered the Industrial Revolution.

The canals eventually lost ground to railways, and later to motorways, and by the 1950s had largely fallen into disrepair. A growing industrial heritage enthusiast movement led to a number of restoration projects between the 1950s and 1970s which, combined with an increased interest in boating and recreational use, helped bring them back into favour. Today, Britain's 2000 miles of waterways are experiencing something of a second golden age. Boat numbers are up: some 33,000 currently afloat, compared to 28,000 10 years ago. More and more people from all walks of life are turning to narrowboats as a viable alternative to owning a house or flat.

Canals still carry freight in some places – mostly in the north of England where the wider canals are suitable for large modern freight barges. Horse boating is now relatively rare although a handful of enthusiasts keep the tradition alive.



Solar panels on the roof of a narrowboat – quieter and cleaner than a diesel generator.



Narrowboats are able to navigate through the centre of major cities.

what are the benefits?

The pace of life tends to be slower and it brings you into close contact with nature. Like parks, canals act as green lungs for cities and are home to a huge variety of wildlife, from water voles to herons, kingfishers, swans, ducks and many species of fish (a good indication of improving water quality). Many canals and towpaths are listed as sites of special scientific interest.

There's a strong sense of community on the water since canal living is idyllic but not easy: there are ongoing repairs, maintenance and other challenges, so canal dwellers tend to help each other out. The nomadic nature of some canal folk also helps to connect different communities along the waterways. It's an outdoorsy kind of life too, which means fresh air and exercise.

Twenty years ago, canal-side developments were built to face away from the water, but today they face onto it; a waterfront location has become very desirable and investment in the canals and surrounding areas is rising, spurring regeneration as developers are motivated to improve the stretches they build along. Increased investment, use of and interest in the canals benefits local economies by creating opportunities for small businesses. narrowboats have been given a new and expanded lease of life and can be found repurposed for day trips, as hotels, as cultural, business or art event spaces, floating bookshops, food shops or markets, barbers, cafes and more.

Narrowboat living has the potential to be lower-impact than a traditional bricks-and-mortar house. For a start, boats don't take up any land. They are much smaller and so use less energy to heat up and keep warm. Everything that goes on or off a boat has to be moved by you, so you tend to be more conscious of the resources you're using and how much waste you produce.



what can I do?

Try a narrowboat holiday first to see if you like it. It can be hard work and you need to do your research before buying a boat, particularly if you're going to live on it. There are hidden costs and continuous maintenance and repairs required, which can mean getting your hands dirty or forking out for specialist work. While the initial investment is less than buying a house, only get a boat if you want to embrace the lifestyle, not to save money. Consider taking a course in boat handling.

Buying a boat: first, check the dimensions are suitable for the waterways you want to use. Canals and rivers in Yorkshire have shorter locks so your boat must be no longer than 56ft if you plan to cruise there. You can buy new, second-hand or have a boat built. If buying new, take some time to visit builders and showrooms and discuss what you want with them. Some boats are built using traditional crafts and materials, others are more modern or unconventional, but almost all are handcrafted to some degree. You can also buy standard models and add refinements yourself.

Second-hand prices vary depending on age and condition. Expect to spend more on maintenance than with a new boat, so always buy the best-maintained one you can afford and check that spares and supplies are readily available for that model. Ensure you buy from a reputable broker or, if buying direct, make sure the person selling is the lawful owner (ask for a legal bill of sale). Even if you're buying from a broker, you need to check all the information provided by the seller is accurate. Then it's a bit like buying a house: you pay a deposit to secure the boat and the sale is then pending a satisfactory survey of the boat's condition. As with a house, get your own survey done rather than just relying on the vendor's.

If you have to borrow, be aware that rates are higher than for house mortgages. Also, a boat is a depreciating asset, unlike flats/houses.

Whether you're buying new or second-hand, it's worth taking time to talk to existing boat owners to get the benefit of their experience.

Other costs: boat safety certificate (like an MOT), required every four years; licence: obligatory for all boats, valid for 12, 6 or 3 months, helps pay for upkeep of the waterways and includes rules for their safe and respectful use; mooring - home

mooring, which you own or rent and where you leave your boat permanently, or no mooring, meaning you have to 'continuously cruise', staying no longer than 14 days at a particular mooring; insurance; diesel; other fuel costs - heating, generator etc.; pumping out (emptying your toilet); blacking the hull every 3-4 years to protect from corrosion; ongoing maintenance by specialists; launderette (most boats don't have a washing machine); keys to access locked bridges, toilets, water supplies etc.; maps & guides.

There are a number of things to be aware of to reduce the environmental impact of your boat.

Waste: use eco-friendly cleaning/personal products to avoid discharging anything harmful; toilets need to be emptied regularly (never overboard). Compost toilets are good; recycle at points provided along the waterways.

Resource efficiency: think about – good insulation; energy-efficient lights / appliances; FSC-certified or recycled wood products; buying 2nd-hand; biodiesel (from waste oil); wood stove; solar panels – see lowimpact.org for more ideas.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/narrowboats for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Nick Corble, *the Narrowboats Story*
- Tony Jones, *the Narrowboat Guide*
- Tony Conder, *Canals in Britain*
- nabo.org.uk – National Assoc. of Boat Owners
- canaljunction.com – information, guides, holiday listings, boat-builders, advice and more
- livingonaboat.co.uk – guide to boat living
- waterwaysdirectory.com – lots of useful info.



The roof of a narrowboat is an ideal place for growing flowers, vegetables and herbs.

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