

The rise and rise of boating holidays: Why boating breaks are booming - and who'll be booking them in 2026

Boating holiday trends, insights, forecasts, and destination hotspots for 2026
from leading inland waterway operator, Le Boat



Boating holidays are enjoying a remarkable surge in popularity, as UK travellers increasingly seek out slower, more meaningful ways to switch off. From the calming rhythm of life on the water to the freedom of exploring at your own pace, houseboat holidays are fast becoming a go-to antidote to the stresses of modern life.

According to leading inland waterway operator [Le Boat](#), demand shows no sign of slowing.

Cheryl Brown, boating holiday expert and Managing Director at Le Boat, shares her insights into the trends shaping boating holidays in 2026 - from who's booking and where they're going, to why this style of travel is resonating so strongly.

A growing appetite for something different

"At [Le Boat](#) we've seen an impressive 32% year on year uplift in UK bookings for 2026 to date, alongside an 11% increase globally," says Brown.

"This growth clearly shows that travellers are looking for something different from their holidays. For many, a boating holiday feels like the natural next step after years of road trips, camping or glamping — it offers novelty, freedom and adventure, without sacrificing comfort.

"Newcomers are leading the charge. In 2025, 75% of our guests were new to the Le Boat experience, which highlights just how willing British travellers are to try something new. At the same time, repeat bookings were up 5% year on year, showing that once people try boating holidays, many come back for more."

When people travel — and why booking ahead matters

“Summer is the busiest period for boating holidays. July and August will continue to see the highest traffic across UK, Ireland, European and Canadian waterways in 2026, driven by school holidays and more reliable weather, so for anyone planning a summer boating break, booking early is strongly recommended.”

Staycations still dominate

“Much like in other tourism segments, staycations are as strong as ever for boating holidays. In 2025, Thames boating holidays rose by 34% (and we’re already seeing a 69% year on year increase in staycation bookings for 2026), while departures on the Caledonian Canal increased by 5%. With this momentum continuing ever since the pandemic, we expect domestic travel to remain robust into 2026.

Brown adds that “Familiarity plays an important role for first-time boaters. The novelty of trying self-drive boating for the first time is exciting enough on its own, so being able to navigate a familiar country, language and culture adds reassurance and makes the experience more accessible when – literally - navigating new waters.”

Overseas hotspots for 2026

“When it comes to overseas destinations, France remains firmly in the spotlight. The Canal du Midi is the number one continental waterway for Brits, and it’s likely to be even more popular in 2026 as this iconic southern French canal celebrates 30 years as a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#).

“Other French regions – including Brittany, Nivernais Loire, Charente, and Burgundy - are growing in popularity respectively, whilst easy-access, no-fly destinations beyond France, such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, provide alternative holiday opportunities for UK customers in 2026.”

Shorter, more spontaneous breaks

“Mirroring the wider travel industry, boating holidays have shifted to become more spontaneous, more local, and also shorter in duration.

“In 2025, driven by staycations and last-minute bookings, short breaks made up nearly half (48%) of Le Boat holidays, up 16% year on year. Tied to domestic travel, economic uncertainty and unpredictable weather, shorter breaks are a trend we expect to continue into 2026.”

Trading up for comfort

“Value remains important for cost-conscious British customers - In 2025, 90% of UK customers booked Comfort or Value boats, however, as we expand our premium offering, we are already seeing a growing demand for our Premier fleet, suggesting that travellers are willing to invest in higher-end experiences, especially when it comes to comfort and convenience..”

Why boating holidays appeal

So what's driving the appeal of houseboat holidays - and who are they best suited to?

According to Brown, there are four key motivators:

1. Value for money

"Much like a campervan holiday, boating combines accommodation, transport and self-catering in one, making it an efficient and cost-effective way to explore multiple locations and sights in a single trip."

2. A desire for unique experiences

"River cruising offers a slow-travel approach that takes guests off the beaten track, uncovering hidden gems that traditional tourism often misses. With personalised itineraries, boaters choose their own pace, pit stops, excursions and activities – catering to the needs, interests and tastes of everyone onboard."

3. A connection with nature

"Time on the water instantly connects people with nature and wildlife, while opening up opportunities for activities like walking, cycling or swimming, that ground us and help us discover and appreciate the beauty of the natural environment that many of us rarely make time for in everyday life."

4. Wellbeing and mindful travel

"In an always-on, digitally dominated world, people increasingly crave meaningful, purposeful downtime. Boating holidays allow guests to slow down and disconnect from the daily grind, whilst reconnecting with loved ones and with their surroundings, and offers the peace and tranquillity required to restore balance, support mental wellbeing, and create lasting memories."

Who are boating holidays for?

"A houseboat holiday suits families, couples, groups of friends, and even solo travellers who can connect with a community of likeminded on the water explorers."

"They're also ideal for pet owners who don't want to exclude their four-legged family members from this all-important downtime or deal with the stress of kennels or catteries."

"The variety of experiences available means a houseboat holiday will cater to a vast range of different interests and pursuits - from wildlife-rich scenery and outdoor adventure to local gastronomy, vineyards, historic towns and cultural landmarks. They can also be a source of inspiration for photographers, artists and writers, thanks to the unique water-level perspective."

The future of mindful adventure

"Ultimately, houseboat holidays appeal to mindful adventurers," Brown concludes. "River cruising isn't about rushing from place to place or ticking off sights. It's about discovery, enjoying the journey, and embracing the unexpected moments and unique experiences that happen along the way."

“As we increasingly seek purpose and quality in our holiday experiences, boating holidays make for a compelling choice.”

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About Le Boat

With over 55 years of experience, leading inland waterways holiday operator, Le Boat, offers self-drive boating holidays that require no license, enabling access to the rivers, lakes and canals of the UK, Ireland, Europe & Canada.

Le Boat makes boating easy and accessible for all, guaranteeing confidence on the water for first timers and seasoned experts alike and offering peace of mind with daily assistance & technical support.

With Le Boat, travellers will discover a different way to holiday - A slow travel option that takes them off the beaten track to explore new places or experience much-loved destinations from a new perspective. Personalised itineraries and the freedom to go at your own pace provide an opportunity to slow down, unwind, (re)connect with loved ones, and create lasting memories.

Combining transport, accommodation, self-catering facilities, and allowing holidaymakers to explore multiple locations and sights in one trip, Le Boat holidays provide excellent value for money, whilst a choice of over 950 vessels, ranging from value to luxury, caters to all budgets.

The Le Boat fleet will grow by 400 boats over the next 10 years, with a focus on premium boats, Liberty & Horizon.

Le Boat holidays are available between March and October and are priced from £194pp (based on a 7-night Thames cruise in April in a Comfort (Caprice) boat, sleeping up to 6 people, priced at £1,169).

For more information or to book your self-drive river cruising holiday, visit www.leboat.com/en

About Cheryl Brown

Cheryl Brown is Managing Director for Le Boat, part of the Marine Division of Travelopia and owned by KKR.

Cheryl began her career in travel at just 16, rising quickly through the ranks to become Retail Trading Director in 2001 and Managing Director of the First Choice Retail Group in 2004.

In 2007 she joined Sunsail as Managing Director and later became COO for TUI Marine, which included The Moorings, Sunsail, Footloose and Le Boat, in Florida.

After four years in the sunshine, Cheryl returned to the UK to lead Le Boat, a role she continues to love and lead in with passion. Today, she also sits on the Board of Travelopia.

A passionate boater herself, Cheryl enjoys life on the Thames from her riverside home with her own dock and dayboat. She loves welcoming new customers and watching them grow in confidence on the water, as well as reconnecting with those who return year after year.

Under Cheryl's leadership, Le Boat has expanded across the Atlantic, opening two bases and launching 32 boats in Ontario, Canada. She also introduced the Horizon fleet in 2016 and most recently unveiled Liberty in 2025, the company's most luxurious boat to date.

Cheryl's vision inspired the new creative platform *We're on Le Boat*, which celebrates the boating community and invites newcomers to discover the freedom of the waterways.

Cheryl is proud to invite everyone to join the Le Boat community and discover the magic of boating.