

Self-Drive Boating Holidays - the New Frontier of Mindful Travel for 2026

Why UK travellers are swapping resorts for riverbanks

Le Boat MD, Cheryl Brown, provides insights on how the once-niche category of self-drive boating holidays is aligning with global travel trends and redefining modern tourism

As travellers increasingly prioritise slower, more meaningful ways to explore the world, self-drive boating holidays are emerging as one of the fastest-growing segments of experiential travel.

Demand for flexible, nature-focused holidays has surged in recent years, driven by interest in slow travel, digital detox experiences and more authentic ways of discovering destinations.

According to Cheryl Brown, Managing Director of Le Boat, the once-niche boating holiday sector aligns perfectly with these evolving travel trends.

“At Le Boat, year-on-year bookings for the 2026 boating season, which begins at the end of March, are already up 21% for the UK, including a 40% increase in bookings for Thames staycations, [3% in Ireland] and 17% globally,” says Cheryl.

“This shows that travellers are looking for something different from their holidays this year - something that combines freedom, adventure and relaxation in equal measure.”

Much like a road trip or camping holiday, a self-drive boating break allows travellers to explore independently, at their own pace and on their own terms, without sacrificing on comfort. With no previous boating experience or licence required on many inland waterways, holidaymakers can captain their own boat while navigating scenic canals and rivers through some of Europe’s most picturesque regions. From spotting kingfishers, mooring up for a pub lunch and taking in the magnificence of Hampton Court Palace on the Thames to visiting medieval villages and cycling vineyard paths along the Canal du Midi, self-drive boating holidays offer a deeply immersive way to explore destinations at a slower, more meaningful pace.

“In an era of digital saturation, travellers aren’t just looking for a change of scenery, they’re looking for a change of pace,” says Cheryl.

“Boating at a maximum of 8 kilometres per hour is the ultimate 'tonic for the mind', providing an opportunity to slow down, unwind, and truly enjoy the moment. It’s a rare travel experience that combines the freedom of a road trip with the calming psychological benefits of being on the water.

“An independent boating holiday also provides the novelty factor for those looking for unique or off-the-beaten-track experiences, allowing them to uncover hidden gems that traditional tourism often misses, whilst also offering Instagram-worthy backdrops enjoyed from the privileged vantage point of being on the water.

“Flexibility is a major draw for the boating holiday category. Whilst the popularity of water-based travel overall is drawing many to explore cruising, busy tourist vessels and fixed itineraries won’t be suitable for independent travellers who prefer more personalised routes, excursions and

activities for an altogether more tailored experience to suit the interests of the whole party onboard.”

A holiday aligned with modern travel trends

Self-drive boating offers a high-value, cost-effective holiday alternative and is gaining traction because it aligns with many of the trends shaping modern tourism:

1. Slow and mindful travel

Travelling by boat naturally encourages a slower rhythm. Guests spend their days navigating peaceful waterways and exploring villages, markets and vineyards along the way

2. Connection with nature

Time on the water offers a direct connection to the natural environment. Wildlife encounters and outdoor activities such as cycling, swimming and walking become part of the daily routine

3. Carbon consciousness

Choosing a staycation which includes activities such as hiking or cycling can be a great way to reduce the carbon footprint of a holiday

4. Supporting local

Unlike all-inclusive resorts, boating holidaymakers rely on local shops, bakeries, pubs, restaurants, cafés and markets during their trip, directly supporting local economies

5. Accessibility

No previous experience or license is required for self-drive boating on inland waterways, attracting a wider, more adventurous audience, and empowering a new generation of "captains"

6. Modern comfort on board

Today's fleets feature contemporary designs and hotel-style amenities, including air-conditioned cabins, fully equipped kitchens, smart TVs and spacious outdoor decks

7. Value for money

A boating holiday 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

8. Pet-friendly travel

Many operators allow pets onboard, making boating holidays particularly appealing for travellers who prefer to holiday with their four-legged family members.

A different way to experience travel

Beyond practical advantages, Cheryl believes the real appeal lies in the emotional experience boating provides.

“Ultimately,” she says, “what lures people to – and back to - boating holidays are the ‘feels’ - the encounters, the awe of the surrounds, the community and togetherness of the experience - the moments you simply don’t get elsewhere.

“Think sundowners on deck, the hit of the morning coffee as the river mist lifts, scenic movie-worthy backdrops of quaint villages or lush vineyards, warm greetings from fellow boaters, pretty vistas from riverside eateries, (re)connecting with your teenager, spotting herons and swans along the banks... These are the moments that stay with people long after the holiday ends.

“As travellers become more conscious about how they spend their leisure time, the focus is shifting towards meaningful experiences, time in nature and genuine connection.

“The travel landscape continues to evolve and with it, the appeal of slower, more immersive travel experiences like boating is only expected to grow.

“The future of travel isn’t about how far you go,” Cheryl concludes, “it’s about how deeply you connect with the journey and the destination.”

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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.