

Float your boat

Forget the boat race – family holidays on the river are all about taking things slowly, finds Lee Hayhurst

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As we arrived at the west London marina, the kids' attention was drawn, briefly, in the other direction – to the entrance for Thorpe Park, just across the road from where our boating break was about to begin.

The theme park has its obvious attractions, particularly for our three, all between the ages of 10 and 13. Yet we were in for a very different kind of family holiday, with life set to proceed at a much more sedate pace.

▶ PUSHING THE BOAT OUT

We had arrived at Penton Hook Marina in Chertsey to board our

home for the next four nights, a surprisingly large Le Boat Horizon 3 self-drive river boat, starting off with a full briefing and a quick test run with a member of Le Boat staff.

The boat was clean and well equipped and, while compact, it had more than ample living space for a party of our size. The Horizon 3 can sleep up to seven people in three en suite cabins and a convertible seating area in the main cabin, but this would be quite a squeeze, so it's advisable only for groups who enjoy each other's company.

It's less of an issue in good

weather, when guests can take full advantage of the spacious outdoor deck above the kitchen/living area and a large sun deck at the front. Not only does the captain get a fantastic all-round view from a lofty driving position here, but there's also a dining table, seating area and gas-powered outdoor cooker, so it's a fantastic place for entertaining when you've found your mooring for the night.

▶ HOMEWARD-BOUND

We headed east from Chertsey towards Teddington Lock, the farthest point downriver we could

go with the boat, which took us through outer west London and past our old home town of Kingston upon Thames.

We know the area well, but it was a revelation to see how pleasant and picturesque many of these familiar places looked from the perspective of the water. Riverside homes ranging from weekend shacks to mansions with rolling lawns and boathouses are a nosey parker's delight.

And, despite being so close to London, there are long stretches of wild riverbank as the Thames meanders its way through





HOW TO SELL

Ship shape

Le Boat offers a range of vessels, so ask as much as you can about your clients to match them to the right boat.

Go the distance

Suggested itineraries are a good guide to how far customers can travel and what they can do in the time they have.

No returns

Boats can be dropped off at different Le Boat bases, so clients don't have to plan a round-trip.

Help needed

Reassure inexperienced boaters that vessels are easy to control and help is usually at hand when using the locks.

Sail the world

Le Boat also operates in France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Ireland, and has recently added Canada.



FAR LEFT:
Le Boat
Horizon 3

LEFT:
The Hayhurst
family on
the sun deck

➔ the countryside, punctuated by towns where the river's locks and crossing points are located.

The locks are fantastic places: tidy, well-maintained by the lock keepers and usually with a cafe or pub nearby – perfect for the weary sailor after a day cruising on the river.

The Thames offers free moorings but also some eye-wateringly expensive ones (notably the one by Hampton Court), so it's advisable not to leave it too late to find a spot, particularly on a warm summer's evening when lots of people are out enjoying the river.

During our short break, we used free moorings in Walton-on-Thames, Hampton, Kingston upon Thames and Shepperton. The only time we struggled to find one was the first night, as we got used to reading the map, controlling the boat and navigating locks. It was nearly dark by the time we had tethered our boat to the riverbank and wandered to The Anglers pub for a well-earned gin and tonic.

▶ SLOW TRAVEL

On joining the boating fraternity, you quickly realise there's an entire culture invisible to anyone not on the river. As people buzz around in the real world, river living is a haven of calm and there's a true feeling of life in the slow lane.

In three days on the boat, we travelled no farther from home than we would on a day trip by car, but we were experiencing life at a pace that



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modern living rarely affords. And that, after all, is what holidays are about.

Book it: A three-night Little Thames Short Break on a Horizon 3 costs from £644 in October. The price includes towels and bedding, boat-handling demo, technical support and lock fees. Bike hire is available at £6 per day for adults and £4 per day for children.

leboat.co.uk

What did the kids think?



Millie, 13

The best thing about our boat was the outdoor space, as we could cook and eat our meals on the top deck. I spent a lot of time on the sun deck reading and sunbathing. I really enjoyed seeing everything from a different perspective – I had never seen Hampton Court from the Thames and it was interesting to view it from that angle.



Seth, 11

I liked that you could travel anywhere along the river – we visited some pretty locations and nice places to stop and eat. We had to work as a team to use the locks. My job was to throw the rope over the side to secure the boat, which took a while to master, but I got help from the lock-keepers. In the end, I managed to get the rope around the bollard first time.



Zac, 10

The river was a friendly place because people on other boats and on the riverbank would wave as we passed by. I liked spotting the wildlife and seeing the fish swimming by from the back of the boat. Helping with the locks was fun and I also enjoyed it when our grandparents and cousins came to visit us on the river.