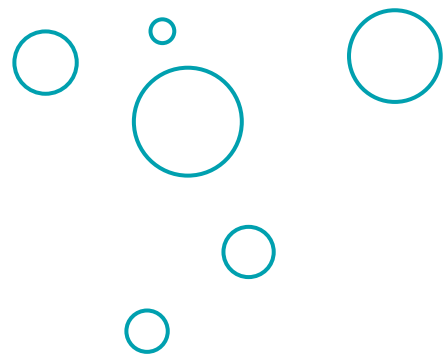




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# THE LIFE AQUATIC

This summer Liverpool played host to the World Canals Conference, the annual international gathering of canal and boating enthusiasts, as it came to the Northwest for the first time. Source NW took the opportunity to ask people who enjoy the life aquatic around the world why they love their unique lifestyle.



## France Bill & Nancy Koenig Barge Eclaircie

“The idea of barging in France came to us out of the blue while we were deciding what to do in retirement. We had been planning to do a road trip around the States with friends, but when this boating idea hit, we knew it was a better choice for us. We had rented boats a couple of times on the Burgundy Canal, and been to France several times on vacation, and we knew right away that barging in France was the right idea for us.

This is our very first boat, so we had no idea how nice this life would be. The warmth of the boating community was a wonderful surprise for us. This is the first place we have lived where it doesn't matter what you do or used to do in life. There is that common bond of boating – that's all you need. There are not many communities that are as diverse, as interesting, or as welcoming as the barging community. We feel very lucky to live in this 'moving village'.

For the last six years, we have wintered in Roanne from October to April, and cruised peacefully along France's 8,000 km of waterways from spring to fall. Last September we came to Paris, and now we plan to stay here for at least a couple of years to experience city life. There is no other way of life where you can moor in a beautiful French village, and stay there for a week or two if you like, then move on and live in the heart of a city.



We love everything about boating, the peaceful country moorings, the excitement of cruising somewhere new and the pleasure of returning to favourite and familiar moorings, but the best part of boating is the people.

From the moment we bought our barge, we were welcomed into the boating community by new friends who were Australians, New Zealanders, Swiss, Dutch, British and Americans. In our last homeport of Roanne most of our neighbours were foreign like us; now in Paris all of our barge neighbours are French, many of them young families, like the French doctor, his wife and two small children who are our next door neighbours.

“We were welcomed by new friends – Australians, New Zealanders, Swiss, Dutch, British and Americans.”

It is not necessarily an easy life – there's constant boat maintenance – but never once has this life fallen under our expectations. We had no idea that living on a barge could be so much fun.”



## Belgium Frederic Logghe Barge Watergeus

“I’ve really got into boats over the past seven years, since I’ve been working with friends and helped them restore old boats and refit barges. But living in a boat has always been a bit of a boy’s dream for me, though my parents never liked the idea and I thought I’d never have enough money. I was lucky and bought an old barge cheap off a friend so I have been living my dream for a year now.

It is particularly the boat itself that attracts me to the lifestyle. I don’t like seeing boats scrapped, especially historical boats. I’m trying to renovate and fit this boat in a historically accurate way.

Most of the people I know here in Belgium don’t move around with their boats. When barges like this become houseboats they are usually not fit for sailing – that’s why they’ve been converted in the first place. And houseboat people often don’t have experience of piloting one. There are 14 house barges in Bruges. Only one is owned by an ex-skipper and he only takes the boat out occasionally.

Houseboats used to be a cheaper living option, but now it is hyped so it has become very expensive. There was a time when you could get an ex-commercial barge for

20,000 euros; they don’t go for less than 60,000 now. It is getting hard to find a mooring too. In Belgium it is still OK, but in places like London it is practically impossible – and can be expensive too if they charge by the length of the boat

Fortunately in Belgium there’s a fixed price for mooring so I have plenty of space in my 38m boat at no extra cost!

“Living in a boat has always been a bit of a boy’s dream for me.”

Maintenance on an old boat like mine can get expensive too. I have hatches that are leaking and it is going to cost me 3,000 euros to get them fixed. Plus, all the time your boat is rusting away. You need to constantly maintain it and every five years take it to the boat yard for an inspection and the possibility that plates need doubling or replacing.

Some people think you are freer living on a boat. I just think it is something you have to choose because you really want to do it, and I’m proud that I did.”



## Canada Barrie & Carole Grant Narrowboat Mañana

“We are used to watery living. In 1990 we sold our house in Canada and moved onto a 45ft sailboat in Vancouver, then moved just over the border to Seattle. But the winters were too cold so we sailed south to San Diego and stayed there for a year or two.

Then we headed even further south and set up a marina service business in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. We stayed there for ten years, but during that time bought a narrowboat in England. To escape the deadly hot humid Mexican summers and our work we would fly over to England and drift down the ‘cut’ for 3-4 months every summer until we had been on almost every canal in England.

We always said that once we were no longer having fun where we were, we would move on. Doing business in Mexico got really frustrating, so 18 months ago we left and took up residence in our English canalboat, but that’s not the end of the story. We’ve just advertised our 45 ft sailboat and our narrowboat for sale and bought a Dutch barge – or the shell of one – in Sandwich, Kent, which we will fit out before going off to explore the 10,000km of European waterways.

You get used to the small space, although our new barge will feel huge in comparison to the narrowboat. The narrowboat has all the normal mod cons

“We sailed south to San Diego and stayed there for a year or two.”

– a double bed, fridge, shower, electricity and butane stove. The toilet is a portaloos type which you have to dump every four or five days and you have to keep on top of the laundry, although it dries wonderfully in the engine room. But the inconveniences are small.



If the weather is bad and you can’t get out, you just pull up on the side of the canal and read a book. Living afloat is just about making a few lifestyle choices.

That’s what we’ve done and we thoroughly enjoy it.”



## Ireland

### Colin Becker

#### Gentlemen's Steam Yacht Chang Sha

"I just love messing about in boats. I love the water and watersports and it's only since I've spent a long time on boats that I've got interested in industrial archaeology, particularly old boats. We don't live on our boat, but we do use it all year round. During the winter it is like a weekend cottage in the water, on Lough Derg at the bottom of the Shannon.

Once summer comes we might take a weeklong trip up the Shannon and then across to Lough Erne, or just mooch around locally and visit some of the other harbours.

The inland waterways network in Ireland is much less extensive than in England. The main haunting ground is the Shannon-erne system, which is mainly river and lake navigation. There's also the Grand Canal and Barrow Navigation and the Royal Canal which is due to re-open next year.

We tend to make our longer trips in a series of long weekends. The car shuffling can be a real pain in the neck, driving to where you start out and having to drop off a car where you expect to finish, but it is still worth it. It's the relaxation.

There's been a real change here in Ireland. When we started boating it was kind of amateurish with people buying old boats and converting them

But the Celtic Tiger economic boom has brought in a huge amount of money.

**"People have bought boats that wouldn't be out of place on the Med."**

Large numbers of people have gone out and bought a luxury boat that wouldn't be out of place on the Med. They've come onto the system with no previous experience and aren't afraid to spend money on their hobby.

The growing number of boaters is putting pressure on the system, especially the waterside amenities and sanitary services. The Shannon is heavily used in a few critical places, but there are still plenty of places you can hide and no-one will find you for days."



## England – Oxford Canal

### Mike Ballinger

#### Narrowboat Branwell



"A long time ago my wife and I didn't know where we wanted to live - we thought if we had a boat we could move around. If we got a job up north we could just go there on the boat.

The first time we got into our boat we'd never been on one before.

That was 15 years ago and now we have our two boys. Joe is five years and Isaac is 22 months. Four people on a narrowboat can get quite interesting, though we are lucky because we've bought a field next to our mooring so there's room for the boys to run around outside. Our boat is also well designed, so the boys can have a bedroom each.

It can be quite cramped, but the boys love it. Joe has only fallen in once! We've taken them swimming since they were three months old. Joe is now a strong swimmer and he just swam to the bank.

We love the freedom to go out on the boat. We do two or three trips during the year (we are less flexible now Joe is at the local school) and a long cruise each summer. You see things you just don't by car. It is a very different journey to go into Birmingham or Manchester by boat. You have no inkling you are in a big city until you step off the boat and wham – you are in the metropolis!

**"Joe has only fallen in once!"**

Modern society is stressful for a lot of people – they are living for their mortgage, their car, their holidays. Boating is very relaxed – you can tell whether people are at the beginning or the end of their boating holidays. When you live on a boat the slower pace of life slowly gets instilled in you. People don't seem to be quite as stressed. A boat is a good stress reliever."