

# Navigating the tricky currents of boat buying in France

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*If you've decided to live the dream and cruise the inland waterways of France, don't buy a boat until you've read this advice from Mike Bodnar, author of the laugh-out-loud French canal travel book Against The Current*

Before my wife Liz and I set off to cruise the French rivers and canals for a year, we travelled the Internet, banging and barging our way through numerous websites, up dead-end URLs, discovering streams of knowledge and occasionally being tossed around in a maelstrom of misinformation.

We were looking to see what sorts of boats were for sale in France – and to identify likely brokers who we might want to do business with – before we got there. It was worth the effort; we found boats of every size, shape, age, condition and price for sale, and no shortage of brokers ready to sell them to us.

But, as boating novices (actually hardly even that – I'd dabbled with narrowboats, and Liz vaguely remembers one boozy canal cruise as a student, but that was it) – we didn't at first know what we were looking for, or even at. We had a budget, and found a reasonable selection of boats within it, so we figured we'd probably be able to buy something relatively easily. As it turned out, we were wrong, but didn't know it at the time, and we excitedly drew up a list of targets.

When we did finally arrive in France some months later we were eager to see for real what had previously been only images (and some of those very fuzzy images) on the web.

What were we looking for? Well, the idea was to buy something we could live comfortably on for a year, and use to meander at an *escargot's* pace along the 5,000-plus miles of France's inland waterways – the fabled Canal du Midi, the mighty Rhône, the Canal Latéral à la Loire, maybe even to cruise majestically through Paris on the Seine; the options were endless. We had a vague idea that our boat would be older (mainly due to our budget), and made of wood, or steel. It would have two cabins, and good outdoor deck space for lounging on during those long balmy summer evenings, sipping chilled glasses of Sancerre.

There would be a good WC and bathroom with shower, a cosy salon, a decent galley, heating, and of course an engine in good condition. Importantly, we wanted something that needed little or (preferably) no work at all, so that we could just turn the key, cast off and head off into the sunset.

We quickly learned that the boats were of many different types – barges, cruisers, *tjalks*, ex-hire boats, *péniches* – and made of widely differing materials – wood, steel, iron, GRP (glass-reinforced plastic), and aluminium. Some were solely for inland waterways, others were built to also go to sea. Some had two engines and twin propellers, others just one. There were petrol engines and diesel engines. And that's before you get into the details of length, beam, draft, and so on. To those knowledgeable about boats this comes as no surprise, but for us it was bewildering.

While budget played a large part in our choice, so too did sentiment. We wanted something ‘quaint’, and with character. We visualised geraniums growing in planters, and saw ourselves polishing pieces of brass on the deck. And yes, we did see some boats for sale on the Internet like that.

But when we finally bounced eagerly down the main sales pontoon at the brokers we’d selected in a place called Saint-Jean-de-Losne (pronounced a bit like ‘lawn’ only shorter) in central-eastern France, we were faced with a harsh reality check.

The first thing we quickly learned was that many of the boats, with their bright yellow *à vendre* signs, were nowhere near as neat and tidy as they’d seemed online. They might have been for sale, but quite a few of them definitely weren’t for sail.

Peeling paint, damp, rust, damage and rot showed up on inspection, certainly not in every boat, but sometimes – sadly – all in the one vessel. None of this had been evident in the images or information online, so lesson one is: do thorough research online first, and lesson two quickly follows: don’t believe everything you see or read. Even the best quality photos are no substitute for being able to physically lift a floor panel to inspect the engine bay, or run your hand under steel in the bilge (and bring out handfuls of rust).

After our first day’s looking we felt like an old rubber dinghy – somewhat deflated – but resolved to carry on the search over the next few days, feeling certain that ‘our boat’ was floating out there somewhere.

One thing that helped was that Liz took up the art of tick-boxing. She drew up a spreadsheet, so that we could tick off key requirements, and note down problems, defects or other areas of concern. This allowed us to thoroughly review in the evenings what we’d seen during the day in the pressure-cooker heat of France’s summer, and made it less likely that we’d miss something important. It was also a good way to dispassionately compare and contrast the different boats and their features on paper, which definitely made decision-making easier. So that’s lesson three: use a checklist.

Another bonus was that we had an experienced boating friend staying on the nearby Bourgogne canal, so we were able to pick his brains. For example, we’d seen a couple of ex-hire boats that looked quite tidy, and were lovely and bright inside – one even had a full-sized bath on board. But our mate Keith pointed out that hire boats – including these two – are generally made of GRP, and could over time suffer from osmosis, which can be expensive to fix.

In fact, one ex-hire boat we looked closely at came with a full service history, and the paperwork showed that indeed osmosis had been a problem, since the owners had spent € 6,000 getting it treated! And that same boat still felt a bit ‘spongy’ underfoot on part of the deck, so... no thanks.

Ex-hire boats have their pluses and minuses. A plus is that they tend to be robustly designed, often with thick rubber trim all round, intended to protect the boat from the ignorance and naivety of inexperienced hirers. They also tend to sleep at least four and maybe even as many as eight or ten people, so there’s plenty of room for friends. Ex-hires usually have decent up-top deck space too, while their limited height and draft allow ‘access all areas’, of which more in a moment.

A downside is that they’ve been handled by hundreds of different crews over time, and – as we were to learn during our year afloat – often mis-handled to an alarming degree. You also have to ask

yourself: if the hire company has decided to sell the boat, doesn't that mean it's come to the end of its useful working life? If it hadn't they'd presumably still use it. (But then, some people get excellent value from buying ex-rental cars, so the conclusion is yours)

The other thing about the two particular ex-hire boats we'd seen was that their steering positions were for'ard, and inside. 'You don't want ninety percent of the boat behind you,' Keith advised us. 'It can make manoeuvring tricky if you can't see what's going on behind.' We had a lot to learn, which leads to lesson four: choose a boat that's easy to manage.

We'd also learned that if we wanted our boat to be able to go anywhere on the waterways we would seriously have to consider its *tirant d'air* and *tirant d'eau* – basically how high it was and how much of it was below the waterline. Height and draft are really important; anything over about 2.7 metres in height means the boat will not fit under some of the lower bridges, especially on the Canal du Midi, while a draft – *tirant d'eau* – of more than 1.2 metres makes some canals off-limits due to their shallow depth.

These important details are all available from the brokers, or are displayed on the for sale signs. Many boats we looked at had hinged Bimini tops, windows and masts, designed specifically for dropping to get under low bridges, so what looks too high at first may not actually be so. Lesson five? Don't forget to see if your prospective purchase measures up... and down.

Many of the boats we examined were, we thought, over-priced, especially those that needed work. These quickly got big crosses on Liz's spreadsheet, so by process of elimination we reduced our list of potential boats... to none.

It's true; we actually got to the point where none of the boats within our budget suited our needs. Well – there was one example – a Pedro cruiser, built in Holland, that came very close. We even went for a bit of a burble with the owners, Penny and Felix, who took us out on the River Saône so we could see how she performed.

We were quite taken with the boat; she was a good size, had two cabins, a nice salon and reasonable galley area, and we could visualise sitting on the deck in the sunshine. She looked to be in quite good condition too (the boat, not Liz. Although...).

But. There's always a But, and in this case it was the shower; there wasn't one.

'So how do you shower?' Liz asked. Penny gave a dismissive toss of her head and said, 'Oh we just swim in the river!'

Hmm. Okay. That didn't wash with us, as we wanted to live aboard for a full year, and neither of us relished the idea of swimming in a river in mid-winter, or, for that matter, in the canals at any time of the year. Boats in France are allowed to discharge their foul water straight into the water.

Sadly, without a shower, the Pedro wasn't for us. In the end, with our time in Saint Jean-de-Losne running out, we decided the only way we were going to find what we wanted was to increase our budget. In fact we actually doubled it, which we thought would solve all our boat-search problems.

It did, in the end, but only on the very last day. What clinched the deal was that we modified our criteria, so instead of restricting ourselves to the cute and charming older boats with buckets of

character (or rust), we instead began looking at sleeker newer craft, cruisers that we had walked past with nary a glance during the previous few days. So lesson six is: be adaptable, both in criteria and budget (if you can). Or be prepared to do lots of work to get what you want within your price range.

Anyway, one of the boats on the sales pontoon did indeed turn out – finally – to be The One. She was a Dutch-built Aquanaut model, about 20 years old, and seemingly with everything we wanted, including an engine that started first time and ran without smoking or vibrating. No handfuls of rust to be had here, *Liberty* (as she was called) turned out to be very well-appointed, including having a nice bathroom with shower!.

We did have to compromise on the accommodation though; there was just the one main cabin, but the banquette in the salon converted easily to a double bed, plus there was a similar (but quirky) arrangement for'ard where the seating around the circular table adjacent to the galley could similarly be converted – into a round bed! Very James Bond, we thought.

The boat came complete 'as is where is', and included two bicycles, but by the time we'd returned from England to take ownership these had been stolen. The broker was no help at all, and our limited French meant we weren't in any position to argue the case, so we had to bite the bullet and buy two new bikes. Lesson seven: take an inventory (including photos) of everything on board as soon as you agree to purchase, and if possible get the broker or seller to confirm your record as accurate at the time. We wish we had!

The outcome of all this? We had a boat that cost twice as much as we wanted to spend, was totally different to anything we'd researched, but which suited us and our aspirations perfectly. Did we learn any other lessons? Oh yes, but that took a whole year!

*You can read about Mike and Liz's other lessons and adventures on Liberty in his book Against The Current – [www.againstthecurrent.uk](http://www.againstthecurrent.uk)*

WORDS: 2106