

NEW BOAT TEST

Bear Boating *Jessica Boo*

Mark Langley looks at a 57ft semi-trad hire-boat that offers the levels of luxury you'd normally find on a high-spec private craft...

Jessica Boo is a 57ft boat built by Ashwood Narrowboats for use in the Bear Boating hire fleet, based at Apperley Bridge Marina on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal. Exhibited at the Crick Boat Show last year, it drew a lot of attention as it is certainly not your average hire-boat. We met up with *Jessica Boo* at the end of the season, after a full year of hiring, to see how it had fared and to provide a more detailed look at the boat we briefly reported on last year.

OUTSIDE

The shell is not a typical hire-boat design – a sturdy Tyler-Wilson semi-trad style, it has a number of nice touches that distinguish it from a run-of-the-mill charter boat. The hull is gently curving, with a fine bow adorned with false rivets which continue around the stern. In the position where you would expect the engine room

to end is a transverse beam on the cabin room, coupled with traditional-style handrails. The only concession to it being a hire-boat is the company name on the aft cabin side panel.

The superb paint scheme has a red roof, contrasting with the black sides with red trim. Chrome finish single-glazed opening portholes match the mushroom vents on the roof and the three chrome roof hatches. A neat headlamp is centrally mounted on the cabin roof – less vulnerable to being caught on lines than one on a pole behind the foredeck. Lights are fitted to the forward and aft decks to enable safe boarding at night, and also shine down onto the cockpits to provide glare-free illumination that may be useful in tunnels.

Unlike many hire-boats, *Jessica Boo* does not try and cram lots of berths into its 57ft length. The forward cockpit is generous in length; without side lockers it looks more purposeful while

giving enough space for several folding chairs for people to dine alfresco. Aft, the semi-trad stern has a good sized cockpit within the cabin sides, with enough room for four people to stand, or sit on the vinyl upholstered lockers set either side.

INTERIOR GALLEY

Central doors and three steps lead down from the aft deck straight into the galley, with a set of lockers, including an airing cupboard, set either side. Entering the cabin, it strikes you that this is no ordinary craft – it could be a private residential boat. Dark granite work surfaces are either side, culminating in a breakfast bar set slightly to the port side of the cabin. The cabin side is covered with matt ceramic tiles, while the galley units are constructed in solid oak, with push-to-open doors and drawers. Two portholes and an overhead hatch give plenty of light and ventilation.

To starboard is a deep sink with drainer routed into the granite. Underneath, large cupboards and drawers swallow the comprehensive utensils and high quality dinner service that is provided, as well as a dedicated space for a bin. The work tops are slightly narrower than in many craft, which means that the circulation space in the galley is much better – allowing people to pass the cook without getting in the way.

On the opposite side, a very neat three-burner gas hob, with a black glass base, makes good use of the space, with a stainless steel oven and grill below. A large fridge is integrated behind the oak doors, and a stainless steel microwave is placed at chest height in the aft locker by the rear steps.

DINING

The breakfast bar is an overhang of the galley worktop, giving comfortable seating for two people on stable bar stools. There are also two side doors, with plenty of shelf space, including a magazine rack. The designer radiator here is a feature throughout the boat and runs off the Webasto diesel heater mounted in the engine room.

Two full height bulkheads are either side of a central pair of doors, leading into the main saloon. The doors are solid oak, while the upper half of each bulkhead is acid-etched frosted glass, with the Bear Boating reed logo picked out as plain glass. This allows light to pass through the bulkhead, but gives privacy to the saloon. In the saloon there are two long fixed settees which provide two single berths or a large double berth across the boat. The doors at either end mean that the cabin is private; someone from the forward cabin could walk round the



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Boatbuilder Ashwood Narrowboats
(07969 901383, www.ashwoodnarrowboats.co.uk)



Price
£125,000



Berths
2+2



57ft x
6ft 10in



Barrus
Shire



GALLEY

The cabin sides are covered with matt ceramic tiles, while the galley units are constructed in solid oak, with push-to-open doors and drawers.



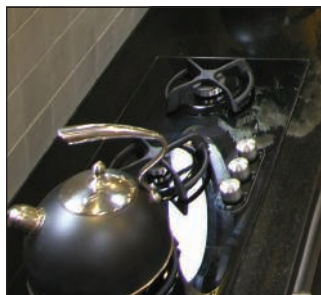
MICROWAVE

A stainless steel microwave is placed at chest height in the aft locker by the rear steps.



QUALITY JOINERY

The joinery is superb – even the dovetail joints making up the drawer carcasses are exceptionally detailed.



THREE-BURNER HOB

A very neat three-burner gas hob, with a black glass base, makes good use of the space.



ESSENTIAL STORAGE

Storage in the galley even includes magazine racks plus designer radiators throughout.



PRIVATE SALOON

In the saloon there are two long fixed settees which provide two single berths or a large double berth across the boat.

gunwales to the galley without disturbing anyone sleeping in the saloon. Another glazed roof hatch gives fresh air, with the two portholes, plus light spilling through the bulkhead, making the fairly compact saloon appear bigger than it actually is.

The berths themselves are very well upholstered in firm material to provide an excellent night's sleep, as well as lounging comfort. Underneath the starboard berth, the top easily lifts up to reveal storage for the dining table, which mounts easily on tubular Desmo legs. There is also lots of drawer storage for clothes and

bedding. Under the opposite settee is a half-sized table, which can be used as a coffee table or mounted in the forward cockpit for eating outdoors.

ENTERTAINMENT

A TV and DVD player is fitted in the saloon, as you might expect, though the Wii games console isn't something you would normally get on a boat, but could be great with kids aboard. The owners of Bear Boating appreciate music, as can be seen from the choice of prints on the wall throughout *Jessica Boo*. Fitted throughout the boat is a Sonos wireless sound

system. From a smartphone, you can stream music directly to the system, rather than docking it (though you can do this as well) – or play CDs in the normal way.

To enable the streaming, a wireless router provides a Wi-Fi signal through the boat – and slightly beyond. This also allows the Roca lighting to be remotely controlled, either from a handset or from an iPhone application, so you can dim the lights from bed – or turn them on as you walk back to the boat from the pub at night. If you hired the sister boat *Molly Moo* and moored the two vessels next to each other, you

could stream the same music to both boats simultaneously.

FIT OUT

Jessica Boo is lined and fitted out in solid wood. The cabin roof and sides are painted in a flawless matt cream finish, with solid oak trim elsewhere. Double trim sections neatly hide the blinds above the portholes, integrating them rather than leaving them exposed.

All the furniture is in solid oak, built by furniture makers ashore before being installed on the boat. The standard of joinery is superb – even the dovetail joints making up the drawer carcasses

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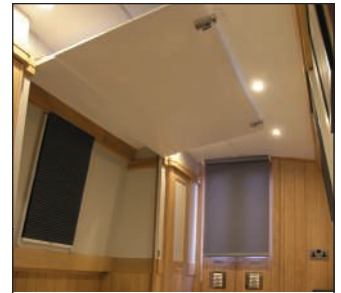
SPACIOUS BATHROOM

The loo is an electric flush Jabsco unit, while the sensibly sized washbasin sits on a small cupboard.



ENTERTAINMENT

A Sonos wireless sound system allows you to stream music to the system and a Wii games console.



ROOF BLIND

When making up the cross bed, the upper flap of cupboard acts as a blind for the rooflight above.



has a large enclosed shower set on the centreline for maximum headroom. To the cabin side of the shower there is plenty of storage for towels and other bathroom necessities.

The loo is an electric flush Jabsco unit, which macerates waste, sending it to the remote holding tank. The sensibly sized washbasin sits on a small cupboard, with a bin below (something often missed on a boat design). An extractor fan helps keep the moisture down, with a large towel rail running off the central heating circuit. The same tiles are used as in the galley, but here are below gunwale level, with the cream panelling above.

FORWARD BEDROOM

By day, the forward cabin has a small settee to act as a second saloon. This is ideal when two couples are cruising, as it gives



FORWARD BEDROOM

The centre section of wall opens up, so one flap rises and the other drops, to form a cross bed (above) with ample space to store duvet and pillows.

are exceptionally detailed. The flooring looks like wooden planking; however, they are porcelain floor tiles. As well as being exceptionally hard wearing and easy to clean, they are also slip resistant. If damaged they can be sanded, as they are coloured all the way through, though it's unlikely they'll need such attention given their robust quality.

BATHROOM

Set in a compartment to port, off a side corridor, the bathroom is very spacious for a 57ft boat. Probably more practical here than a walk-through bathroom, it

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some quiet space forward, away from the saloon. Opposite the settee to port is a large bank of cupboards. The centre section opens up, so one flap rises (and covers the roof light) and the other drops, to form a cross bed with ample space to store duvet and pillows. The whole changeover only takes a few minutes, giving a very large double berth without it taking up space during the day. Either side of the bed are wardrobes and shelves, giving a large amount of storage – some of the hanging space would be needed for any occupants of the saloon berths.

A mirror against the aft bulkhead has two brushed steel finish electrical sockets. On closer inspection, you find that one has round pins (for 12V appliances) while the other is a conventional 230V socket, enabling different appliances, like hairdryers, to be used. A light over the mirror is a useful addition, rather than having to be in your own shadow. A large bedside table is against the forward bulkhead which gives more storage space, as well as under the day settee. The fit-out here, including the forward bulkhead, includes tongue and grooved solid oak, as found under the gunwales in other parts of the boat.

SERVICES

As you head up to the back deck from the galley, the basic engine control panel is set into the port locker, along with digital gauges for water, diesel and toilet tank levels. Usefully, the electrical control panel is slightly recessed and covered with an acrylic door, thus preventing accidental switching of circuits. The cupboards containing the mains electrical equipment are kept locked – though the keys are usefully stored on the back of the cupboard door under the sink. This ensures that inquisitive children (and adults, possibly!) keep away from things they generally should not be interfering with. Not just useful on a hire-boat, but any boat.

A 2.5kW Sterling inverter-charger combi powers the equipment on the boat when cruising, though there is a shoreline fitting for use when available. The domestic systems are supported by four 115Ah batteries, charged by a dedicated alternator on the



PADDED SEAT LOCKERS

Semi-trad cockpit with enough room for four people to stand, or sit on the vinyl upholstered lockers.



CONTROL PANEL

The engine control panel is set into the port locker, along with digital gauges for water, diesel and toilet tank levels.



CLEAN ENGINE SPACE

The steel deck hatches are a little heavy to lift, but they give full access to the Barrus Shire engine.



GENEROUS COCKPIT

The forward cockpit is generous in length; without side lockers it looks more purposeful while giving enough space for people to dine alfresco.

engine. The calorifier is also fitted with an immersion heater, though principle sources of heat are the engine and the central heating boiler.

ENGINE

The Barrus Shire is very neatly installed in a dry and clean engine space. The steel deck hatches are a little heavy to lift, but they give full access to the engine space. The Shire engine drives through a hydraulic (oil-operated) gearbox, via a flexible coupling to a conventional stuffing-box stern gland. The deep oil-catch tray under the engine was clean, which is always reassuring on a boat that has been in hire service for a year. A large single skin tank should give enough cooling when on rivers, as well as during more sedate progress on the L&L canal.

On such a luxury craft, it was a surprising omission at

first that there was no sound insulation at all inside the engine compartment. However, once the hatches are down, a thick rubber non-slip mat covers the entire engine compartment, which provides a very noticeable reduction in sound levels.

UNDERWAY

Although our test was hampered by several stoppages close together, we had enough space to give *Jessica Boo* a reasonable run out. The boat steered very easily and was positive in handling. One criticism was that, from the helm, it was not easy to see the engine panel. However, as this only has a voltmeter and rev counter, rather than the full panel with oil pressure and temperature gauges, you would rely on the warning lights and loud buzzer to warn you of any problems – and that can be heard from the helm.

Despite being shallow in places, the boat made very little wash, and the engine managed to stop the boat in every length, without ventilating the prop. We had a surprise on our test that a stoppage we thought had finished was overrunning, so we had to reverse the boat for 400m or so, before we could turn round. The boat handled well astern, though a momentary lack of concentration on my part meant that I did manage to ground slightly, but we soon got off. The shallow waters are one reason that a bow thruster has not been fitted. On hire-boats in particular, electric thrusters can be overused, and hydraulic ones can be a challenge to set up effectively. Plus most people can comfortably handle a 57ft boat without resorting to a thruster – however, as a private build they could, of course, be fitted.

Vital stats

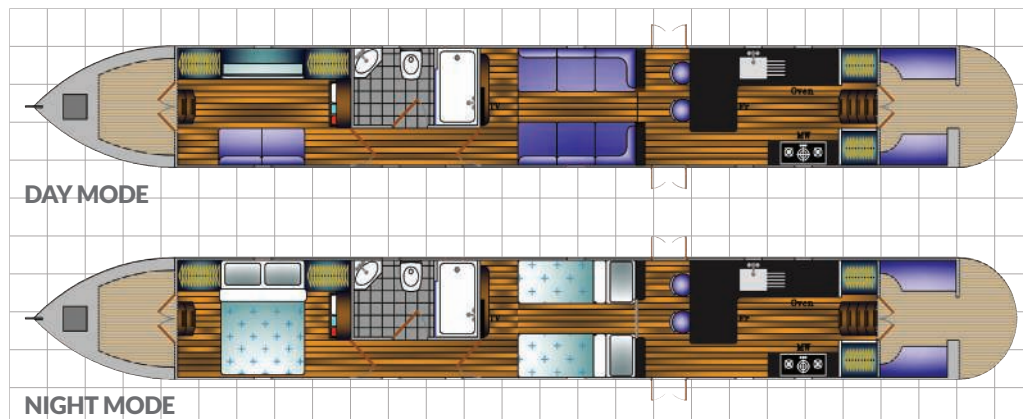
Builder Ashwood Narrowboats

(Tel: 07969 901383, www.ashwoodnarrowboats.co.uk)

Hirer Bear Boating

(Tel: 07969 901383, www.bearboating.co.uk)

BOAT PLAN



What's onboard

Galley

- Solid oak units
- Dark granite work surface
- Deep integrated stainless steel sink
- Large fridge
- Designer glass 3 burner hob
- Stainless oven and grill
- Integrated microwave
- Protected electrical panel
- Wet weather clothing locker
- Access to semi-trad deck via 4 steps
- Large drawers and lockers under berths
- Fully integrated entertainment system, including TV, DVD and Wii
- Sonos sound system integrates with MP3 players wirelessly
- Roca lighting remote controlled from inside and out of boat

Bathroom

- Tiled off-corridor bathroom
- Good sound insulation around bulkheads
- Large shower on centreline
- Heated towel rail
- Large vanity sink
- Jabsco macerator toilet pumping to remote holding tank
- Extractor fan in roof

Saloon

- Separated from galley by half-glazed bulkhead
- Seating for six people
- Converts to two singles or double berth
- Two tables store away under berths



Forward bedroom

- Day settee
- Large double bed folds down from cabin side
- Two large wardrobes and storage
- 230V and 12V powerpoints by mirror
- Access to forward deck through glazed doors

WE LIKE

- ✓ Cross-bed in forward day cabin
- ✓ Remote control lighting and sound systems
- ✓ Separate saloon from galley
- ✓ Protected electrical equipment
- ✓ Excellent storage in saloon and bedroom

The Company

Why Bear Boating? The owners frequently charter yachts – and when you hire a yacht without a skipper, it's called bareboat charter. The owners also have a love for Newfoundland dogs, which are quite bear-like in their looks; hence Bear Boating!

Bear Boating, and its sister boatbuilding company, Ashwood Narrowboats, is based on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal and, on hiring boats, they accompany experienced hirers through a couple of locks and bridges, to ensure they are happy. Inexperienced hirers have more detailed support – which is very useful, given the number of broad staircase locks and swing-bridges in the immediate vicinity of the hire base. On the back of the boats is a sensible instruction plate, to act as a reminder – something that used to be common on hire-boats, but not so often now.

Bear Boating also runs weekend training trips, where those on board can work towards their RYA Inland Helmsman's Certificate. Heading down towards Leeds and the Royal Armouries at Clarence Dock is a day cruise away; the hirers are left to their own devices overnight, and then accompanied back up to the base. A Friday afternoon to Sunday evening training course is £600 for two people or £800 for four – giving the opportunity to experience some of the more interesting industrial heritage sites at this end of the L&L. Subject to availability, experienced hirers can book for just a weekend cruise as well.

WW VERDICT

As a private craft, *Jessica Boo* is up there with the top division boats, especially with the thought that has gone into the design and execution. For a hire-boat, it is unsurpassed; there are few fleets that offer such a private boat feel, with high specifications.

It takes a slightly different outlook on the "reverse layout", which is the most popular design at the moment. There is a lot to be said for fixed

furniture in boats – it does provide lots more storage, essential when more than two people are cruising. The separation of the galley/breakfast bar and the saloon is ideal, as it does provide genuine privacy for those sleeping in the middle cabin – provided you don't lock the aft doors when you retire for the night! The remote control sound and lighting systems may seem futuristic, but the technology is

reliable, user-friendly and not disproportionately expensive.

As a hire-boat, *Jessica Boo* costs from £700 to £1,300 per week (including fuel, linen, towels and parking) and in its first year of operation, has given immense pleasure to those who have hired her. As a private build she would cost around £125,000 which, given the level of equipment and high standard of joinery, is good value.