

A HIRE standard

Bear Boating's new hire-boat is a wide-beam offering top levels of luxury and convenience. **Mark Langley** puts it to the test on the Leeds & Liverpool

Bear Boating is a small company based on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal near Leeds, which has recently expanded its fleet of two hire-narrowboats to include a brand new wide-beam craft.

Of course, broad-beam hire-boats are nothing new on this waterway, but as well as giving groups or families plenty of space to enjoy a cruise, Bear Boating's new boat – called *nemoNOO* after the company owners' Newfoundland dog – has been specifically designed to provide a level of fit-out in keeping with modern expectations ashore. Managing director Andy Stakes has a background

in both yachting and bespoke house construction, and has brought some of these ideas to the new craft.

The company will also be offering boat-handling courses (which can be combined with a hire cruise) on *nemoNOO*, as the variety of locks and bridges in its vicinity combined with the wider dimensions of the boat make for perfect training conditions.

Shell & exterior

The Tyler-Wilson shell is sturdily built, with a cruiser-style stern and bow cockpit. Some wide-beam bows can have a pinched look – however, Tyler Wilson has managed to give *nemoNOO* a



BUYER'S FILE



nemoNOO

Size 58ft x 10ft

Berths 6+2

Engine Shire 60

Price (hire) from £1,350 to £1,900 per week. Short breaks are also available. bearboating.co.uk



Underway: it has graceful lines and low wash for a wide-beam.

narrowboat-style front end that curves in all the right places, with a gentle upsweep from the gunwales. There is a locker in the forepeak, plus access to the bow-thruster below the deck. Given that the boat is named after a dog, paw prints make their way onto parts of the decoration, such as at the bow.

The broad expanse of cabin roof, sensibly finished in red, slip-resistant paint, splits into two with a decorative roof beam, which is a thoughtful touch from the steelworkers. The roof area is punctuated by four chrome mushroom vents, two glazed hatches and the pole/plank holder. Solid handrails and wide, flat gunwales, plus folding steps on the aft bulkhead, make walking around the boat easy. The cabin side, with black panels offset with white and red details, has chrome Channelglaze drop-back opening portholes. An LED tunnel light is on the edge of the forward cabin roof, with external aerial ports and a 230V shore power connection on the bulkhead.

The stern is semicircular, with a steel dodger enclosing a large seating area. The part of the deck that is level with the gunwales has two dollies either side, so that spring lines can be run out. Solid steel gates at the front end of the cockpit close off the entire space, creating both a secure place for



Cute paw prints on the attractively shaped bow.

young children and dogs, and a sheltered area when cruising or tied up. Further enabling the latter is a huge, quick-to-erect canopy that can be hired for an extra £100 per week, to be used when moored up (the boat wouldn't be able to pass under bridges if it were left in situ). This represents a sensible investment as it effectively provides a large extra room, which is very useful with a full crew aboard. A dining table sits in the centre of the seating area and can be easily removed when not needed – or if the emergency tiller is used instead of the wheel steering.

Galley

Three big, wide steps drop down from the aft deck into

the galley. Substantial stainless steel handrails are either side of the stairs, so making it easier to go up and down. To port of the steps are two electrical cupboards, with an integrated microwave oven set between them. Opposite is a large, full-height unit, originally planned as an airing cupboard but now serving as a general larder and place to store cleaning materials. Four folding coat hooks on the aft bulkhead make good use of the space to enable wet gear to dry off – really sodden clothes could be hung in the showers.

The main galley is of a large, L-shaped configuration, with a small section, containing the sink, drain and rubbish bin, opposite to starboard. The bigger

BOAT LAYOUT





Good bin space next to the sink unit.

worktop to port has a linear three-burner glass gas hob, with a separate Thetford Midi Prima III oven and grill below. There is a large fridge/freezer beneath the black granite work surface, plus an array of cupboards and drawers. Throughout the boat, all storage unit doors are secured by push to open/lock positive catches, so that they remain secure when underway.

On the worktop is a Nespresso coffee-maker, as well as a DAB radio with iPhone dock. As with the two narrowboats in the hire fleet, 4G wifi is provided throughout the boat. As the walkway leaves the galley, there is a side door for extra ventilation, while plenty of natural light is provided by way of the large porthole windows. There is also a designer radiator – a neat, grey, column unit that is more in keeping with the boat's style than flat white panels. This runs from the diesel-fired Webasto boiler, which also heats the calorifier when the engine is not running.

Saloon

The saloon has a massive U-shaped dinette, with a central table. With large sculptured backrests, and upholstery that looks and feels superb, the dinette provides comfortable lounging and will easily allow eight people to sit and eat. The height is adjustable and the surface area of the table can be expanded by way of fold-out panels. Partly to separate the galley from the saloon, and somewhat to guard against inadvertent spillage on the upholstery, a full-height glazed panel divides the space up and includes acid-etched paw prints across the top.

The dinette has quite a lot of service equipment underneath,

but there is still a good level of space for bedding and a bag or two. Although the dinette converts to a huge double bed, it is probably easier to use it as two large singles, as fewer alterations are needed.

Facing the dinette on the starboard side is a full-height unit, with stowage below. As throughout the boat, the woodwork is a mix of painted panels on the ceiling and a superb engineered veneer on the cupboards, hull sides and doors. This veneer appears to change colour, from a mid-grey through to a light brown,



A microwave, full-sized cooker and masses of storage in the galley.



A large shower cubicle is in each of the well-planned bathrooms.

depending on the ambient light. This is in keeping with the overall feel of the boat, which is far more like a boutique hotel than a typical hire-boat.

The door leading forwards of the saloon has been given a curved frame, reminiscent of ships' doors, and is an attractive alternative to the more usual angular frames. A whole series of these doors is along what is effectively the starboard-side corridor, compartmentalising the sections to give privacy. The boat's galley-saloon-bathroom-bedroom-bathroom-bedroom layout helps give maximum soundproofing and personal space – useful if teenagers are aboard, for example.

Bathrooms

The boat's two bathrooms are mirror images of one another. They are separated from the cabins by small vestibules, in addition to the main bathroom doors. Unusually, they have no windows in the cabin side – instead there are glazed roof hatches for ventilation and light. This means that the shower, which is fully enclosed and



HANDRAILS

Good-sized steps lift for easy access to the water pump.

C-SHAPED DINETTE

Seating for eight, with a good view of the eye-level TV.

GLAZED DIVIDE

A glass panel prevents spills from the galley.

PORHOLE WINDOWS

Let in lots of light and have neat concertina blinds.

against the hull side, doesn't have the issue of a cold window frame making unwanted contact with bare flesh and also resolves privacy issues. The shower itself is a good size, with a fully glazed folding door.

Each Jabsco macerator toilet pumps to its own holding tank, and there is plenty of legroom around the seats. Although quite compact, the bathrooms pack in a wash basin, cupboard, heated towel-rail and bin, and feel very spacious with enough room to towel down properly. The flooring, as throughout the boat, is attractive ceramic, imitation-wood tiling, which, as well as being very easy to clean, has proved highly robust on Bear Boating's other craft.

Mid-cabin

Moveable bed bases make the mid-cabin a very flexible space. Two large singles or a double-berth can be created by swapping units about – and



the two bedside tables are also free-standing. However, there are an additional two single berths, one folding down from each bulkhead. These large beds can be left made up as they occupy the expanded width of the bulkhead. They also lower easily into position – just pull on the coat hook that doubles as a handle – as the mechanism is the same as those used in cruise liner and ferry cabins, they have a proven record of reliability.



Opposite the berths is a sideboard, with drawers and cupboards but any clothing that needs to be hung up will have to jostle for space in the forward cabin wardrobes. However, the flexibility of this cabin, with two, three or four berths in a variety of configurations, means the loss of a wardrobe is not a major issue. Indeed, it suits families very well, with children using this cabin, and the parents having the forward cabin and saloon to themselves.

Forward cabin

In the forward cabin a big, peninsular double-bed is fixed against the aft bulkhead, with a side table to port. As well as a holding tank, there is some further storage under the bed, but the majority of possessions will be kept in the two wardrobes either side of the front doors. The top half of each wardrobe is shelved, with hanging space in the lower part.

As throughout much of the boat (the galley being the



BULKHEAD BEDS

Fold-up bunks have sturdy hinges.

MOVEABLE BASES

Create two singles or a double berth in the middle cabin.

CABIN WARDROBES

There's enough hanging space for all in the forward cabin.

SIDEBOARD

A good mix of cupboards and drawers, all with catches.

exception) the portholes here are fitted with small concertina blackout blinds running in a track, so they cannot flap about. The forward door is a very wide bi-fold unit, which slides in a track inside the cabin. Instead of the usual curtains or blind, the doors have a Venetian blind sandwiched between the two panes of glass, operated by a removable magnetic opener, so there is nothing to be damaged by wind. The blinds are very neat and, if produced for other boat-sized windows, could at a stroke solve many curtain/blind conundrums.

Services

One of the key requirements for a hire-boat is reliability of services and ease of access should things go wrong. Many private craft (and some hire-boats of the past) bury services out of sight. Bear Boating has taken the step of not only ensuring that all hull side panels are easily removable, but a number of back-up services are provided.



The middle cabin with bulkhead beds hidden.

Due to the position of the forward bow-thruster locker, the main fresh water tank is slightly smaller than the builders wanted, though it is still large by many boats' standards. Under the dinette is a reserve 200-litre plastic water tank, which can be switched into action by the hirer if the main tank runs out. Sensibly, the digital tank gauge is set to read only on the main tank, so enough water for a full crew to shower can be provided before a water point is found.



Free-standing bedside tables and reading lights.

Also, under the dinette is the pump that empties the sump, which both showers and wash basins drain into. There is a second auxiliary pump that can be brought into service, should the main one fail during a hire cruise, thus avoiding the need for a callout.

The aft steps lift easily on a gas strut to reveal the water pump, which is located here to prevent the system disturbing people at night. The cold water pressure vessel and hot water expansion tank are also located here, along

with access to the cabin bilge.

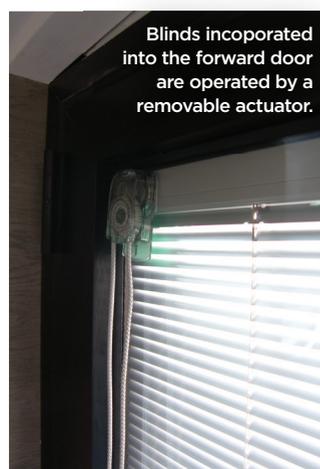
The comprehensive, 230V electrics run from a 2,500W Sterling pure sinewave combi unit, providing power to the many sockets throughout the boat – hirers are more demanding about electrics than a decade or so ago, expecting an almost hotel-like level of service. To back up the inverter, there are four 135Ah domestic batteries, charged by the large alternator on the engine. As hirers tend to cruise for longer hours than private boaters, this gives good



Large double bed in the forward cabin. Note the curved doors too.



Aft cockpit seating under an optional canopy makes an excellent second saloon.



Blinds incorporated into the forward door are operated by a removable actuator.



Wheel steering to port.

recharge rates. There are also 12V-powered USB charging sockets around the boat, which are ideal for mobiles and tablets. The main control panels for the electrics are accessible only as far as a hirer would need them, with other connections secured out of the way – this is very good boat-builder practice.

Engine and handling

A 50hp Barrus Shire diesel is fitted, which many would consider a small engine for this size of boat. However, it is a good-sized choice, giving sensible engine speed when cruising canals, with enough power for river navigations like the Aire

& Calder, which is within a day's cruise of Bear Boating's base at Apperley Bridge Marina near Leeds. The engine is fitted with a hydraulic power pack for the bow-thruster – although more expensive than an electric thruster, this is likely to repay the investment, as it is more tolerant of overuse. A thick layer of sound-absorbing deck matting keeps noise to a minimum, while the deck surround limits reflected exhaust noise.

nemoNOO is usually steered by wheel from the port side. A standing position gives a good view along the boat and makes for easy approaches to locks and bridges, by just gauging the

gap on the left side of the boat. Using the rudder, forward/reverse gears and bow-thruster, *nemoNOO* can be easily nudged sideways into a berth. Underway, the boat pulls cleanly through the water at normal speeds. As the boat is below the maximum width and length of the L&L, it avoids the canal's pinch points – the 10ft beam gives around 50% extra internal floor area over a narrowboat, but without the potential handling issues of a 12ft- or 14ft-beam craft. If the wheel steering fails, then a tiller can be attached – and Andy uses this for some of the RYA boat-handling training offered by the company.

WW'S VERDICT

A few years ago we described the narrowboats run by Bear Boating as the "most luxurious afloat". While many other companies have increased their level of opulence, Bear Boating has remained ahead of the game – and its booking levels are testament to the fact it is providing what hirers want. *nemoNOO* is superb, particularly in terms of its handling and levels of comfort, and is a great way to explore the northern waterways. Those who really like Bear Boating's fit-out will be interested to know that the company is considering building limited numbers of boats for private use.

Bear Boat Training

In next month's issue assistant editor Amelia Hamson spends two days aboard *nemoNOO*, undertaking the RYA Inland Waterways Helmsman course.



Combi inverter, 4G wifi and vacuum cleaner are in the lower electrics cupboard.



The hydraulic bow-thruster sits in a watertight compartment.