

MY HOUSEBOAT HIDEAWAY

Love to have a place by the sea? Georgina Moore reveals how she turned fantasy into reality

I have always wanted to live by the beach. You might think that is a bit greedy given that when I met my partner, James, he lived on a houseboat on the Thames near Hampton Court Palace, which became home to us and our children, Sonny (3) and Daisy (2).

It was our children that prompted my daydreams. As a working mum with toddlers twelve months apart I had got through the first hard year by running everything to a strict schedule. Routine, meal planners, strict bed times, nap times. Routine was my friend but now I began to long for an escape where rules got bent out of shape, as they are meant to on holidays. Throw some clothes in a

bag, beans on toast for supper when you arrived, late bedtimes, too much fish and chips. The kind of place where you play board games or read in the evenings.

Of course that's a fantasy that many of us have, but turning it into a reality is difficult. With small children we couldn't drive for hours and a place on the south coast, which was do-able, carried a massive price tag. Even though I was lucky enough to still have the flat where I had lived before James and I got together, selling that wouldn't add up to a seaside cottage. I cruised property websites, indulging in a bit of fantasy, but it was James who stumbled upon a houseboat community in the harbour of Bembridge on the Isle of Wight.

The harbour was being regenerated. Many of the old, tumbledown boats were

being rebuilt into smart houseboats that weren't just *near* the sea they were *in* the sea – something I could never have imagined! They were big too and at a price (around £300k) that was achievable if I sold my flat and the houseboat brought in an income through holiday rentals.

That was how we came to find *Sturdy*, a newly built houseboat that comprised of two floors built on the existing 72ft hull of a Thames lighter – a vessel used to transport goods on the river. It was fixed by four steel mooring piles, which allow movement so it rises and falls a little with

the tide. It had mains water and electricity and its own bio-treatment plant, which returned clear water to the sea. Most beguiling, however, was the uninterrupted view right across the harbour, and out through the harbour mouth across the Solent.

Then something strange happened. The very same yacht James had spent his childhood holidays on was moored right next to *Sturdy*. James would tut and raise his eyebrows every time I said it was a sign, but I know he felt it too!

Everything was conspiring to make me fall and fall hard. I loved the ferry crossing

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Clockwise: Georgina on deck with Sonny and Daisy; the houseboat's nautical interior, former Thames lighter, *Sturdy*, from the outside

to the island, the glimpse of the tree lined beaches as you come in to the port. Bembridge harbour itself at first sight had me in thrall. As I listened to the clanking of the masts and the wheeling seagulls I could feel James watching and worrying as I took it all in. I think he hoped I wouldn't mind that the houseboats all backed on to the busy harbour road. But I had quickly weighed that up against the colourful mix of boats and houseboats, the feeling of eccentricity and fun it had, the sense of community, the amazing view. The lobster salad lunch round the corner at The Crab & Lobster Inn had me imagining the future – the children sailing at the local sailing club, meeting friends

for barbecues on the beach, trailing sand in and out, picnics and boat trips.

At one point it looked like we were not going to get *Sturdy*. We had several hoops to jump through, including selling my flat. Like any house, boats need to be well built but a good survey will show any problems that need remedying. Fortunately *Sturdy* was given a clean bill of health and finally, she was really ours.

Now it is one year on and we have just spent a blissful week aboard doing all the things that I had imagined. As with all houseboats, *Sturdy* has peculiarities we need to get used to – the gurgling sounds as the tide comes in, the creaking of all the wood in the wind, the slight

tilting when she comes off the sand. But we have stayed on board in 70mph winds and barely noticed movement.

Sonny and Daisy call *Sturdy* 'the holiday boat' and love it, talking endlessly of the beach, their buckets and spades, the chips they get to eat at The Tollgate Café overlooking the harbour. We have made her as safe on deck as we can, with extra wiring around the decks, and taught the kids to walk the gangplank with care. Unlike living on the river though, at least we don't have to worry about flooding, as the tides are so much more predictable! Now as the bookings start to roll in and we share the houseboat with others, all I have to worry about is when we can stay there ourselves again!

To rent *Sturdy*, visit; theharbourhouseboat.co.uk w&h

Love to own a houseboat?

- + **Finance** isn't available for static houseboats, but boats that move with power from their moorings are eligible. Homeowners can possibly raise funds against their home.
- + **Council tax** is charged at the same rate as houses.
- + **Mains drainage** will depend where the houseboat is moored and services provided by the marina, landlord or harbour. Otherwise a bio-treatment plant is the answer. For more information, visit the Residential Boat Owners' Association's website; rboa.org.uk

THREE WATERSIDE HOMES... FOR LESS

HAPPY DAYS, SOUTHWOLD, SUFFOLK, EXCESS £100,000

This pastel-hued beach hut in swanky Southwold opens directly onto the beach and is being sold by tender at the start of June so sadly will be snapped up, but will provide a guide price if you want to hunt down others. Not a home, as you can't spend the night there but the whitewashed interior is well equipped with a stove and tables. Agents: durrants.com, 01502 723 292



RIVERSIDE LODGE, RIVERSIDE ISLAND MARINA, ISLEHAM, ELY, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, £175,000

Who says you have to be by the sea to enjoy waterside living? The Riverside Island Marina is set in woodland by the River Lark, and features 112 Scandinavian-style lodges. This particular lodge has one bedroom, a converted loft, conservatory and large garden. Agents: balmforth.co.uk, 01638 582 455.



SOUTH LODGE, ARDPATRICK, ARGYLL, OFFERS OVER £225,000

This secluded stone cottage, which has two bedrooms and a cosy, Aga wood-burning stove, looks out across West Loch Tarbert to the Sound of Gigha and the Kintyre Peninsula. Located about forty minutes from a beaver trail, you can try your luck spotting them – if you can tear yourself away from the panoramic views, that is. Agents: bellingram.co.uk, 01631 566 122



PHOTOGRAPHS INDIRA FLAHERTY