

RYA: A handy guide to boating into Europe

If you're taking your boat out of the UK this Summer we've got some tips for a smooth journey
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Holidaying on your boat can be even more special when it's away from home in European waters. Make the most of your time abroad by ensuring you've dealt with all the formalities before you go with our guide to boating into Europe in 2024.

Know your obligations

If you're sailing or motorboating in another country's waters, that country can ask you to comply with its rules and regulations under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Find out more about the [requirements for commonly visited countries](#) and read on for our checklist for the core paperwork to take.

The need for, and accepted forms of, evidence of competence is determined by the requirements of the flag state of the boat you are operating, as well as the country you are visiting. The [RYA International Certificate of Competence for Operators of Pleasure Craft](#) (ICC) is formally, and sometimes informally, accepted in many European countries but you should check what you need for the type of boat and where the boat will be used.

Share your plans

If you leave the UK on a recreational boat (pleasure craft), you'll need to submit your voyage plan in advance to [UK Border Force and HMRC](#). You should do this between 24 hours and two hours prior to departure. You must also do the same before your return journey. It's important that you notify Border Force if you cancel or change your plan. Find out more about [entry and exit formalities](#).



Flag-flying

A UK-flagged vessel must wear her ensign as required by the Merchant Shipping Act 1995, which includes when entering or leaving a foreign port. Although a custom in many countries rather than a legal requirement, a courtesy flag is expected to be flown by foreign flagged vessels. This is to acknowledge that they will respect the Coastal State's jurisdiction laws and sovereignty.

A vessel arriving in a country (from outside its customs or immigration territory) should fly the Q flag until given clearance from the authorities, unless you are certain you don't need to. The crew should normally remain on board the vessel until the skipper has completed the necessary customs and immigration formalities, when the Q flag may be taken down. Read more on [flag etiquette](#).

Be clear on customs

The 27 EU member states form a single customs territory which the UK is not part of, so when you take your boat to the EU you effectively import it. Import VAT and duty could be payable unless you are eligible for relief. For most people this will be under the terms of EU Temporary Admission, where your boat can enter the EU for up to 18 months.

When you're [trailing a boat](#) and drive through the border control point, you make a customs 'declaration by conduct'. Most people go straight through but if you are stopped, your conversation with customs officials will be considered an 'oral customs declaration'. The European Commission suggests having a completed [Annex71-01 form](#) with you in case this happens.



Port of entry

Some countries specify the ports of entry a vessel should use when arriving from abroad. It's often a requirement that you use the most direct route to a port of entry on entering territorial waters. On entering the Schengen area (the 29 European countries that officially abolished border controls at their mutual borders) from a non-Schengen country, you should obtain immigration clearance.

This also applies when leaving the area. If your passport is stamped (including electronically) on entry into the Schengen area, ensure it's stamped on departure otherwise immigration authorities will assume you've not left.

Pets and provisions

A pet can only arrive in Great Britain on a private boat if it's coming from Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or the Republic of Ireland. Otherwise, your pet must enter the UK using an [approved transport company and route](#). There are also rules for what food you can take into the EU and bring back to the UK.

New for 2024: permission to travel

Anyone reporting a voyage inbound to the UK using the [submit a pleasure craft report service](#) (sPCR) will now see a new element. As part of the report, skippers request a response from the Home Office system to indicate each person's permission to travel, unless the voyage originates from within the [Common Travel Area](#).

Skippers will receive a response confirming whether they only need to check that the person has a valid passport or travel documents to travel to the UK and which they are the rightful holder of, or if additional documentation and additional checks are required. For example, those who need a visa to come to the UK have a valid visa or exemption certificate.

In the rare case an individual's travel to the UK must be prevented, permission will be refused and a 'do not board' instruction will be communicated by the National Border Targeting Centre via a telephone call and/or email. Further advice will then be given.



Electronic Travel Authorisation

The government is phasing in a new requirement for anyone who doesn't have a British or Irish passport, visa or other permission to enter or remain in the UK. The [Electronic Travel Authorisation](#) (ETA) gives advance permission to travel to, or transit through the UK.

The 'paperchase'

However you and your boat arrive in Europe, you'll need a [range of documents](#):

By water

- Registration document
- Ship radio licence
- Insurance documents
- Evidence of eligibility for relief from import VAT and duty
- Voyage log

Vehicle and trailer

- Vehicle driving licence valid for the combination of vehicle and trailer
- Vehicle registration document
- Trailer registration (if required)
- Boat registration document and evidence of ownership
- Completed EU Annex71-01 document
- Vehicle breakdown/recovery insurance

Skipper and crew

- Evidence of competence
- Authority to operate maritime radio
- Passport and/or other recognised travel document
- Global Health Insurance Card and insurance cover



This information is written as a basic guide for a UK-flagged pleasure vessel operated by a UK resident. It may differ for boats registered in other flag states or if you're resident elsewhere, and for boats that are operated commercially.

Information last updated June 2024. For the latest guidance, please visit our [boating abroad hub](#).

Our guide to boating into Europe was first published in the summer 2024 edition of [RYA magazine](#).