

BOAT PEOPLE OF AMSTERDAM

LEMNISCAAT

# BOAT PEOPLE



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TRANSLATED BY JONATHAN ELLIS

# OF AMSTERDAM





*Ed and Carmen* [Verbindingsdam](#)  
*'Steentje'/André* [Levantkade](#)  
*Michel and Mariken* [Ertskade](#)  
*Familie Schuttevaer* [Veemkade](#)  
*Cornie and Barbara* [Brouwersgracht](#)  
*Monique and Harry* [Brouwersgracht](#)  
*Karin and Martijn* [Oosterdok](#)  
*Lucas* [Entrepotdok](#)  
*Paul* [Achtergracht](#)  
*Max* [Jacob van Lennepkade](#)  
*Els* [Houthavens](#)  
*Robbie* [Houthavens](#)  
*Ton* [Wittenkade](#)  
*Zev and Yanick* [Zuider IJdijk](#)  
*Kees and Monique* [Brigantijnkade](#)  
*Ger* [Jaagpad](#)  
*Yoko* [Grasweg](#)  
*Giannattasio Family* [Buiksloterweg](#)

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## Introduction

‘The nice thing about a boat is that it’s a bit like camping. A house is more solid, more serious. The movements of a ship make the changeability tangible. Everything, including people, can do just a little bit more of what they really want, on the water.’ – *Ger*

Photographer Friso and I step from the shaky gangplank. We wave. We have just had coffee in a charming houseboat and nibbled at the waffles we brought with us. It’s snowing as I cycle off, but I’m happy: another good conversation, another glimpse of a life I did not know. I live on a boat and what’s more, I’m a writer and journalist. That combination meant I wanted to write a book about boats. With pictures. So I asked Hollandse Hoogte photographer Friso to take part in the project. It took two years to make this book. During that time, we visited hundreds of houseboat occupants, searching for ‘the voice of the water’. The voice of people who all in their own way had a unique link with the water that bore their homes. Their stories are rarely heard; there are virtually no books about them. That in itself is strange, because anybody

who visits Amsterdam sees boats. And anybody who is even slightly inquisitive would love to know what those boats look like inside.

So we went and had a look.

We searched and searched until we had eighteen portraits in word and image, portraits that partly overlap but on the whole complement each other. Portraits of people living alone, but also married couples and families. People of all ages in all sorts of vessels, spread all over Amsterdam. From the first ‘water yuppies’ to the old bargee family that moored one day and has never left since. From the family that drifted around for years before finally being allocated a mooring place, to the man who, in his student days, built a house on a rotting barge and still lives there, without shower or toilet.

We visited 'Steentje' who used to be an inland shipping bargee and, on an ice-cold day in winter, found himself frozen in on the IJssel, near Montfort. It lasted weeks, he told us. 'I set up a refreshment stall, but I drank most of the genever myself! We went to visit Monique and Harry who had raised their three sons on the boat and now live there with a bunch of cats and dogs. Their boat is their world: they 'never, never, ever want to go on shore again'. We also met Kees and Monique in their beautiful house-boat with its high windows in IJburg, where the view is always different and always stunning. A strange set of circumstances had brought us there. Earlier that day, we had been walking over the jetty when it started to pour with rain. We discovered that there were few places to shelter in IJburg and we pressed ourselves against the wall of a house – and then a man passed by with a dog. Yellow sou'wester, pipe in his mouth. He was one, we saw that right away: a boat dweller.

We were invited in to dry out a little and were given some delicious coffee. We often encountered such generosity: if they liked the look of you, they invited you in.

This is a book for browsing and reading. A book about water and about Amsterdam: you can't get more Dutch than that. We hope that by the end of the book, you, as reader and browser, will have come to know them a little better, these people who live on boats. Now I understand what they've found in all that damp. Who knows, I may buy a boat some day. Because let's face it: living on the water is the best thing there is.

*Jowi Schmitz & Friso Spoelstra*













Number of people on the boat [2](#) | Type of boat [Friese Maatkast](#) | Name of boat [Tramp](#) | Year of construction [1917](#)  
Length [40 metres](#) | Width [5,5 metres](#) | Berth [Verbindingsdam](#)

ED SCHAPER & CARMEN FREUDENTHAL

## ‘You live on a boat with your ears and nose’

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### CRANKY

‘But the east wind, I really hate it. Then the ship bucks around, the whole day water crashes against the hull. Sometimes the wind keeps up for days on end. That makes me cranky. Then I can imagine going to live in a house again.’

Ed Schaper (1961) and Carmen Freudenthal (1965) have been living on the Tramp since 2001. It is a Friese Maatkast dating from 1917. Ed renovated the ship with his own hands; he rents out the deckhouse to tourists. It was natural that he should do the rebuilding himself, because Ed is a carpenter.

### ‘LUXURY BOAT DWELLERS’

Ed and Carmen are among the first self-styled ‘luxury boat dwellers’ in the Eastern Harbour District. This used to be a rough neighbourhood, but thanks to new housing and city redevelopment, it is now one of the spots where people are eager to live. Ed and Carmen do not have some diesel-fuelled, sooty bawler for heating. They have

a combination boiler, a sun boiler and solar panels. They wanted an attractive ship. Nothing ostentatious, but fine material that you could use well and ingenious systems for heating and maintenance. It had to look and smell like a boat, but you had to be comfortable in it.

### TEST SET-UP

Ed: ‘Living on a boat is an active way of living. You work in order to live and you live in order to work. You have to make a lot yourself and think things up and enjoy doing it. We don’t think living on a building site is a punishment. When we bought our first ship – this boat is our second – there was nothing in it. So I installed a big bath in the middle of the hold. That seemed the most important thing to me. The rest was chaos, but that gave us the room to fantasise. I made test set-ups for Carmen with cardboard or wooden walls. We shifted things around, looking for the best spot for the sofa, the correct size for the bedroom.’

‘I miss all that a bit, now that the boat is virtually finished.’

Okay, there's still an office that has to be finished. And at the back, where the engine room is, I want to make a hole. A James Bond hole: one you can jump through into the water and swim off into the distance. But that's about

it. Everything else is working. Sometimes I dream of a new project: a larger ship, perhaps a harbour even, with a shipyard. But we're moored here in such a beautiful spot. I wouldn't like to lose it!









### COMPULSIVE HOARDING

‘What’s so nice about working on a boat is that you can go and track things down. Take the ceiling: I found it on the Internet. It’s made of cedar, something that’s incredibly expensive if you buy it from a normal wood merchant. I drove into the country in a van to pick it up, it’s such beautiful wood. I could almost do the whole ceiling with it. But in the end, I needed just a bit more. I had to buy that new, and it cost almost as much as the rest of the ceiling put together. You have to take your time. Really search for something and wait for the right moment. The fireplace. That took us ages as well. We knew exactly what we wanted, but we simply couldn’t find it. In the end, it turned out that two guys here in Amsterdam had precisely the right fireplace.’

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### BUILDING

Ed found his first ship when he was doing some building work on the Kanis en Meiland café on the Levantkade, a café that Ed had bought with two other owners. He often fantasised in the evening after work that he would live there. The neighbourhood used to be too rough for his taste, but that had just started to change. Ed saw an advertisement in the paper and guess what: the boat on offer was moored next to the café. In the morning he went to look at it with Carmen and in the evening they’d bought it. The ship’s name was *Ideaal II*. It’s still moored in the same place; Ed’s sister lives on it now. Thirty metres long and everything had to be renovated.







After a few years, the current boat joined the family; it is a full forty-two metres long. It was moored not that far away. It had been renovated here and there, but not in the way Ed wanted. So he had to start all over again. There's satisfaction in his voice.

### SPUDS

'For the Ideaal II we chose – in retrospect – a strange layout. You came in in the bedroom and from there walked into the living room. I wanted things different in the Tramp. First the public areas, then the private ones.

