

How to find a Hovercraft Cruising Site



The question “Where can I use my hovercraft?” comes up regularly on the club forum and elsewhere. Finding a place to use a cruising hovercraft isn’t actually that difficult!

You can, of course, use a hovercraft on land. Unfortunately, the UK does not have large, publicly accessible land areas that are suitable, and driving around a small field gets boring pretty quickly (unless you are racing someone else, of course). That leaves water as the only practical choice. There are many inland rivers and lakes but virtually all are privately owned and controlled and are heavily used – it can be very difficult to get consent or gain access to these areas (not impossible though!). Part land, part water areas are usually tidal (marshes, mud and sand banks). These areas can be very suitable for hovercraft as no other vehicles can use them!

In addition to inland waterways the UK has more than 11,000 miles of spectacular and diverse coastline (including estuaries and around 2000 miles of tidal rivers!). No-one in the UK lives more than 45 miles from tidal water! Based on this, the obvious and easiest place to look for a cruising site is on tidal water!

The first place you should look at is the list of HCGB “Cruising Site Guides” – there may be a site near to you that has already been listed. The cruising site guides contain a lot of useful information on each site including cruise routes and detailed hovercraft-specific information

In common with all other water users, you have a statutory right of navigation over *all* tidal water (with the possible exception of controlled water – see below). This right allows you to use tidal water to travel from one location to another (beach-buzzing or messing around in the same place is *not* navigating) and to ‘moor’ or anchor on exposed tidal land (beaches or banks).

Some tidal areas have restrictions on how you can use them. For example, harbours and nature reserves. Harbour areas are controlled by ‘Harbour Authorities’ or ‘Port Authorities’, each created by its own Act of Parliament. Harbour Authorities (listed on http://www.britishports.org.uk/public/our_members) have a duty to allow access for the purposes of trade or transport (including people – the ‘navigation’ thing again!). They also have a duty to make sure that these activities are carried out safely (see the Port Marine safety code at <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/shippingports/ports/pmsc/portmarinesafetycodeintroduction>). There should be no problem using a harbour *provided* you are ‘navigating’, transporting people (yourself!), aren’t a safety risk to other users of the harbour and you obey any safety rules that apply in the harbour area.

There are also Queens Harbours – these are basically Royal Navy or military bases (there are six in the UK (see <http://www.royal-navy.mod.uk/server/show/nav.3083>) controlled by the MOD. Obviously, these can be sensitive areas with high security levels in places. Other types of restricted tidal areas include SSSIs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest), SACs, nature reserves, etc. They are listed on www.natureonthemap.org.uk . These areas usually gain their status from a ‘listed’ or ‘notified’ feature (it’s a criminal

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offence to damage or disturb a 'notified' feature). It's worth checking what these features actually are – if using a hovercraft isn't likely to 'disturb or damage' them then you may have found a usable cruising site!

It should be obvious by now that there should be plenty of places within easy reach of almost anyone in the UK, where you can use a hovercraft!

The next question is usually '*how do I find a launch location onto the water?*'.

The easiest way, by far, is to talk to local water users (canoeists, fisherman, etc – they will often be able to tell you where the 'hidden' slipways and water access points are.

Slipways:

Slipways are an obvious solution but you should remember that we operate *hovercraft*, we don't **have** to use slipways - any reasonably smooth sloping surface into water will do!

Due to the popularity of water sports in the UK there are *thousands* of slipways dotted along our coastline, rivers and estuaries. These slipways are either public (on common land), owned by local or harbour authorities or by private clubs/individuals - the web site www.boatlaunch.co.uk lists most of the slipways in the UK. Try boat clubs – use <http://www.noblemarine.co.uk/clubfinder.php3> to find one near to you (if it's a in good location it may be worth joining!). Remember to check any local harbours – there is almost certainly a slipway in the harbour or nearby! Use satellite mapping (<http://earth.google.com> <http://maps.live.com> <http://192.com/maps>) to take a close look around the edges of any water locations and to look at slipways in detail. It can also be used to spot small boats on the water – the boats have usually been launched from someplace fairly nearby! Although slipways seem like an obvious choice for a launch site sometimes they aren't suitable – common problems are drop-offs or big rocks exposed at mid to low tide, restricted exit (facing into a harbour wall, for example) and hover unfriendly ramps (too steep, slatted wood or sloping off to one side).

Disused slipways:

You may be able to find disused or old ferry slipways (have a look near to bridges for the old ferry slips) that can no longer be used by boats (maybe the water has silted up next to the slip or the ramp has partially crumbled) – they may be perfect for a hovercraft!

Common land:

Common land (in England) is land that can be often be freely used by anyone. You may be able to find sections of common land next to tidal water with a sloping bank. Check <http://www.openaccess.gov.uk/S4/html/default.htm> or with the local council (who will have a common land register available) for locations of suitable common land.

Private land:

You may be able to find suitable private land next to water – use satellite mapping

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software (see above) to check for any obvious locations – a bit of local knowledge also helps here! You will obviously need to get consent from the landowner to use the land.

The back door method!

One other option is to offer to demonstrate your craft at a local event. There is a high level of public interest in hovercraft and it is usually fairly easy to persuade event organisers to allow you to attend (check that your insurance, or the organisers, covers you at public events!). In return for the demonstration, you may be able to negotiate access to the event site at a future date or be offered an alternate launch location.

Getting permission to use controlled or private water or launch sites:

You may need to gain consent from authorities, harbour masters or private individuals to use controlled water or launch sites. The best approach is to reassure the authority that you are a responsible water user. The HCGB has several documents available that will help you to do this (Health and Safety Guidelines, Environmental Impact report, Code of Conduct, etc) - these documents are **only** available to HCGB members. If you are asked for a risk assessment or something else that you are not familiar with then please contact the Recreational Committee for expert help. Don't be apologetic or defensive when approaching 'authorities' – you should expect to be treated in the same way as any other responsible water user. If you are refused access to an area that is in common use by other watercraft then please contact the Recreational Committee who will attempt to resolve the problems.

Lastly, once you find a new site **please** take time to produce a 'Cruising Site Guide' for it so that we can all enjoy it!