

MY WATERWAYS

Alice Griffin describes how the canals accommodate her lifestyle choices, young family and burgeoning craft career



Alice at the tiller.



Alice lives aboard Heather with her husband and daughter.

Sitting on the bow of my narrowboat at a tranquil bend on the Grand Union Canal, I bask in the mid-summer sunlight. The sky is blue with a smattering of perfect fluffy white clouds, and fields fall away from either side of the water. I hear birdsong and lambs bleating, marvel at a gull circling and swooping – repeatedly trying to catch lunch – and lock eyes with a silent young heron, stock-still in the shallows. I sigh and feel a contentment deep inside. This is my quiet space.

I first discovered the calming effect of the canals many years ago when they became my retreat from busy office jobs; a place to ponder, read books and eat lunch. In my 20s I enjoyed lazy days on the waterways aboard a friend's boat and, when I met my husband Scott, soon converted him to the slower pace. We bought our first liveaboard narrowboat more than six years ago. Doing so transformed not just our day-to-day life, but also, rather unexpectedly, our work. We refurbished several older boats to sell on and are currently roving traders, making handcrafted jewellery and

gifts. Our plan for next year is to attend more canal fairs around the country as a way to showcase what we do.

IN THE BEGINNING

When we bought our first boat in 2010 we were looking for a way to live closer to nature, cut down our expenditure and find an escape from the busyness of modern life. For us, the canals were one of the only ways to fulfil this wish-list in the UK. We started off living in a marina, which these days, as continuous cruisers, seems a ludicrous waste of a boat! Back then a friend said we were missing all the best bits of the lifestyle



Alice with her husband Scott.



Simple styling onboard Heather.



It was scenes like this that drew Alice to the canals.



Idyllic moorings.



Alice's daughter is most at home on the water.

by being safely buttoned up in our berth and, in time, this is something we came to agree with. However, it was a good way for us to slowly get used to boat living and a convenient place to renovate the interior of our very tired 1990 ex-hire-boat and turn it into a bright and funky living space.

We were thrilled with the result and received so much great feedback and encouragement that, after several years, we decided to sell it on for a small profit. Two more boat refurbishments followed. There are so many new craft being built these days, but the truth is that many of the older ones are constructed very well and, with a little bit of imagination and hard work, can be brought up to a level comparable with those fresh from a boatbuilder.

GREEN LIVING

Our current boat is a 1988 60ft semi-traditional ex-hotel-boat named Heather. It has two bedrooms, a walk-through bathroom, galley and saloon. The large bow with permanent seating

and table means we are encouraged to eat outside and this is something we love – living on a boat should surely entail more outdoor time. We run on three leisure batteries and one small 50W solar panel, opting to simplify our life rather than fill our space with too many modern appliances that require more power. Who needs a TV when there is so much beauty outside the window? And why would we want to run our engine more than necessary, polluting the environment around us? Instead we opt to work with hand tools for our crafts and hand-wash with the help of an ancient – but amazing – spin dryer.

Living like this has been a wonderful way to teach our home-schooled daughter that the earth's resources are finite. Having been on boats since she was two years old, she is a true child of the canals, spending her time building dens along the towpath, feeding water fowl and talking to people from all backgrounds. She is learning to understand what she needs not wants. In a world so driven



Alice sells her handcrafted gifts from her narrowboat.



Alice's husband Scott has taken to the liveaboard life.

by mindless consumerism and greed, I think this is an important lesson.

FAVOURITE HAUNTS

There are so many beautiful stretches of canals and all have their own charms. I constantly marvel at how different a place can feel from the towpath rather than the pavement and am a huge advocate of saving your opinions until you have experienced a town or city from the water. Our personal favourite so far has been the

Leeds & Liverpool Canal. Collecting our latest narrowboat from Skipton, we took a wonderful journey south and the diversity this waterway offers, in landscape, community and history, made for an interesting time. Even the whole day it took to get through Wigan locks was magical, just imagining all the boats before us and all the boats to come.

Other waterways have different selling points. We feel the Shropshire Union offers the perfect retreat with



Out and about on the Trent & Mersey.

its long stretches of open countryside, and then there is our home-stretch of the Grand Union Canal with its diverse community and moorings that slip seamlessly between forest, town, village, field and city. Prior to our ownership and in her previous hotel-boat guise, Heather travelled the entire system – we have even seen photos of her going under London Bridge – and it constantly warms our hearts as we cruise the waterways and people shout, “Hey, there's narrowboat Heather!” and stop to ask us how the couple who owned her before are.

Whether winter with the stove going and the sound of ice cracking as I fall asleep, or spring with hedgerows in full bloom and all the newborn animals: I love it all. But I think summer will always remain my favourite time of year on the water – barefoot on the towpath, alfresco eating, evening cruises and mooring up with friends we haven't seen for a while to share wine and stories.

As we enjoy all this we are aware that living afloat is becoming more popular. I only hope that our waterways will continue to be respected and protected and, of course, that they won't ever become so busy that I won't be able to find my bend in the canal – my quiet space – and watch the world go by in slow motion.

More information...

Alice divides her time between a narrowboat in the UK and an olive grove in Portugal. She loves travel, writing and making jewellery and toys for her small family business.

Follow her adventures at litteloquat.com.