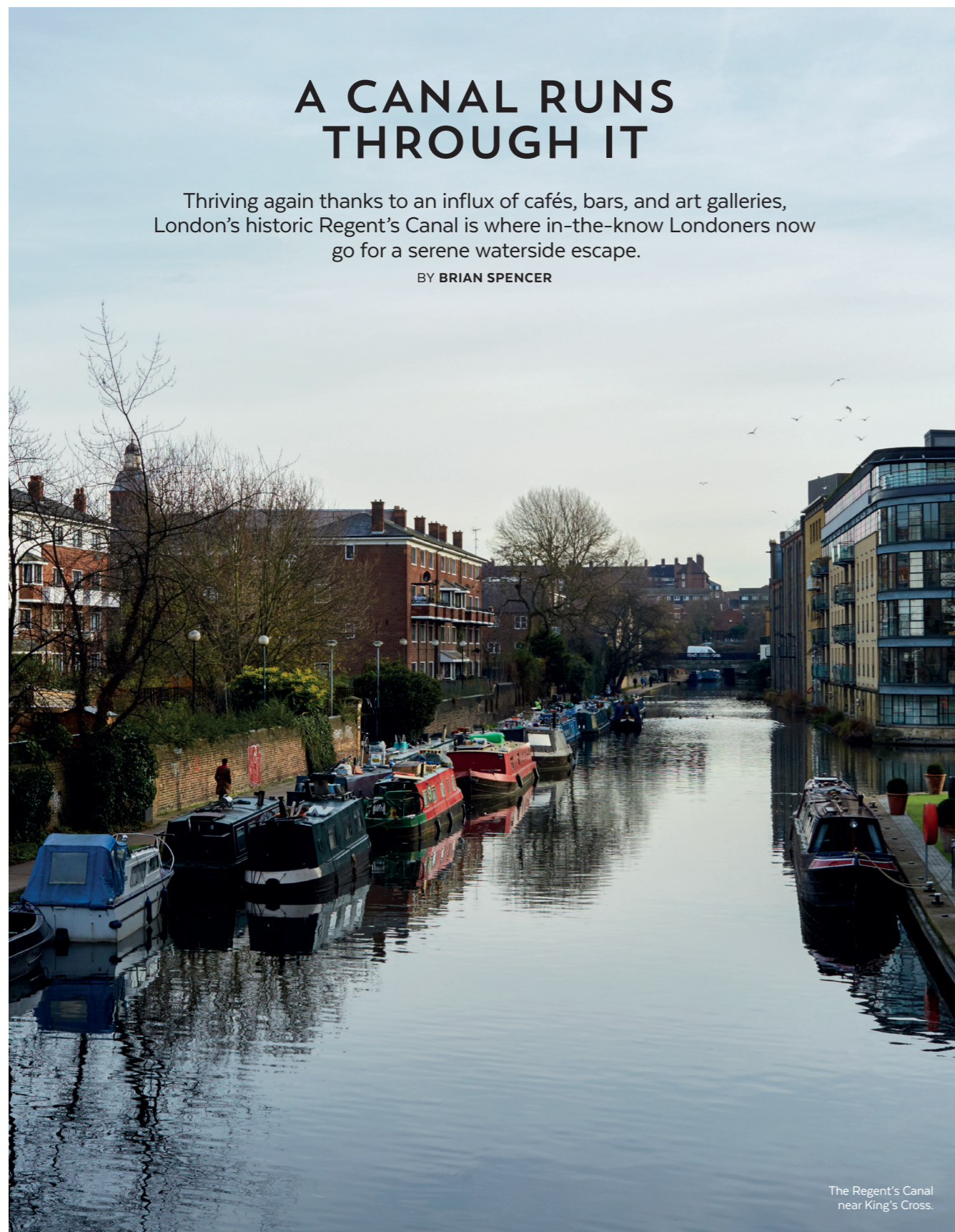


A CANAL RUNS THROUGH IT

Thriving again thanks to an influx of cafés, bars, and art galleries, London's historic Regent's Canal is where in-the-know Londoners now go for a serene waterside escape.

BY BRIAN SPENCER



The Regent's Canal
near King's Cross.

The original vision, as architect John Nash saw it, was one of “barges moving through an urban landscape,” facilitating commerce via an expansive waterway cut directly through London that would link Paddington Arm (a branch of the Grand Union Canal) with Limehouse Basin and the River Thames to the east. Construction began on Regent’s Canal in 1812 under the supervision of Nash, who by the end of his illustrious career had also designed such London landmarks as the Marble Arch, Regent’s Park, and parts of Buckingham Palace.

Nash opened Regent’s Canal to great fanfare in 1820—and at a final cost more than twice the original estimate. Spanning nearly 14 kilometers from end to end, the waterway became populated with long river barges transporting building supplies and assorted sundries inland to areas that included Camden, Islington, and Hackney. Narrow towpaths lined the canal to accommodate the horses that pulled the barges. These were, in fact, perhaps too narrow, to judge by the short stone ramps built to help any horse that fell into the water get back to shore.

Though commercially viable for a time, the canal felt the inevitable squeeze of modernization as early as 1845, when an attempt was made to convert it into a railway. By the time small tractors replaced horses on the towpaths in the mid-1950s, improved roads and railways had rendered Regent’s Canal’s trade viability obsolete. The last shipping barge sailed the canal in 1969.

After a period of disuse, however, the canal again thrives, though in ways Nash could not have possibly envisioned nearly 200 years ago.

Supplanting the horse (and tractor) traffic of yesteryear, today it is runners, bicyclists, bird watchers, and dog walkers jockeying for precious little towpath space as Regent’s Canal settles into its second life as a serene escape within the city. Hidden by ivied brick walls and modern housing developments in some parts, shrouded by loping willow trees and holly-decked bramble thickets in others, the canal is far removed from London’s touristy center. From pleasant Little Venice, near Paddington Station, to beloved East London green space Victoria Park, where the canal veers south to Limehouse Basin, canal-goers will discover scores of old wood-burning houseboats, the birdsong of chirping blue tits and wrens, and the many merchants contributing to Regent’s Canal’s ongoing rejuvenation.

Summertime cinemas, pop-up art shows and shops, and for-hire party boats are among the resourceful barge businesses trolling the canal these days. Some, such as mobile vinyl specialists **The Record Deck** (therecorddeckuk.wordpress.com), keep customers updated with their mooring locations on social media; others,

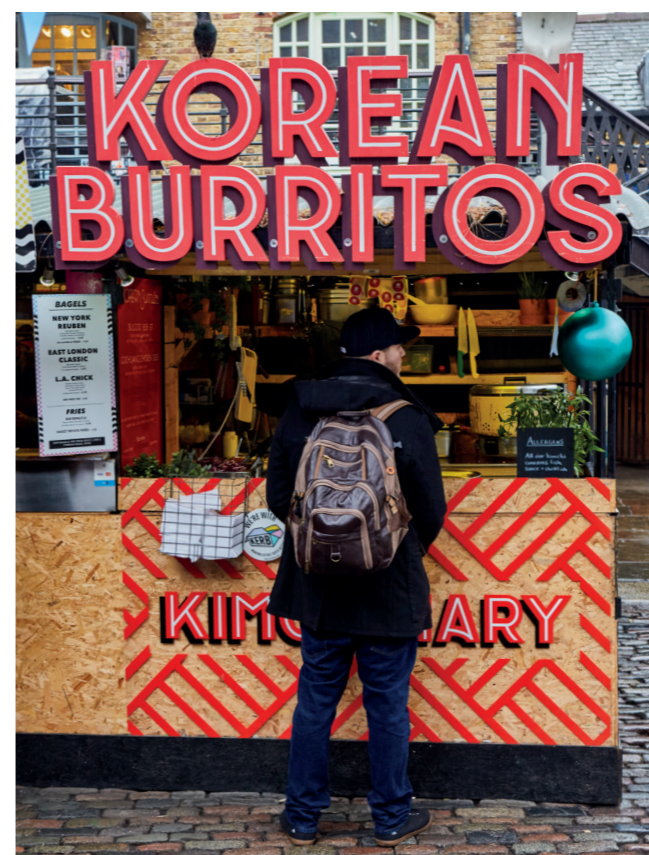


Above: Browsing the bookshelves at Word on the Water. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Fresh-baked cookies at café and bar Barge House; a barista at the same establishment; the Regent’s Canal at Islington’s Colebrooke Row; the Kimchinary outlet at KERB Camden Market.

like British seafood restaurant **London Shell Co.** (londonshellco.com) and booksellers **Word on the Water** (fb.com/wordonthewater), have semi-permanent anchor points.

Paddy Screech is one of three business partners managing the floating bookshop, which is housed in a refitted Dutch barge that’s more than 100 years old. “Our captain, Noy, brought the boat from Rotterdam intending to sell it in London, but he fell in love with it and unconsciously told those who came to view it everything that was wrong with it to put them off,” Screech says. “When we presented our plan of opening a bookshop he jumped at the chance.”

Shelves at Word on the Water, London’s only water-bound bookshop, are stacked with an engaging collection of literary gems, creative non-fiction, children’s literature and, in Screech’s words, “books that convey the wisdom that only a life of great challenge can generate.” Screech



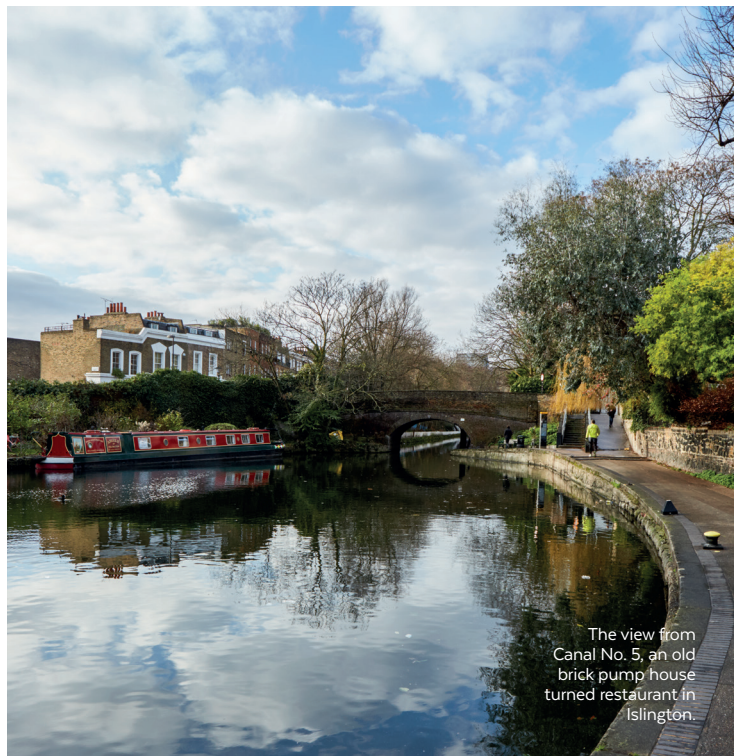
and his partners have all lived in barges, too—more than 10,000 Londoners, in fact, now call the canals home. “It’s a parallel, entirely different way of experiencing the city—in it, but not entirely of it,” says Screech. “People are friendly here, and greet each other in the way that they would on a countryside lane in Devonshire.”

At **Bert’s Barges** (bertsbarges.com), visitors can experience a slice of that canal life with overnight stays aboard London’s first barge hotel. Managed by bespoke design company Bert & May, the cozy one-bedroom boat includes a full kitchen, bathroom, and roomy living area with a wood-burning stove. The quiet site, accessed via the company’s showroom in Bethnal Green, couldn’t be much more picturesque—a canal-side entrance to Victoria Park is visible through the bedroom window.

Back on land, Regent’s Canal has seen an influx of trendy cafés, bars, and art galleries move in canalside to capitalize on the increase in foot traffic from new office spaces and condos. **Barge House** (bargehouse.co.uk) is packed daily with creative types sipping coffee from East London roasters Climpson & Sons and brunching on modern British comfort foods like wine-braised beef and baked eggs with oyster mushrooms and black pudding. It’s in De Beauvoir Town, near Kingsland Basin and a crop of other eateries and galleries, including curator Monika Bobinska’s indie art space **CANAL** (canal.projects.info).

Following a closure of more than two years for extensive renovations, the former Pump-house Café reopened in mid-2016 as **Canal No. 5** (44/7883-168376). Occupying one of the canal’s old brick pumping facilities on a pretty corner of Islington, the revamped restaurant has one entrance for coffees and cakes, and another for its intimate dining room, which features original brick walls and vintage wooden furnishings. Expect a small but considered menu of soups, sandwiches, and classic breakfast platters.

Last August, the pop-up street-food market specialists at KERB landed for good in a massive canalside courtyard in Camden. **KERB Camden Market** (kerbfood.com), open 364 days a year, is home to 34 vendors hawking everything from



The view from Canal No. 5, an old brick pump house turned restaurant in Islington.

slow-cooked barbecue and Indian-style roti wraps to Taiwanese bento boxes and loaded bowls of gourmet mac ‘n’ cheese. Hanna Soderlund is the founder of Kimchinary, where the grilled Korean-style burritos—moreish umami bombs stuffed with fillings that include braised ox cheek, pulled pork, and kimchi rice—are consistently voted one of London’s favorite street eats. “This is the first permanent home for many of us, and the chance to set down roots in an iconic place like Camden is an amazing step forward,” Soderlund says. “Having London’s best street foods here seven days a week is brilliant.”

Kimchinary and the rest of the KERB Camden crew aren’t the only street-food purveyors to have found a home on the canal last year. A joint venture between the founders of Italo-American sandwich makers Capish? and craft brewery The Five Points, Scandic-cool **Mason & Company** (masonandcompany.co.uk) is among the handful of bars and restaurants at Here East in Hackney Wick, on the River Lee Navigation, which connects to the Regent’s via a smaller canal. Here, around 20 draft beers pair with a snack-friendly selection of Italian eats like deep-fried spaghetti bites, a meatball hero, and eggplant parmesan.

It may not have turned into the shipping thoroughfare that he intended, but John Nash would certainly be proud of what his canal has become. ☉

