



I AM CONSCIOUSLY UNPLUGGED...  
AND I AM CONSCIOUS

Alice Elgie shares how she finds time to just ‘be’

**P**erched on the seat at the back of my 60ft narrowboat I hold the brass tiller with my gloved hand and push it gently from side to side as I navigate my way along a quiet stretch of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. I am in the Calder Valley, the sky is a crisp ice blue, and shafts of sunlight are forcing me to screw up my eyes as I follow the soft bends of this exposed cutting. I am stunned into complete silence by the spectacularly vast expanses of open land falling away from the towpath in endlessly undulating hills – every shade of green – and am overwhelmed by a true sense of spaciousness, both physically and in spirit. I feel totally connected to the present moment. I am not thinking about shopping lists or something I should be doing for my family, I am not checking to see if so-and-so has liked my photo or if that email has come through that I was expecting, and my phone is inside the boat, not inside my pocket. It is as if all noise has simply fallen away, dissipated, and I am left feeling truly alive. There is no desire to achieve anything more than move my boat along and submerge myself fully in that which happens around me. I am consciously unplugged... and I am conscious.

**it appears many of us have become frightened to actually stop... because, if we stop, what will happen?**

These days I believe people wander around in such a haze of noise that it's easy to forget what it felt like before we were demanded of 24/7 by our smartphones, drawn into the TV throughout the night, and tempted by consumerism around the clock. Sometimes it's as if the never-ceasing din of traffic and interrupting beeps of devices is more normal than birdsong and silence, and as we rush around attending meetings and meet-ups, doing school runs and sitting in rush-hour traffic on our way to work, or doing the weekly shop as well as the myriad of other errands, it appears many of us have become frightened to actually stop... because, if we stop, what will happen? If we 'sign out', how will it be? Will people miss us on social media? Will our children be rejected by friends when they return from a spell away? Will we fall ill at the first sign of rest, or become agitated and bored?

Taking time out of the, at times, exhaustion that is everyday modern life to go on journeys that allow me to slow things down and reconnect with myself, my family and nature is something I regularly strive to do. It is an essential part of who I am, and this trip was no different: a conscious decision to cruise our latest narrowboat home from the north to the south of England, without a car and with a month to do so. Of course, I acknowledge that not everyone has the option to build a month 'out' into their life, but perhaps a weekend? Maybe even a week? For us, we made it so that we had no pressing engagements, in life or online, >



for pretty much all of us it is possible to give over one day of our week to pursuits that call on us to be wholly present and absorbed in that which is truly around us



> because the truth is that no matter how little or how long you are able to allow yourself to drop out for, nothing really happens. Life goes on in the world without us, and in my experience there is nothing we miss that can't be caught up on later, and yet what we are set to gain is so much more. It is a return to zero, a rebalancing, and a reconnection with our more natural state. It's true that when first embarking on these 'time out' trips I can feel tetchy, separated, left out and aggrieved because I can't just drive to the shops quickly or google something immediately. It takes a while to steady the body, still the mind, adapt to the new pace. But after that while, it's like good medicine flowing through my veins, and these days I crave this far more than the alternative, as if by slowly venturing back to a time before, although at first daunting, it has now become my normality, and for me the waterways that secretly span Great Britain are one of the places where I find this kind of sanctuary.

England at 4mph is vastly different from England at 60mph or even 30mph, and our trip allowed us all to appreciate and absorb every little inch of it. The Leeds and Liverpool passes through such varied landscape: urban areas where we reflected on the canal's industrial past, valleys backed by hills that people have walked for centuries; villages, towns and cities dot vast swathes of space unfolding in millions of colours. Our descent of the 23 Wigan locks was a kind of meditation, so mesmerised was I by these great bodies of water rushing through looming heavy gates, descending slowly into eventual silence until only bubbling whirlpools simmered on the surface and I was able to push the heavy wood and watch my boat float silently through.

This true absorption of my surrounding environment is what inspires and excites me, and having time to chat with those people from all backgrounds and walks of life who themselves find solace on the towpath, fills me with happiness: an old man sharing with us his boyhood memories of a stretch of canal not far from Skipton, volunteer lock-keepers from Liverpool giving an energising and passionate history lesson to my daughter, and a fellow writer with whom I shared a real cup of tea rather than just a tweet. Then there was a Muslim couple from Blackburn who chatted to us for 20 minutes about our lifestyle and left expressing appreciation that we didn't turn away at the first sight of a veil. This moment perhaps struck me more than others, for it left me astounded and yet resigned to its truth. So many people appear marred by media, and I want to shake them, tell them to go out into their community and find the time to meet the real people and really listen.

**Alice Elgie** lives a quiet life divided between an olive grove in Portugal and a narrowboat in the UK. She runs a creative handcrafted business with her husband, home educates her 9-year-old daughter, writes, and switches off – a lot.

Recently I was talking to a friend who was lamenting what a drain the online world can be. We remarked on how everyone seems to be switched on and preoccupied a lot of the time, and pondered how this might affect real life relationships as well as creativity. "If everyone is always so busy looking at this other world behind a screen and not the world in front of their eyes, then how will real and amazing things ever be created in this century, as in those previous?" we mused. By the end of that conversation my friend had resolved to spend one day a week completely unconnected and fully alert and present on other projects, and I get this. During our trip I wrote reams and reams in my notebook. We read books. We talked about those books and of our dreams and ideas. We observed nature for hours and lost ourselves in the silence of scenery as it drifted by us, and somehow, during that month, life began to feel real and solid again. It became tangible instead of loose in my hands, my thoughts ordered instead of drifting in all directions like fine grains of sand blowing in the wind.

It's not easy these days to nurture a lifestyle that allows you to take long periods of time off, but for pretty much all of us it is possible to give over one day of our week to pursuits that call on us to be wholly present and absorbed in that which is truly around us. There are endless opportunities for weekly walks in nature, afternoons that could be given over completely to gardening, beach trips that do not need to be infiltrated by photography for the benefit of others, but instead can be just ours; and maybe that holiday cottage doesn't really need wi-fi or satellite TV. Set your email autoresponder to say that in an emergency you are contactable only by phone, or – better still – hide your phone in the cupboard for an entire day!

Perhaps remove the internet facility on your phone, or at the very least your Facebook app, so you're not tempted to check in every 30 minutes. Unplug your TV, resist popping to the shop for some irrelevant item, and make it so that you are only contactable if it's really important – because is anything really that urgent that you can't allow yourself some time off?

The other day a friend gazed across at me and said: "I keep thinking about 'doing an Alice'," and it made me smile. So many people I meet are exhausted, tired and overwhelmed by this fast-paced world and yet seem unable to remove themselves from its grip. I implored her to do it now, make the time and the opportunity, even if only for one afternoon or one day a week. Sign off, sign out and find your sanctuary, a place where you can be at total peace; think, wonder, observe, share, create. ●



**BK** NO WRAPPING  
BABY K'TAN Patented double-loop design  
www.babyktan.co.uk



Artistic baby slings, perfect from birth onwards, organic, soft & adjustable. Designed & woven in the U.K for you and your child. www.oschaslings.com



Simple, supportive clothing for skin-to-skin contact and newborn carrying.

Use code JUNO16£5 for £5 off orders over £30

**VIJA** DESIGN (UK)  
vija-design.co.uk

**15% OFF!**

Quote: JUNOMAG  
www.amawrap.com



Suitable from birth, baby is comforted feeling your voice, breathing and heartbeat when snuggled in the AmaWrap. It is ideal for colic and reflux babies, easy to tie, and allows you to get on with everyday life with no fuss!

Your baby's weight is distributed equally over your body, ensuring absolute comfort for hours on end for baby and parent.

The contact within the AmaWrap also increases breastfeeding success and reduces the chances of postnatal depression. For more information on this go to [www.amawrap.com](http://www.amawrap.com)

*Keeping baby close to your heart...*