

## LOCKSIDE LIVELIHOODS: NEW LIVES FORGED ON THE WATER

# From life-changing accident to living life afloat

Each month writer Alice Elgie delves into the lives of those who live, work and travel on the waterways of Great Britain. This month she meets Deaine Duffy who, along with Frances the cat and Henry the boat bunny, runs a small online ethical fashion boutique - Canal Couture - aboard her narrowboat, Norton.



Positivity can be hard to muster when we're dealt blows in life and yet often it is the negative experiences that, when viewed through the lens of hindsight, propel us to stretch further and dream bigger. When something knocks the wind out of your sails, perhaps surprisingly it can be the catalyst for rising higher than before.

For Deaine Duffy, boater and owner of Canal Couture, it was a life-changing accident that finally prompted her to turn a childhood dream of living on a narrowboat into reality. Travelling in Indonesia back in 2019 where she was staying with a local family teaching English and learning the language, a beautiful day trip to a local waterfall attraction ended in tragedy.

She shares the details: "I was riding on the back of a friend's moped when he lost control due to a large rock in the road. It wasn't his fault, just an accident, but the bike flipped up in the air and fell back onto me whilst the wheels were still spinning. Things went black and all I could hear was the clanging of metal and the feeling of

being dragged around. Everything stopped in that moment."

Despite the severity of waking up on the road knowing that something was badly wrong, Deaine was already implementing her positive attitude. Her recollection of feeling at peace and without pain, is moving: "I had just had the best three months of my life travelling so I thought if it's going to all end now, that's okay."

Thankfully life didn't end there, but as hospital care was minimal in such a rural area, a gruelling van journey to the closest medical centre ensued, followed by many lost days and surgeries until Deaine finally woke up.

"My host, Hardy, and his wife were at my bedside praying and singing Oasis songs, which he knew I loved and made me feel at home," she said.

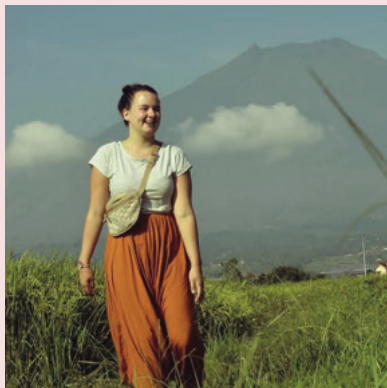
"They explained that doctors had managed to save my badly broken leg, and save my life, but their limited resources meant they simply didn't know what other injuries I had sustained."

Thankfully Deaine's mum was able to make the trip to rural Indonesia and after





Mooring up Norton



ABOVE & RIGHT: Travelling



moving to another hospital where more tests and surgeries were undertaken, they were advised to make the trip home.

“They said I had taken a blow to my head in the accident and had broken many ribs, but I was stable and just needed to lie flat for the flight.”

An arduous trip ensued being transported through different airports.

“I was being taken through gates and onto planes like a princess but all I could feel was sadness,” she said.

“I knew I would have to come back to the UK at some point but not like this. Questions were swirling in my mind: would I ever walk again? Would I ever work again? But most importantly, would I ever get to live out my narrowboat dream?”

From a young age Deaine had an obsession with Rosie and Jim.

“I loved that show and found it extremely magical to observe all the different adventures you could have from a boat in the English countryside,” she said.

Living in a council house in a concrete jungle, she has fond memories of playing in her small garden with friends.

“We had a tree in our garden that I used to climb. I’d sit at the top dreaming of greener spaces as well as the canals I’d seen on my favourite show.”

On occasional weekends there was opportunity to develop these dreams on camping trips with her nanna.

“We used to camp at an old pub that was on the canal and I was fascinated by watching the boats go past, always asking questions to boaters and waving as they chugged by, she recalls.

“When I got to the age where I was allowed to look over the canal on my own, I would spend all day watching boats. My nanna knew I would be back before sunset with plenty of stories from the cut!”

However, it wasn’t until Deaine was 11 that the canals became a reality when the whole family hired two narrowboats for a holiday on the Oxford and Grand Union.

“My maternal grandfather became ill and it was his dream to take the whole family on a narrowboat holiday before he passed,” said Deaine.

“It was amazing to finally be on an actual narrowboat after sitting at the side of the canal obsessing about the lifestyle while camping with Nanna.”

Young Deaine jumped into everything with an eagerness to learn, steering the boat and helping with locks and remembers days of sitting on the roof watching the English countryside go by while drinking tea and eating sandwiches.

“I fell even more in love with boating on that holiday and was gutted when it was time to go home.”



**ABOVE:** Frances the boat cat  
**RIGHT:** Deaine on board

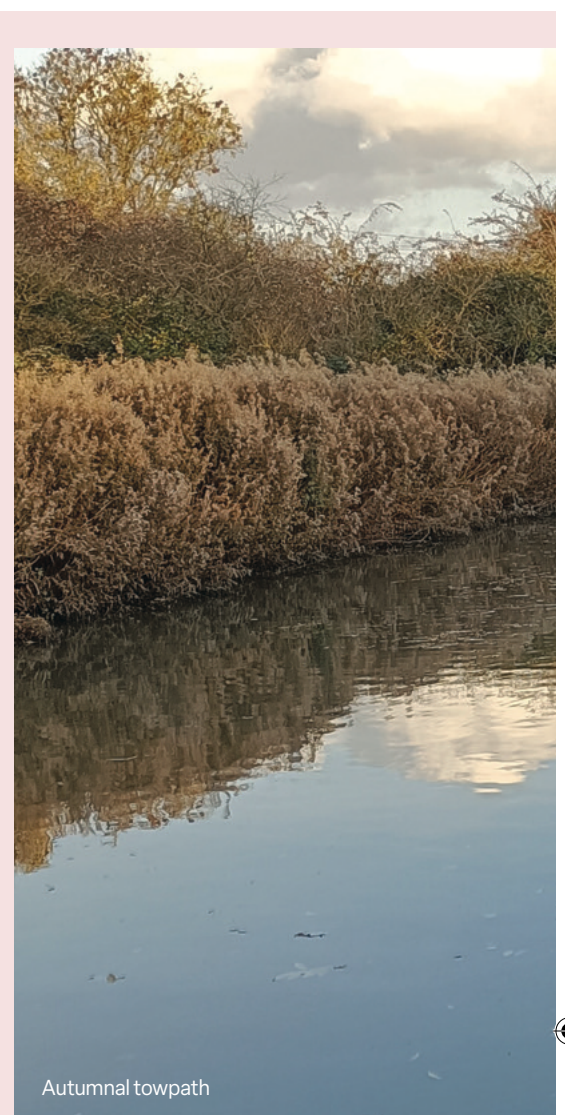
This is perhaps why the predominant thought on her mind whilst travelling back from Indonesia centred around the potential loss of her dream to live on a narrowboat and yet, this legitimate concern turned out to be completely unfounded.

Once back home in the UK there were more tests that revealed a damaged lung, heart condition and a neurological disorder called FND.

More surgeries to fix Deaine's leg followed and then there was the long road to recovery but rather than sit idle, she began researching alongside learning to walk again.

"Thinking of a life without stairs and being out in nature felt like the perfect way to continue my healing journey and so I obsessed, buying all the books and watching every documentary I could find!"

This focus on achieving her dream, despite the potential hurdles, is no doubt what kept Deaine motivated to move forward positively and when, in 2022, she finally put a deposit down on a 1981 traditional narrowboat called



Autumnal towpath

Norton, she cried for days out of sheer joy and happiness.

"I had a second chance at a life I wanted to live. Everyone thought I was mad. I didn't really have a clue about boat life, I had a new disability and people didn't think I could manage, but I knew I would make it work!"

This determination has certainly propelled Deaine forward on her journey and in September 2025 she even launched her own boat-based business, Canal Couture. Inspired by her travels to Indonesia where she learned how fabric and clothing waste from the fast fashion industry is sent there for disposal from countries including the UK, she knew she had found a way to make a difference.

Canal Couture sells reasonably priced ethical clothing from brands that work closely with fair trade factories around the world, and business is thriving.

"I have huge plans to





**Would I ever walk again? Would I ever work again? Would I ever get to live out my narrowboat dream?**

**TOP:** In hospital after accident in Indonesia  
**ABOVE:** Cooking on the towpath



Model wearing Canal Couture clothes



Model wearing Canal Couture



Model wearing Canal Couture



Norton on the towpath



Deaine on the towpath

create my own brand with Canal Couture and work closely with small fair-trade factories in Nepal and Indonesia and next year I'm hoping to hit the small festival market."

Running such a business on board can prove tricky due to space, but Deaine loves working from home where she is free to admire the beautiful views and work at her own pace. Small adaptations help day-to-day life, such as using a stool on wheels when cooking or doing anything where she needs to be standing up for a period of time. Handles and a seat have also been fitted into Norton's shower.

"My boat home gives me the freedom I wouldn't get in a house due to there being no stairs and plenty of things to hold onto



Lock



With Norton out of the water

rather than open space,” she said,

Deaine’s mum continues to be a pillar of strength and despite doing more than the average mother of an adult child, they have found a routine that works.

“I have adapted and overcome many things and I’m shocked in myself at how much I can do now when just a few years ago I was unsure what my life would look like.” The only sticking point is cruising, which can prove tricky with her disability, but certainly isn’t too much of a barrier:

“I love to be out on the canal and the dream would be to continuously cruise, but this is harder than it seems for someone like myself but I do have a little routine when it comes to getting out from my mooring, and I do so whenever I can.”

Whilst summer is obviously a joyful time to be out on the cut, Deaine also enjoys autumn cruising, finding it to be a healing experience.

“I sit on the back of Norton with a large flask of tea in my cosy clothing and feel blessed. While most people are rushing around I get to see, smell and feel the

season change right in front of me, making me feel present and humble.”

Nurturing courage over adversity and discovering simple pleasures in your chosen direction, is perhaps another benefit of looking through the lens of hindsight.

When we’re knocked down it’s important to rise back up into a place of gratitude, hope and belief and perhaps put into practice the popular Mark Twain quote to: “Throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.” It seems Deaine is a shining example of this positive approach toward life.

**Facebook:** @canalcouture

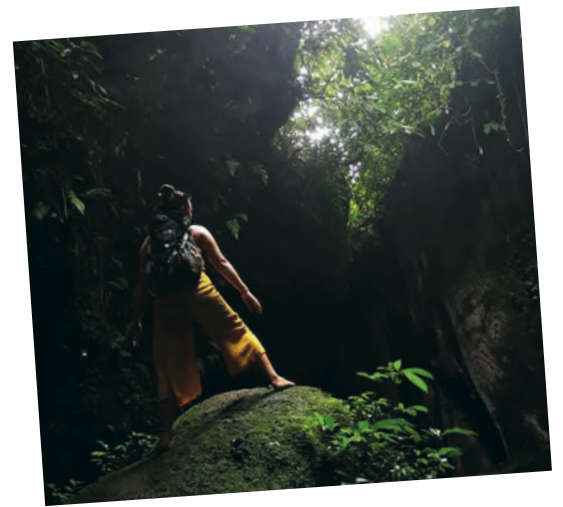
**Instagram:** @canalcouture  
@veggieonthecut

**Tiktok:** @veggieonthecut

**Ebay:** Canal Couture



Alan



**Alice Elgie is a nature-loving writer who shares words about her own wandering lifestyle through hold-in-the-hand letters and recorded reflections. [aliceelgie.com](http://aliceelgie.com)**

## SHARE YOUR LIFE ON THE CUT

We are always on the lookout for inspiring people who live and work on the waterways. If you’ve got a new venture afloat or have been working on canal boats for decades, we’d love to hear from you to feature in a future edition. Get in touch with us by email to [editor@canalboat.co.uk](mailto:editor@canalboat.co.uk)