

LOCKSIDE LIVELIHOODS

WORK, TRADE AND ENTERPRISE ON THE CUT

Wandering Alice

In the coming months, writer Alice Elgie will be delving into the lives of those who live, work and travel on the waterways of Great Britain. This month she begins by sharing her own journey to a self-supported itinerant lifestyle.

Photos by Alice Elgie

Waking slowly in my bed I hear the wind blowing outside the window - great swathes of motion - and I feel excitement rising from deep in my belly, to my chest, to my throat. It was most definitely a day for running up and down the hill that descended from a busy dual carriageway in the city estate where I grew up, thought nine-year-old me as I jumped down from my bunk and pulled on my jeans and trainers, the yearning to go outside only deepened.

This vivid memory and the tangible feelings associated with it, still play out in real time more than 40 years later and I am in no doubt it is because it represented freedom. The exhilaration of moving with the wind and of discovering a moment within an average day where I could touch something deeper; reach for something more profound.

Finding myself naturally on the same trajectory as my peers: from school to work placement, 9-5, to city centre flat, it wasn't long before I instinctively knew this routine would become stifling for me in the long-term and so, when in my early 20s I read the book *As I Walked Out One*

Midsummer Morning by Laurie Lee and realised that folk did just get up and wander, making their money as they went, I knew the opportunity for a new route was being revealed.

I believe wholeheartedly in the power of following our hearts and trust that if we open ourselves up with humility and authenticity and accept opportunities without fear, then we will be led along the right path. For me this saw me travelling across France and Spain by road and rail before moving to Japan for a number of months and then somehow wriggling my way into a dream job through pure dogged determination and tenacity. Travelling the world writing for a tourist guide in my mid-twenties it felt as if everything was beginning to fall into place because as I moved from country to country, I knew I felt just like Laurie Lee - "I was the stranger, but I felt at home".

Home is a strange concept for a perpetual wanderer because in time

everywhere begins to hold a part of you, and the idea of what constitutes home shifts from the experience we might have had growing up. I like to think that somehow the threads of memory from our nomadic ancestors have woven their way into my deepest self and, because I have responded, this wandering world has opened up. For me home is security, yes, but security in the form of sincere relationships and deep-rooted connection to landscape. Where the resting place for my head is, often becomes the very last piece of the puzzle. However, when I met the love of my life and together we embarked on the adventure of parenthood and then decided to take our baby daughter on the road with us, questions arose all around like new spring shoots as to whether this was the right thing. Oftentimes we thought yes, but sometimes the nagging doubts crept in as people cast their accusing eyes our way and so two years into our adventure the memory of





Alice and Scott



ABOVE: Alice teaching yoga from her narrowboat saloon.
RIGHT: Alice's daughter enjoying crafting alongside her dogs, Milla & Pepper



narrowboats was taken down from a dusty shelf in the back of my mind.

I had grown up near the canals and by the time I was a teenager, had friends whose family owned a narrowboat and mixing in those circles had become second nature. So, when my husband and I decided the time was right to have some kind of 'root' in the UK, it seemed natural to explore the idea as a liveaboard option, which at least represented some part of

the wider notion of home. Our daughter was just shy of three years old when we moved onto our first 'doer-upper' narrowboat and at that time we had opted for a marina mooring close to a local pre-school and a permanent job for my husband, believing that the option to head out further afield at weekends and for holidays would be enough to soothe our itchy feet. Of course, it didn't take long for the canals as a whole to capture our

imagination and when the idea to home educate was thrown into the mix, the course of our life as a family began to take shape.

During my years travelling, I had built up enough freelance work to carry us from day-to-day in a simple manner and we knew that with occasional longer stops where my husband could secure temporary work contracts, we could give the permanently wandering family life a go, so by the time we had sold our renovated first boat and moved on to our more spacious second boat, we had decided to travel slowly to Shropshire. As L.T.C. Rolt shares in the opening pages of his book, *Narrow Boat*, a wandering life on

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the canals, “seemed to me to fulfil in the fullest sense the meaning of travel as opposed to a mere blind hurrying from place to place”. In all my years’ wandering I had been genuinely astounded that the number of pin badges collected, or photographs of well-known landmarks taken, appeared to sufficiently quantify travel whereas for me, it has always been about wanting to immerse myself in the simple day-to-day life of wherever I might land. Canal travel suited this ethos perfectly and during that first voyage we embraced being able to experience England from a different viewpoint.

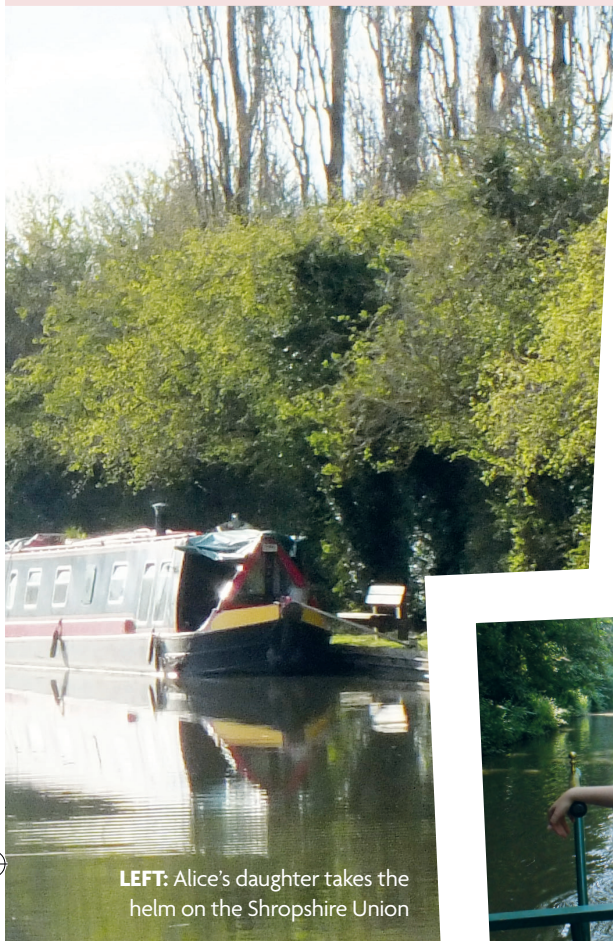
What we discovered was the countryside of our homeland is achingly beautiful and to absorb it at a slower pace, a gift. My parents joined us for a portion of that trip and the added joy of strolling along untouched hedgerows, mum teaching both myself and my daughter the names of wildflowers, grasses, birdsongs, as well as demonstrating how to ‘ping’ ribbed plantain, was magical. I remember vividly that year, meditatively working sets of locks on still and silent summer evenings, the desire to travel more of my own country in this way, softly stirring within. I was hooked.

In the years since we have made our life afloat work by renovating and selling on older narrowboats as a way to demonstrate that what is already available on the water can be enough. We are living in an environmentally aware time so it makes sense to work with what we have, and the small profits made have gone to directly support the fundamental needs of this wandering lifestyle, such as insurances, upkeep and fuel, as well as allowing us spells away from the water to enjoy other experiences before seeking out another boat project. My growing online work over the years as a writer, publishing assistant and teacher of writing to home educated children - along with my husband’s ad-hoc contracts as a printer and handyman - have kept us afloat day-to-day, leaving us free to expand our travels to other places and countries, often returning to the same communities to forge long-term bonds by nurturing strong connections to the land and people.

Now our daughter is 18 and embracing her own strides toward independence, and 17 years since we originally embarked on this lifestyle, my husband and I are once again finding our own wandering groove



Alice’s wooden jewellery



LEFT: Alice's daughter takes the helm on the Shropshire Union



Alice and her daughter enjoy travels in Norway in 2010



and currently split time between our 52ft narrowboat on the canals of England, our cottage in the depths of rural France, and stop offs in our tiny self-build campervan 'Shanti' to other places we call home such as Andalucia, Spain, and the Highlands of Scotland. Throughout these years our regular work has also been peppered with other creative endeavours such as making and selling wooden jewellery, handmade from fallen branches along the way, and more recently I have been able to share my path as a devoted yoginī with students from around the world who step virtually onto my narrowboat as well as into various stopping places along the road, for online yoga, meditation and journalling experiences. I also write hold-in-the-hand letters where I share my adventures through pages typed on a 1960s typewriter, sending them to folk who still have an appreciation for old-skool communication.

Ours is not a life for everyone because it is fraught with the unknown and is lived from one day to the next with, often, nothing more than the wholehearted

belief that we are authentically following our true calling. But it is perhaps the continued thrill that is waking up on a windy morning knowing that out there lies an adventure worth experiencing that keeps our feet, hull, and wheels, firmly moving, along with the knowledge that we have found a way to live a life of our own creation. 



Alice Elgie is a nature-loving wandering writer who shares words about her nomadic lifestyle through hold-in-the-hand letters. She also facilitates journalling experiences and records podcasts for Slow Friend subscribers.

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