

FINDING FREEDOM, FRIENDSHIP AND CAKE ON THE CANALS

Tea and Tranquility

Each month 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 meets Claire Marcia Burgoyne and her dogs, Ronnie and Mable, who wander the Aire and Calder Canal popping up their floating cafe as they go.

On a crisp and fresh autumnal day strolling briskly along the towpath, I'm certain there can be nothing that would warm a person up more than the sight of a beautiful purple boat named Elizabeth along with the friendly face of owner, Claire Marcia Burgoyne, poking out of the side hatch with the offer of homemade cake and a cup of freshly ground coffee or healing tea.

The Shanti Tea Boat has been a regular sight on the Aire and Calder Canal since summer 2018 and in those years Claire has been passionate about evolving her skills and vision so as to keep her business happily bobbing along. What started out as an holistic therapy boat with a little gift shop and a few cakes and cuppas on offer, is now a fully-fledged floating cafe with a

25,000 people fanbase. After just a few minutes chatting to Claire it's clear why she's gained such a following. Warm-hearted and open her inner light shines out and despite facing health issues as well as the practical challenges of being a single-handed continuously cruising business, it appears she faces any and all obstacles with cheerful positivity, which it seems is mostly down to the fact that she's passionate about her chosen lifestyle.

When I ask Claire about the story behind her love of the travelling life she is, as expected, frankly honest about how her free spirit stems from a difficult childhood: "I didn't have the best of upbringings as my mum was very disconnected, but up until about three to four years old there was a guy who we thought was our dad. One day mum told us he'd left to go travelling and she would tell us stories about him and the countries he'd been to all over the world. He left a suitcase at our house, which was covered





TOP: Claire at the hatch
LEFT: Claire in her narrowboat kitchen
ABOVE Pomegranate & blueberry cake
BELOW: Feet up in her saloon



in stickers from various countries so he must have already been well travelled and I always kept the suitcase and as a kid, thought he was going to come back for me." It's clear that even from a young age Claire was able to see the positive in every situation as even though this father figure never did return, she hung on to the inspiration he left behind: "I think that's where the travel thing stuck in my head because I didn't really have a connection with my mum, I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere, so I decided I wanted to follow in his footsteps and see the world."

At the age of 15 Claire began that journey by heading to Newquay, "as far as I could get without a passport!" and began scratching out a living travelling and working at festivals. However, by the time she was 17 a very different adventure was about to unfold: "I found out I was pregnant with my daughter, Lucy, so that put a stop to everything for a while. I did all the sensible stuff; secured a good job with social services and bought a house, but I still travelled a lot with my daughter, taking her out of school for spells when she was young and homeschooling her whilst we explored and lived in countries such as Turkey, France and Spain." However, when Lucy headed off to university Claire saw an opportunity to get back to travelling longer-term to further-afield destinations: "I rented my house out and went off to India and South East Asia." Quickly falling back into the rhythm of nomadic living she decided to leave her house rented and break up her travels with occasional months working with young people for an agency in the UK: "I would save as much money as I could before heading off again" Claire tells me. However, it was on one of those trips back to the UK when, staying with her daughter whose house overlooks a river, the possibility of remaining in England was presented: "My daughter looked out of the window at a narrowboat passing by and said, 'Mum that would suit you, living on a boat' and so the seed was planted!"

With Claire's favourite books and programmes as a child being Huckleberry Finn and The Littlest Hobo, it's no surprise that living on a boat appealed. She laughs as she reminisces about how she was "always making dens in the shed or living in the garden for the summer in a tent" and tells me how she's always had this need to be outside in nature. "I knew I didn't want to go back to a house as I'd found I couldn't sleep, feeling wired and agitated with all the electronics, so the thought of living on a boat and being closer to nature made me feel alive."



Claire at the hatch



Autumn outdoor
cafe setting

RIGHT: Another baked delight
BELOW: Ronnie and Mable

Claire finally moved afloat in February 2017, but it wasn't all smooth sailing: "I'd googled, researched, asked lots of questions on narrowboat forums and thought I was prepared however, it was a massive culture shock. It was the thick of winter, really cold and I had no idea what I was doing, but I absolutely loved it!" Claire is open about the ups and downs with her social media followers and her Tales from the Back Deck diaries are a delight to read and watch as she shares snippets of life aboard with her online tribe, although she's equally committed to keeping up with her in-person customers also.

Finding herself so busy with custom that she has little time to relax and chat to those sampling her gorgeous homemade cakes—pumpkin spice loaf, loaded brownie waffle stacks, lemon curd drizzle and pomegranate & blueberry to name a few!—as well as currently struggling with menopause symptoms, Claire recently decided to marry the two and create a new offering. She shares with me: "The menopause came on really suddenly for me and is sending me a little boggled in my head if I'm honest! So I thought it would be nice to connect with other women who are suffering with the same thing. Lately I've been going at 100mph serving people, which is good, because I need my business to make a profit and be viable but I also miss the deeper





Narrowboat Elizabeth

connection I used to have with people when things were less busy. I figured if I launched a women-only coffee morning I'd attract those of a similar mindset and stage in life."

Creating a sense of community is a big part of what Claire is all about and when she had a health shock last year, it was the boating community who came to her rescue. In October of 2024 after a busy summer trading and enjoying life Claire began to feel unwell and by mid-November, whilst also struck down with a debilitating flu, was diagnosed with breast cancer: "I'd never been as poorly in my life with a flu bug and then in the middle of that I was diagnosed and rushed into surgery. This resulted in me being really sick for a number of days after my operation so I went to stay with my daughter and quite a few fellow boaters came together to help me look after my dogs, Ronnie and Mable." Boaty friends took turns in looking after them, as well as

showing up once Claire was back aboard to help her move her boat as she couldn't use the tiller due to her arm being sore following the operation. It all proved to be a stressful time, but somehow she managed to continue opening up throughout, as well as focus forward on a sideline project, Tugboat Ted:

"Last summer me and my friend were talking and we said we should build a raft as I could do with a floating shed/greenhouse so I can grow me own tomatoes and salads." The idea was shelved as Claire couldn't work out how it would be achievable, until that is Tugboat Ted came up for sale at the princely sum of £500. "On a whim I bought him but then I thought, I've no idea what I'm going to do now!" After knocking the top off and employing someone to build a new structure Ted is nearly finished and ready for Claire to begin sowing some simple salads and herbs next spring. She's excited for this new adventure and, as always, can be seen with a smile on her face as she manoeuvres both boats: "He's looking really grand and I can't wait to start sowing, but he's also handy for storage and is a really nice space for sitting in so he's a really useful addition to my life!"

Long term Claire is unsure of what other projects might take shape, but with her affable and warm-hearted personality and inspirational spirit it's clear that as new directions open up she will continue to effortlessly evolve in her chosen lifestyle: "I don't like being 'out there' it's too stressful, too fast and intense. When you're in nature on a boat travelling it's a slower pace, you see seasons change and appreciate what life should be about. Yes it's busy, but you are connected to everything." 

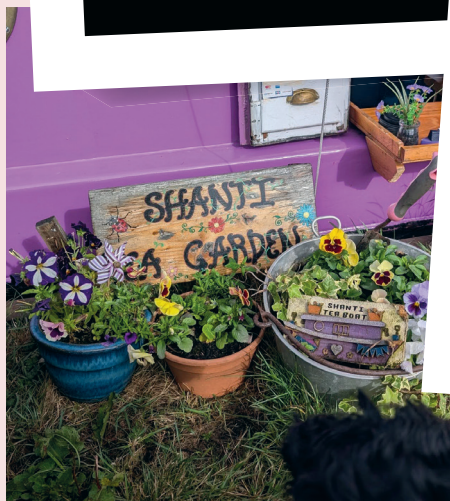
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Alice Elgie is a nature-loving wandering writer who shares words about her nomadic lifestyle through hold-in-the-hand letters. She also facilitates journalling experiences and records podcasts for Slow Friend subscribers.

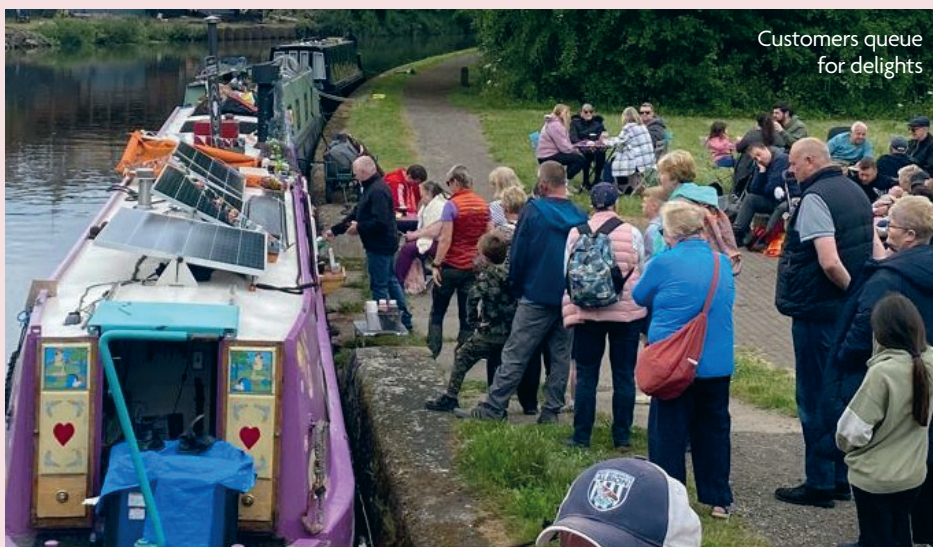
aliceelgiewriter.etsy.com
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Tugboat Ted at night



ABOVE: Customers enjoying the cafe
 LEFT: Shanti Tea garden



Customers queue for delights

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