

CHARACTERS OF THE CUT

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Making waves without leaving a footprint...

For author, environmental campaigner and cyclist Anna Hughes, her lifelong love of water and her turbo-charged low-carbon lifestyle on the canals has kept her happily afloat for 12 years and counting.

By Alice Elgie

"I LOVE living off-grid and the self-sufficiency that boat life brings. All my power comes from the solar panel on my roof, and I have a composting toilet which was the best decision ever - no stinky Elsan, and my poo literally turns into soil, which blows my mind every time. I have always been a very low-carbon person, but boat life is like the turbo-charged version of that!"

Anna's passionate for living in a more sustainable way and is keen to ignite it in others. She says emphatically: "Guys, if you're still running your engine in the summer... come on, get a solar panel, do everyone a favour!"

She also hasn't flown for more than 17 years, and as director of the charity Flight Free UK, she encourages others to do the same. "Flight Free UK encourages people to travel without flying. We educate the public about the climate impact of aviation and give information and inspiration for travelling by other means. Not everybody flies, but for those who do, flights are likely to make up the



biggest chunk of your carbon footprint."

She certainly walks (or runs and cycles) her talk too, recently completing a 'parkrun alphabet' without a car or a plane. This entailed travelling to park runs up and down the country by foot, bike, and public transport, as well as via boat and train to the Netherlands for her final Z run. "One of the things I love about running is its simplicity - head out of the door and go where your legs

take you. There's very little kit needed, and importantly for a sustainability professional like me, there's very little impact on the planet. I have tried to keep to that ethos as I've got more into parkrun, usually running or riding my bike to get there."

It's a good job Anna likes cycling... she certainly proved it after travelling 4000 miles around the coast of Britain in 2011, an adventure published in her first book, Eat, Sleep, Cycle. She has since published two more books, Pedal



Power and Peak Climbers.

However, it's the calmness and comfort of her narrowboat home that provides a retreat between the action, and it is also Anna's perfect workspace. "Working from home is very enriching because I have nature around all the time, and the water is a very calming influence. I love all the bird life, and I get to see kingfishers, which is always a treat. The community is open and helpful, which is wonderful - no matter your background, you all have boats in common, and that's a lovely leveller."

As a continuous cruiser aboard 1983 56' Slow Gin, Anna spends most of her time on the River Lea, east of London, cruising the full length from Hertford down to Limehouse,

Alice Elgie is a writer who shares words about her nature-infused lifestyle through recorded reflections and seasonal hold-in-the-hand letters: aliceelgie.com

Website:
www.annacycles.co.uk
www.flightfree.co.uk

although on occasion she has ventured further afield. "I've been up the River Stort a couple of times and the River Thames as far as Windsor before coming back. A few years ago, I cruised from London to Bristol over two weeks along the Kennet and Avon, spent a year moored out that way, and came back to London."

"I spent one springtime just outside Bath, by Warleigh Weir, and every time I cycled home, it took my breath away. You have the Avon at the bottom of the

gorge, then the railway line, then the canal carved into the hillside, and then you on the road above with fantastic views. It is without doubt the most beautiful place I have ever moored."

Not everything is beautiful, though, with damp clothes in winter, feeling like you're stuck in a greenhouse in summer, and flies in the toilet all being what Anna calls "the not so nice parts" of narrowboat life. But the magic of the waterways, walkways and cycleways are enough to cancel out the downsides and will gently nourish Anna's low-carbon lifestyle for many years to come!

