

NARROW ESCAPISM

BY JENNIFER RATCLIFFE | BEECHWOOD, UK

"THIS IS A NICE SPOT" Tall stems of corn glow in low light. The air is a mix of farmland, diesel, and flowing water. At the horizon stands a large Elizabethan style house with just one light beaming out, mingling with the melting sunset. I jump as the floor moves beneath me, the gruff rope beneath our fingertips cradling both our landings. The chug-a-chug lulling us here fades, then silence. This is our life now, finding the best view and enjoying it.

There are some other parts of this new life too; fighting with engines, running along small ledges over high drops of water, emptying toilets, scrubbing decks and oh, so much renovation work to do. Welcome to our mobile tiny home: 23ft of indoor living space within 40ft of narrowboat. After months of isolation it might seem a little mad to embrace even more difficult circumstances. For me and my partner, after months of separation it feels like we're living again. Something to sink our teeth into, the flavour of this phase: challenging with a dash of freedom and lashings of cozy.

We've spent the past decade travelling the world and needed some downtime in our home country, but it would seem the nomads within us couldn't help getting creative. 2020 might just be the year of the staycation, the year where we all suddenly discover that waterfall one town over, the local art piece that attracts world visitors or that those historic roots beneath you are worth excavating. For us it is starting our life as shipmates and bumbling DIYers.

Why a boat? I hear you ask. We aren't sailors, but we just happen to live in the UK. This country has many land laws for tiny home living such as expensive property and a lot of water. For us, when it comes down to it, a van or a boat are the most accessible options here (with narrow boats being ever so slightly bigger). Some go for wider boats like beautiful Dutch Barges but these boats are too wide to cruise all the canals and part of this journey is the journeying itself. The waterways cover a vast majority of the UK, most of which are connected with some a little harder to get to (the Irish Sea being one of the obstacles). They embrace a slow pace of life and a need for minimalism (my Ebay account has been soaring declutter lately). The world has been declared a bit of a mess when it comes to housing, pace and belongings, so minimizing our impact on Earth whilst living leisurely discovering our country compelled us to jump in head first...

Neither of us have ever owned a car and I don't even have a license. So to say we might have moved hastily would be precise. Who knew there was a whole community waiting for us at the edge of the towpath? Soap boats, rope makers, plant growers, coalmen and more.

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If you need fuel- ring the coal boat, if you need advice- talk to anyone around. We spent our first day on board surrounded by a circle of Johns. Literally a crowd of people named John. We have yet to see a vessel named John, but owners are plentiful. John was a passing floating mechanic, Other-John was a passing long-term boater, Other-Other John possibly was born on a boat and simply never left. There was a great five minutes where those hard of hearing couldn't understand who owned what boat or where. "Whaaaaat? Speak up" became a household phrase. All in the aid of our non-moving boat and about twenty pages of general boating advice that I'll read for years to come. Later that week we met another John (dubbed John-of all trades) who helped us get ticking again.

The UK has a long history of canals and the present boom in living aboard is just one of the latest in its legacy. In the 1700s it was an innovative trading transportation, in the 1970's an attractive holiday attraction. Now the generation of double-recession-before-30 year-olds are creating a home influx. My family even has ties to the canals too. Just yesterday I was pestering my Dad on how to make fenders from rope. Once we were on the boat it became clear that we were going to be a short story in its life rather than the other way around. So as I watch the water and light work together to make patterns on my ceilings, I see how my home and I are working together in the same way. Giving each other the power of movement.

Life in the slow lane is a welcome change to the hustle and bustle of daily living. The best thing about a narrowboat is that you have a choice of where to be. The speed limit being 4mph means no one is going anywhere fast. You can, however, still choose to be a part of a buzzing hive if you want to by staying in the city. If that's the antithesis of what you want then keep gliding and take to the countryside. Both have plenty of options for being close to the pub and work. Officially speaking you have to travel just 20 miles in a year to be considered continuous cruisers like ourselves. So, if the wind changes, turn the key and go.

There is a symbiotic flow between a boat and life. All roads are liquid, when you sail, small ripples appear all around you. The ducks bob up and down, the trees wave as you pass. Nature dances to the tune of your whims and at times you reciprocate; preparing for a storm, igniting a fire and breaking ice at the bow. Your effect on this world is seen, heard and made room for. So you watch the world back and return in kind. If the water is still then so am I. A small change can be powerful enough to ricochet through every part of life.

We've currently crossed two canals and one border. Before the New Year we will venture further, experience the leaves falling above us and the snow enveloping us into darkness. This will all be happening whilst we keep wandering, keep exploring. The biggest change between living on board and living on land is the acknowledgement of this. That time isn't standing still, but neither are you. Perhaps we shouldn't venture far because of the current state of affairs, or perhaps it is the opposite? I often say to be romantic about your life, it is your one and only. This right here, a little imperfect, a little unknown, feels like a blossoming romance to me.

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