

LIFE ON THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

AFTER MONTHS AT HOME, IT'S A JOY TO GET AWAY FOR THE WEEKEND. GISELLE WHITEAKER EXPLORES LIFE ON THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW.

There are currently around 3,000 miles of navigable canals and rivers throughout the United Kingdom. The speed limit on the canals is 4 miles an hour. That's 750 hours of top-speed cruising, not taking into account the time spent at locks, meal breaks or slowing down for fishermen, and busy mooring spots. We only have a weekend aboard Selene, a 49-foot narrowboat arranged through Drifters Waterway Holidays. I don't see us getting very far – but that's almost the point.

It's been a long, tedious lockdown, and my boyfriend Elio and I are keen to escape the confines of home while the rules have been eased. At the same time, we want to be safe. A boat drifting along the canal seems like the perfect way to maintain social distancing while having an adventure.

When we arrive at Braunston in Northamptonshire, we are greeted by Heather Duncan and Tim Hewitt of Union Canal Carriers, part of the Drifters family. This is a provider with a pedigree – Union Canal Carriers is a family business that has been in Braunston village for around 50 years. Born in the dying days of the carrying trade on the Grand Union and Oxford Canals, Union Canal Carriers pioneered narrowboating for pleasure, starting with camping boats in 1968. Fast-forward to today and the family operates a fleet of boats that have all been built in Braunston, fitted out by Tim and upholstered and marketed by Heather. The pair speak so affectionately about the boats that it's hard to believe we are being trusted to skipper one.





Fridge loaded and safety checks done, Tim and Heather supervise us through the first lock. This is as far as we'll go this evening. Our real start is tomorrow, where we'll need to do it all ourselves. There's a lot to remember – our heads are whirling with information, but a glass of crisp white wine calms the nerves and we relax into river life.

We're up bright and early in the morning and after a quick breakfast, we cast off, pushing smoothly away from the bank. We've timed our run well – another boat is pulling into the lock as we arrive, allowing us to share the workload. I'm at the tiller and manage to glide in next to them with nary a bump and watch Elio cranking the paddles open, the water rushing into the lock. It fills quickly and I'm soon on my way, chugging slowly along the canal as Elio strides along the towpath to prepare the next lock.

There's a queue at this one, so I pull in to the bank with only a small jolt and jump off the side with the centre rope to hold Selene steady while we wait. Elio joins me and we chat with the skippers ahead and behind. It's delightfully social and we feel welcomed into the river community.

We share the next few locks with a young couple from London, who live permanently on board. Hayley grew weary of London rent two years back, investing in her floating home. Adam joined her a year later and now the pair traverse the waterways, moving every two weeks. A small vegetable garden grows on the roof of the boat, next to the solar panels that provide power. "Do it," Hayley says, when I tell her it's something I'd consider.

At the top of Braunston Locks, Elio joins me onboard and we meander down the canal, brushing through weeping willows that reach towards the water's surface. Boaters headed the other way raise their hands in greeting, like long-lost friends. We can't stop smiling.



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Our next challenge soon appears: a small opening up ahead. This is Braunston Tunnel, which stretches around 1.8 miles, carrying the canal under high ground. The far end is a mere dot of light in the inky blackness, our headlight illuminating a small section ahead as we squint into the dark, hoping not to meet another vessel. There is room for two boats to pass, but it's a tight squeeze. Our journey is slow and mesmerising, the only sound the swirl of water marking our passage. Half an hour later, we emerge into the day, blinking in the light.

We warm ourselves with coffee as we continue on our winding way, taking turns at the tiller. The world seems to slow as we spot ducks frolicking by the banks, their ripples cutting across our prow. We pass cottages tucked under trees, lambs in a riverside paddock and we squeeze through narrow arches under bridges. Then we reach our next flight of locks. Where before we were climbing, now we are descending. We share all seven locks, our new friends Tracy and Andy transferring their knowledge as they return home after a few weeks on the water.

Waving farewell, we pull in for a late lunch before continuing on our way, no fixed destination in mind. When we tire, we moor and settle in for the evening, a





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flotilla of ducks paddling by to see if we are willing to share our dinner. The next day, we find a winding hole and turn around, returning from whence we came. We find ourselves alone in the locks, putting our newfound knowledge to the test. Elio scurries back and forth to open the gates, close the gates, open the sluices, open the paddles, close the sluices, close the paddles, open the gates and close the gates. Boating is a good workout.

We've had three nights aboard Selene and we know it's not enough. We may not be ready to move onboard permanently yet, but we're eager for more. Life on the straight and narrow has never had so much appeal.



INFO

Drifters Waterway Holidays offers 550 canal boats for hire from 45 bases across England, Scotland and Wales. Drifters' 2020 hire prices start at £560 for a short break (three or four nights) on a boat for four people, £725 for a week. Narrowboats range in size, providing accommodation for up to 12 people. Tuition is included. For more information, visit www.drifters.co.uk.

Prices for Selene start at £630 for a short break or £870 for a week. See www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk.

For more information about visiting the canals, see www.canalrivertrust.org.uk