

Life on the Cut

Projectile excrement, dodgy deals and bizarre characters – Josh McLoughlin reveals life as a continuous cruiser on London's waterways.

When I moved to London in 2015, my ex and I crammed into her aunty's box room in Hackney 'until we found our feet'. Each day, we walked along Regent's Canal, fascinated by the boats huddled along the towpath. We were soon obsessed with the idea of living aboard. The trouble was, we were skint.

Enter Uncle Dodgy. I knew he was eccentric – part oddball, part cool guy, part shifty – but I didn't see this coming. He would buy a boat, my ex and I could live aboard, and he would sell it when London inevitably spat us out and I returned to Merseyside muttering darkly about life 'down there'.

I had misgivings but recalled what my granddad told me all those years ago, as we watched the model frigates on the lake at Southport Pontins: 'You don't look a gift boat in the mouth, Josh – remember that. Now run along and get your granddad twenty Benson & Hedges Gold, there's a good lad'.

Soon my ex and I were browsing Apollo Duck – *Auto Trader* for boats – the way posh people browse Knight Frank: with genuine purpose and a glut of undeserved family cash to spend.

We fell in love with a Dutch barge moored at Hampton Wick. György, its gregarious Hungarian owner, welcomed us with open arms, followed immediately by a question: 'Pay cash?' We poked around. 'We'll take it', I said confidently, as if I knew anything about boats.

Uncle Dodgy arrived sporting a rogue's grin, thick sunglasses, trilby and a ludicrous Spongebob Squarepants school bag stuffed with crumpled twenties. He handed it over and skinned a celebratory joint.

After counting more money than I'd ever seen in my life, György disappeared with the sack full of cash and wink in his eye. Looking back, it was the perfect introduction to boat life: eccentric characters ostensibly shady, but friendly enough – loitering on the murky fringes of society.

Piloting a boat for the first time is a sublime experience – beautiful and terrifying – because there is no requirement to pass a test. Within minutes I was motoring along the Thames on the verge

of crashing into Kingston Bridge and killing everyone on board.

Luckily, we had Paul. A weathered, ancient, chainsmoking old boy recommended by György, Paul was a first-mate-for-hire to chaperone new boaters during their nervous first days aboard. 'As far as the Thames Lock at Brentford – no further', he warned in a Cockney snarl.

Paul kept a watchful eye on me at the tiller by day and at dusk mounted a BMW before peddling away. He returned at dawn smelling like he'd spent his £50 day rate (non-negotiable, he insisted) on booze and cigarettes.

True to his word, Paul left us for the last time at Brentford, where the Thames meets the Grand Union canal. 'Don't forget your license', Paul quipped, bunny-hopping on to the towpath and heading for the nearest Spoons, never to be seen (by me) again.

There are two types of boat license administered by the Canal & River, a charity with deep-rooted delusions of authoritarianism. Boaters either live on a marina with a 'residential' license – the boating equivalent of owning a flat in Cheyne Walk – or they are 'continuous cruisers', which is unfortunately not the sex odyssey it suggests.

Continuous cruisers have to move their boat every fortnight and navigate at least 20 miles over the annual license period. 'Shuffling' back and forth between a few spots not only earns you opprobrium from fellow boaters via an ill-tempered Facebook group, but also risks official censure.

The Canal & River Trust can reduce or revoke your license if you do not cruise continuously. Our first year took us from Brentford to Broxbourne – but we still received a totalitarian letter warning against 'non-compliance', threatening 'license termination', and suggesting we refer to the Transport Act 1962 for re-education.

Cruising allows you 'live' in posh bits of London you can never afford, like Little Venice, Maida Vale, and Angel, or cool bits you could never afford, like Broadway Market, Victoria Park, and

Hackney Wick. But you have to do hard time in London's benighted yet still unaffordable hinterlands, like Northolt and Ponder's End.

As far as creature comforts and facilities go, boat life falls somewhere between rough sleeping-asceticism and luxury Airbnb, depending on your budget.

Most boats have Elsan toilets. That means regularly lugging a 25-litre cassette filled with your excrement to one of the few unholy (and frequently blocked) gigantic dunnies at certain locks. There you hold your breath, release the pressurised gasses and blast the foul-smelling projectile sludge into a drain of hell.

Accordingly, many boaters do their business elsewhere: work, the gym, anxiously in a pub cubicle – anywhere but the boat will do.

Kitchen-wise, we made do with a hob and 'nature's fridge' (putting food outside) but many boaters have ovens, fridge-freezers, and even washing machines.

Electricity is supplied by 12v leisure batteries charged with solar panels, a generator or the engine. If the batteries go flat, you are up shit creek – so boaters quickly learn to minimise unnecessary energy use.

Heat, the most precious commodity between September and May, is generated the old-fashioned way: wood, coal or diesel-burning stoves. On a boat, there are only extremes: you're either too hot because of the roaring fire or too cold because heat soon dissipates, leaving you shivering in an uninsulated metal tube half-submerged in bitterly cold water.

As on land, boat life is populated by distinctive tribes and riven with social conflict. First, the old guard: hardened boaters who've lived aboard in London for 20 or 30 years, never missing an opportunity to tell you about 'back when' the canals were deserted and you could loiter in Camden for months on end.

Predictably, they hate the recent influx of younger new boaters, seen as contemptible dilettantes barely able to tie a shoelace, never mind a mooring

hitch. Many of the old guard are in the classic hippie or punk mould, covered in tattoos or exuding a haze of kush and Nag Champa as they glide by.

London's waterways are populated by these fascinating, bizarre characters. Johnny Diesel is a grizzled but affable sea dog from Barking who delivers fuel, day or night, to boaters in need.

Fearsome balding geezers, donning flat caps like *Peaky Blinders* extras, operate the coal and gas barges. Bestriding titanic craft that slug slowly up the Lea bloated with explosive cargo, they announce their wares in indistinguishable booming vowels. A terrifying Cockney called Mickey turned up to service our engine with a toolbox and a five-inch scar on his neck.

Many down-on-their-luck types, divorcees, and addicts live on cruisers: tiny leisure boats, not designed as live-aboards and dubbed 'yoghurt pots' on account of their white fibreglass hulls and perilous flimsiness.

The 'New London Boaters' are a mixed group. Some are students, arty or literary types drawn to unorthodox accommodation; others are trust fund kids treating London as a wet playground, killing time until their inheritance kicks in.

Of course, there are high-earning young professionals with vulgar, oversized, £150,000 McMansion 'widebeams', usually painted in a distinctive shade of what has come to be known on the canals as 'cunt grey' (see glossary). On water, as on land, everyone hates yuppies.

My ex and I lived aboard for two years before breaking up. I returned to reality, wondering what it all meant. Was it a dream? Uncle Dodgy and his Spongebob bag of cash, György the Hungarian boat dealer, Paul the BMXing ghoul of the Thames, the ageing punks and hippies, Johnny Diesel, the Fuel Geezers, and Mickey the Neck – were they all fancies of my imagination?

Or was I an unwitting Truman Burbank in a Guy Ritchie-themed imaginary London, floundering for the amusement of middle England?

Either way, boat life left a permanent impression. I remain grateful for essential conveniences like running water, warmth, and a static residence.

Most of all, however, I maintain a staunch, continuous cruiser state of mind: itinerant, a little eccentric, and obsessed with battery life – but that sex odyssey continues to elude me.

Beam

a boat's width, hence 'widebeam' (see: 'cunt grey') for double-width craft

Canal & River Distrust

term used by boaters angry at the overbearing policies and jobsworth enforcement of the Canal & River Trust

Continuous cruiser

boaters with no residential mooring, who therefore move their boat every two weeks (also known as 'cc-ers')

Cunt grey

the distinctive shade of gauche grey favoured by nouveau riche owners of new, oversized, and universally loathed widebeams

Cut

the canal

Day-tripper

pejorative term for person or persons – work outings, stag dos, twat reunions – hiring a boat for the day, usually with no idea how to steer it

Drink

the canal, esp. used of someone or something falling into the water

Flight

a gruelling series of locks in quick succession, such as those at Hanwell

Gongoozler

a person who stands, gawks, and points at passing boats; famous locks, such as Camden, draw large crowds of *gongoozlers*

Project Kraken

the division of the Metropolitan Police responsible for the waterways, where crime is rife

London Boaters

denoting both the city's boaters and the eponymous Facebook group, a rancorous forum of gossip, naming and shaming, DIY squabbles, and simmering resentment from the old guard

New London Boaters

designating both recent arrivals to London's canals and the 'safe space' alternative to the 'London Boaters' Facebook group

Troll

boat moored under or near a bridge; a canal faux pas disallowed by the Canal and River Trust

Village butty

floating community centre for London boaters and canal users (a 'BUTTY' is any unpowered boat), hosting workshops, social events, clubs, and performances

Yoghurt pot

Small, white, dangerously flimsy fibreglass cruisers