

## Try Before You Buy a Narrowboat Case Study

– Matt and Julie Collins January 2025



We are considering selling up and buying a narrowboat to become year-round liveaboards. Now, some may say we have had an awakening and are about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime, but others might say we are having a mid-life crisis!

So last Autumn we decided to hire a narrowboat for a midweek break for a few nights to dip our toes in the water, thankfully not literally! We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves and felt it could be the life for us.

But a few nights break is an entirely different proposition to day-to-day life, handling all that living on a boat entails whilst still working full time. So, we set our sights on a longer-term boat hire option and was merrily on our way with our plan and making our enquiries when we happened to get in touch with Aston Marina to see if they had any mooring spots available so we could experience a bit of marina life.

Their answer was yes, but have you thought about '**CanalScapes try before you buy experience**' instead?

With that, we were deftly redirected to a different proposition, one which had not considered or even knew existed. We contacted CanalScapes, and Mark and Deb were responsive and supportive of our needs – two adults and two cats to live on a boat for three weeks please! Mark invited us down to the marina to view the CanalScapes flagship, Pendelvin Gypsy. She is a 62ft traditional style narrowboat with a beautiful and cosy interior, an engine room and a boatman's cabin. We can't thank Mark enough for his time on that cold and drizzly day to show us the boat and give us a tour of the marina. Mark is a boater and his enthusiasm for life on the canals is obvious, and infectious. The mission of CanalScapes is to offer experiences of canal life to others and allow them to develop their own love for the inland waterways.

We also had the pleasure of meeting the marina manager, Nick Scott, who was also very friendly and supportive. Nick took time out of his day to show us some of the narrowboats for sale so we could have the opportunity to see a few different styles of boats in different price ranges.

The personal touch of CanalScapes was first rate and we felt very much looked after even though we were still at the enquiry stage. After some further dialogue to confirm the finer details, we made the decision to book Pendelvin Gypsy for three weeks for the early part of January. On the morning of moving in, Mark was there to offer support and give us a thorough tour of the boat systems and how to use them. We were all moved in by early afternoon and

toasty warm due to the diesel stove. To our delight, Mark had modified the bed area to create a functional cross bed, which was a huge improvement. The following days saw some very cold weather, so much so that the marina froze over. Over the days we spent aboard, we had subzero temperatures, strong winds and heavy rain. Throughout it all the boat was a warm, comfortable and pleasurable place to be.

We had to take some time to adjust to boat life, and figure out how to live in tight conditions, planning activities to account for the limitations of a boat, namely space, volume of hot water, regulating boat temperature and cooking / eating. We cooked meals every night bar two, and as one of us is a home worker, we also utilised the boat daily for work purposes, and lunch preparation. The diesel stove was a marvel, but even on the lowest setting it was so efficient that we had to keep opening the bow doors to cool off! A very minor price to pay for the benefit of a warm boat but opening the bow doors was not always practical for one reason or another and so sometimes it was just a bit too warm.

The television, whilst much smaller than we are used to, was the right size for the space and worked flawlessly throughout. We also bought our own streaming stick which also worked very well thanks to the ~30mbps internet on the boat. Indeed, over three weeks the internet was used for business video calls, emails and streaming of video content with only one minor technical issue that Mark rectified in an hour or so.

Next there is what we affectionally called “fun times at the Elsan”. Having lived on land all our lives, the concept of a cassette toilet was curious, and alien to us. Nevertheless, boat life demands attention to waste, and we were not there to shy away from the challenge of emptying cassettes, solids and all! Splashback took on a whole new meaning!

It has to be said the facilities at Aston Marina were very clean and there was always enough blue-roll consumables and soap/sanitizer available to help in the process. The marina staff and boaters kept the Elsan in tip top condition, and we accept that may not always be the case whilst out on the cut! We were filling a cassette every 48hrs so planning for this was part of our general adjustment to boat life. As an aside, the staff at Aston Marina are superb. Friendly, knowledgeable and helpful – nothing is too much trouble.

Food storage was another adjustment. I suspect we are like most land lovers in as much as we are used to having acres of fridge and freezer space at home. The boat had an undercounter fridge with a freezer box inside and in total the fridge / freezer constituted perhaps one quarter of the storage volume we are used to. But the world didn't end, we just adjusted! We selected meat products with longer dates, restricted frozen items to chips and peas and tried to have as much fresh veg in one of the cupboards as possible. We cooked a range of meals such as a couple of Sunday roasts, spaghetti bolognese, chili con carne, fish chips and mushy peas and Mexican fajitas as some examples. Cooking in a smaller gas oven was a challenge, and in particular the long-forgotten notion (for us) of the bottom of the cooker being cooler than the top. Like many others, we have one of those electric cookers that distributes heat evenly throughout the cooker, so swapping food around from top to bottom to ensure even cooking caught us out the first time, but as with everything else, we adapted.

Movement around the boat was restricted due to the nature of it being a narrow boat, so we established two passing places that worked very well, and we just communicated with each other. Another feature of narrow boats is they rock side to side. Movement of one adult somewhere else on the boat has the potential for the other unsuspecting adult to be caught out. There were several instances of being caught off guard whilst balanced on one foot putting a sock on!

Initially, sleeping was a fraught affair. Afterall, you are trying to sleep in an unfamiliar environment that floats and anything that floats has the potential to sink! So, are those dripping sounds normal, and furthermore are they outside or inside the boat? Some noise related anxiety in the first night or two, but happily it settled down once we established the noises were indeed normal and invariably outside of the boat, even if they sounded otherwise.

Washing clothes was another life adjustment. The boat has a fully functioning washing machine which we made good use of, and the marina also has a launderette, which we also tried. Washing clothes was no issue but getting them dry again was another matter. Space is limited on a boat, but nevertheless we discovered some creative ways to hang washing to help it dry. We also tried the dryers in the marina launderette and not being used to tumble drying washing, some items of clothing came out child sized. Ooops!

Cats! Whoever thought bringing two mature and set in their ways cats onto a narrowboat was a good idea? Well, nobody most likely and least of all us, but they are part of this journey as much as we are, so along they came for the ride! Our advice to anyone with cats who does not already have one is get a stove! Our cats were literally unconscious for most of the three weeks, other than eating and toileting. But seriously, having cats aboard added another level of planning and activities to handle feeding times, 2am zoomies and litter tray related shenanigans. Fortunately, the boat has a big bow and we could keep the litter trays out there for most of the time. But litter tracks, and boats are quite small relatively speaking, so sweeping and Hoovering was required several times a day to keep the boat tidy. We established a fun game where one of us would empty the litter trays and then try and guess how long it would be before one of the cats christened it again. For the record, at one point we had a cat in each litter tray within 15 seconds. They both looked incredibly smug with their feline revenge tactics. We put little harnesses on them and tried taking them outside for walks on a lead like a dog. It was clearly for their safety, but evidently, they did not agree with our risk assessment and went out of their way to rebel!

So how was our three weeks aboard Pendelvin Gypsy? Are you expecting superlatives like outstanding, amazing, perfect? Honestly, it was stressful and challenging, at least for the first 7-10 days until we adjusted and got into our own rhythm. That isn't any fault of the boat, but I suspect more of a natural period of adaptation required for such an upheaval in our life.

After a while we settled into the new version of what our lives might be, and importantly CanalScapes and Pendelvin Gypsy allowed us to experience living aboard and start the process of establishing what was important for us, and not so important, which has been invaluable. We have learned so much about living on a boat, and about ourselves and we are grateful for the try before you buy experience that CanalScapes has given us. Coupled with great customer service, a beautiful boat and the enthusiastic and supporting owners (Mark and Deb), the CanalScapes experience is a winning combination.

## **So what have we learned?**

- Prepare to bump your head, a lot!
- Emptying cassettes is a little unsavoury but not all that bad. Carrying them from the bathroom to the bow and onto a trolley on the jetty was probably the hardest part as they weigh a fair amount when full.
- A specific set of clothes for visiting the Elsan is a good idea, and maybe an apron! But we might have just been doing it wrong. Also watch out for the slider on the top of the cassette. Despite our best efforts, and warnings from Mark, one nearly slid out and could have gone down the Elsan.
- When cooking in a compact gas fired boat cooker, add 20 degrees Celsius to the cooking temperatures you are used to, and probably an extra 20 mins time (sometimes more) - and remember to rotate your food!
- Learning to turn off the shower to wash and then turn it on again to rinse is a must to avoid running out of hot water. Certainly, a balance needs to be made between water flow rate and calorifier volume.
- Learning calorifier reheat times is useful to plan showering and washing up activity.
- Changing a gas bottle in the dark on a wet bow is fraught with peril, but safely achievable if you are careful.
- Cats can be mischievous and spiteful creatures!
- Prioritise your bed because boat life becomes more stressful when you are tired, so good sleep is a must.
- A dishwasher has been sorely missed!
- Teamwork makes the dream work. Granted it's a common trope, but nonetheless it seems more relevant to boat life somehow.
- We now know we can adapt to living on a boat and make it work, the challenge will be finding the right boat!

## **What have we enjoyed?**

- The view from the stern across the marina during early morning.
- The view from the stern at sunset when the sky is clear.
- The happy feeling you get when you have taken your rubbish, emptied your cassettes and are sat in front of the TV with a nice beverage and a hot stove.
- How the experience has taught us what we can do without, and still have a relatively content and happy life.
- How dark the boat is when the bungs are in. Inky black dark, and no light pollution compared to a typical house surrounded by street lighting.
- Chatting with other boaters and the marina staff about life in general and boating.
- How much quicker "housework" is on a boat compared to a house.
- The Pendelvin Gypsy. Whilst she probably wouldn't be the sort of boat we would look to buy, she is a cracking boat, full of charm and character, very comfortable and warm, and a pleasure to spend time in (once we got our heads around it all). She has also been completely reliable, and we have had no drama at all.
- Working from the boat and listening to the wildlife nearby.
- Knowing we made it work and feel more confident in tackling life afloat for real.

## What haven't we enjoyed so much?

- Banging heads on things. It's just a learning curve but a painful one.
- Emptying cassettes in the freezing cold. Well, just emptying cassettes in general really.
- Running out of gas when cooking a sausage dinner and not realising, resulting in a bottle change in the freezing cold and wet, and a much-delayed dinner! Again, a one off and a lesson to keep your eye on things. Boat life requires a more attentive approach.
- Working from the boat has been possible but the setup is not as good as at home (multiple monitors etc). Clearly we are not comparing apples with apples and it is in no way a criticism of Pendelvin Gypsy, but it is something for home workers to consider if they prefer (or need) to work in a certain way. We feel that, for us, home working space needs to be a separate and contained space that does not capitalise the boat or prevent its normal use day to day.
- Managing cats, specifically their litter trays and the associated tracking issues. Sweeping and hoovering several times a day was required. Also, their reticence to engage with the outdoors when on harnesses meant they were couped up for most of the three weeks and that felt a little unfair. We want them to remain safe as they are getting on a bit and mistiming jump is a natural side effect, which around water is more of an issue. We also want to respect other boaters and not have our cats inviting themselves onto other people's boats. The other issue is people generally don't expect to see cats on a marina jetty or in the marina grounds generally.
- Showering. It's just felt like a faff. Perfectly doable but having to shower to a schedule because of limited hot water feels like a big step backwards compared to living in a house. Definitely a sacrifice that must be made to pursue the lifestyle, though (unless you are lucky to have an older boat with a gas fired water heater). Gas fired water heaters exist for a reason and we are at a loss as to why such systems are now "not allowed" on narrowboats despite their excellent safety record. For us, it's a big drawback, but again an adjustment in order to live the boat life.

What is our conclusion? Well, ultimately boat life is still something we would like to pursue, but as with most things, it will need to be right for us. The boat layout and features will be essential to get right for us personally to make the move to permanently living aboard. But the living aboard part is only one aspect of a bigger picture, and some other points are the pleasure cruising brings and the short-term financial benefits of being mortgage free. Also, we need to sell the house first which in the current financial climate is perhaps the biggest challenge of all!

We accept we would be replacing an appreciating asset with a depreciating one and are prepared to face the consequences of doing so. The truth is one or neither of us may live to reap the benefits of the house in later life. When so many around us are dealing with illness or bereavement the notion of making each day count comes into stark relief. Enjoying life and making memories whilst we can feels like a valuable thing to do.

**Disclaimer:** Aston Marina has a strict no residential mooring policy, with a maximum of 120 days stay a year. Therefore, you are able to sample life aboard a boat with CanalScapes but would not be able to do so full time at Aston. Other marinas in the area do offer such a facility.