

TWO US CITIES AND THE NEW YORK STATE CANAL SYSTEM

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We bought *Quilcene* in 2006 to replace our beloved Contessa 32 and provide more living space for our 'big trip'. She's a cutter-rigged Bowman 40 built to Lloyds A1, and a good bluewater yacht. Since 2007 she has taken us from Plymouth to the Mediterranean, where we lived aboard for eight years, dropped the hook in 13 countries, and visited 44 Greek islands! We left the Med in 2013 to sail down to the Canary and Cape Verde islands, then across the Atlantic to Suriname, South America in 2014 (our OCC qualifying passage), and north from there up through the Caribbean Islands, Virgin Islands, Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Cuba and to the East Coast of the USA. We decided on a different type of cruising for 2017 – mostly on rivers, canals and lakes. (photo 01)

Leaving Deltaville, Virginia in early April we sailed *Quilcene* north up the Chesapeake Bay and into the Potomac River, following the river inland from its 12-mile wide mouth, and taking two days to reach Washington DC. Mostly we stuck to the buoyed shipping channel, taking advantage of flood tides. Once into the river we tentatively picked our way through the crab pots that seemed to be everywhere into The Glebe, a pretty creek on the south bank, to anchor for the first night. Next day we continued upriver, again following the buoyed channel. The air appeared a bit hazy, but we soon realised that it was due to clouds of pollen dust blowing up from the trees and across the river. I have never suffered from hay fever, but this had me sneezing with my eyes watering.



*Quilcene on the
dock at Deltaville*



The chart showed that we were approaching the Dahlgren military firing range so Kit called them up on VHF to check it was OK to pass. A very polite young man told us there would be firing and requested that we keep to the north side of the river. Naturally we complied, but were a little sceptical about the firing as all was peaceful. How wrong can you be – sudden deafening booms rang out and we almost jumped out of our skins! Coastguard and military vessels were out in force and no doubt monitored our progress through the zone. We spent the second night anchored at the side of the river. Reports had suggested that we might be disturbed by the wake of other traffic, but we actually saw few other vessels with the exception of the military. We managed to sail a little in the lower reaches, but finally had to resort to the motor.

The Potomac can be quite lumpy at times, especially in narrow stretches where a strong northerly created wind-over-tide effects that saw us bashing into the chop – most uncomfortable! Luckily it didn't last too long and the final stretches were relatively quiet. The scenery is lovely with beautiful wooded banks – just south of DC we passed Mount Vernon, the historic house where George Washington lived with his wife Martha in the 1700s. Lots of tourists wandered in the grounds and we felt privileged to have a great view of the house from the river.

As far away as Alexandria, five miles downriver from DC, we could see the tall Washington Monument and the dome of Capitol Hill. The final approach to DC is also the approach for Ronald Reagan Airport, and planes flew noisily overhead as we made our way into the Washington Channel and picked up a mooring buoy just off the waterfront. The Washington Monument towered above the buildings to one side, balanced by the green swathe of East Potomac Park and golf course on the other. The riverside edges of the park, including some of the paths, disappeared underwater when we experienced a high spring tide a few days later – apparently this has become a regular occurrence over recent years.

We paid US \$35 per night for the mooring, but we were close to the centre of DC and in a great place to base ourselves for checking out the museums and galleries on the city's National Mall – most of which have free entry! Shortly after arrival we were invited to the Capital Yacht Club for drinks and supper by Scott Berg, who'd noticed our OCC burgee. Scott used to be a Commodore in the Seven Seas Cruising Association, and since our visit has become OCC Port Officer for Washington. Scott and his wife Freddi were very welcoming and helpful during our stay, and kindly assisted us with a battery problem. Our OCC burgee was often recognised, and through it we met some wonderful people as we travelled up the East Coast of the US.



*An osprey nesting on
a starboard hand buoy*

*The Washington Monument
from our Washington
Channel mooring*



We really enjoyed Washington DC, taking our time and visiting a few of the principal attractions each day. The weather was quite changeable with sunny hot days interspersed with wet grey days – a bit like the UK but warmer when the sun shone. We'd arrived just in time for the Cherry Blossom Festival, although there'd been a waterspout through the basin the previous week that had stripped all the blossom from the trees. The festival was a small affair on the waterfront with lots of food stalls and a couple of bands, but the fireworks were spectacular and we had a great view from the boat.

The National Mall stretches two miles from Capitol Hill to the Lincoln Memorial, with the Washington Monument about halfway between. Lining the Mall are huge buildings, many resembling Greek temples, housing museums, art galleries, and monuments. There are sculpture gardens, the National Botanic Gardens and parkland. Much of this is part of the Smithsonian Institute, and most have free admission. The Smithsonian was founded by a British scientist, James Smithson, who never visited America but in 1826 left \$500,000 to found an 'establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge'.

Amongst the sites we visited were Capitol Hill, the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King Memorial, Washington Monument (you have to get close to appreciate the size), the American Indian Museum, National Art Galleries (modern and traditional), Smithsonian Castle, Arthur Sackler Gallery, Freer Gallery, Union Station (an amazing building) and of course the White House. We walked miles but also used the buses and metro (underground). The metro is not as extensive as the London underground but covers the central area. The stations, although modern, are huge and very dark and dour. Unlike London there is no advertising so all you can look at is grey concrete – who'd have thought we'd miss advertising!

After a week our cultural appetites were satisfied, so we headed back down the Potomac and up to Annapolis for the Spring Boat Show. Sadly it was only a small affair and not a patch, we're told, on the autumn one. Even so, Annapolis was a great place to visit for a few days, and how could we resist a famous 'painkiller' in the waterside Pussers Caribbean Bar and Grill. From Annapolis we sailed to the top of Chesapeake Bay and through the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal. We'd been warned about potential encounters with large ships passing through the C&D canal, so were almost disappointed to arrive in the Delaware River having seen nothing larger than a rowing boat! Then just as we got the anchor set for an overnight stop near the east end of the Canal, what can only be described as a leviathan popped out of the canal, towering over us as it passed. How it managed to squeeze through the quite narrow waterway is a mystery ... and thank goodness we hadn't been in its path.

We'd just caught up with Phil and Monica on their catamaran *Miss Molly*, so we sailed down the Delaware River in company, planning to anchor overnight at Port Henlopen opposite Cape May before sailing up the Atlantic coast to New York. However a VHF weather forecast announced strong northerly winds in the next few days, so we decided to carry on and sail overnight to get to New York ahead of the blow.

Rounding Cape May was a bit tricky, as we took an inside passage close inshore to save time. We arrived just as the tide was turning and encountered rip tides as we picked our way through the narrow channels. It was a relief to get through the disturbed seas and away from submerged rocks. We spotted a whale off Cape May, and then a pod of dolphins kept us company for a while, diving under our bows and leaping alongside, clearly showing off. It's always such a pleasure to see them! Atlantic City, with its bright lights, was quite a spectacle as we sailed past after dark, and we were treated to a fantastic sunrise next morning – one of the rewards of overnight sailing.

Sailing into NY was thrilling but quite daunting. As we passed the Statue of Liberty the waters of New York Bay were churned by the wake of pleasure boats, tugs, fast ferries and police and coastguard boats. Helicopters were buzzing overhead and the coastguard called us on VHF to redirect *Quilcene* north of Governors Island off the tip of Manhattan to reach the East River instead of the recommended inside channel, as they had an 'ongoing incident'.

Kit, Belinda and the White House



The Manhattan skyline



We never found out what had happened, but the delay put us at Hell Gate on the East River at the wrong time. The East River, which links New York Bay and Long Island Sound is not so much a river, more of a tidal strait. It flows at 5+ knots and switches direction in a matter of minutes when the tide turns. Hell Gate is the infamous dogleg point on the river where strong tidal streams, whirlpools and boils combine to make it a challenge for low powered vessels and those with limited manoeuvrability. *Quilcene* was

already making around 9 knots with the current as we approached Hell Gate, and was carried through at 11 knots! Kit managed to keep control as we passed through overfalls and whirlpools, but we vowed to hit slack water on the return journey.

It had been a hectic few hours – thank goodness we'd heard there were quiet moorings available at Port Washington, Manhasset Bay in Long Island Sound. With the first two nights free and only \$25 per night thereafter, including a free water taxi service,



you can't go wrong – and how nice to visit NY by train and return to *Quilcene* in a peaceful bay after a hard day's tourism! We did a lot of sightseeing and even treated ourselves to a Broadway show, which was fantastic. Port Washington itself is such a nice town that we lingered a while. Shops, laundry, cafes and restaurants are all within walking distance of the water taxi dock, and there's a weekly jazz night at the Mediterranean Café.



Busy times in Times Square

Eventually we slipped the mooring and headed back through the East River – having studied the tides and currents our timing was perfect, and the waters of Hell Gate were placid. We turned into the Hudson River just as the flood tide began and had fair winds and tide for 49 miles to reach a pretty anchorage at Cornwall-on-Hudson. *En route* we passed West Point, looking more like a walled city than a military academy!

We picked up the following flood tide next morning and spent a beautiful, sunny day admiring the mighty Hudson. To see the beautiful Hudson River Valley from the water is a real treat and we loved the lighthouses, which are actual houses on rocks in the river! The only downside was that we had to keep a careful



A lighthouse on the Hudson River



Unstepping the mast at Catskill

watch to dodge the numerous logs and other debris floating in the river. There had been a lot of rain and water levels were quite high ... as we were to find out later.

At anchor off Catskill we watched a pair of bald eagles fishing in the river – a wonderful sight as they scooped up fish in their talons and flew overhead with the struggling fish held fast! In Catskill marina we removed the sails and carried out preparatory work before the mast was unstepped and, hey presto, *Quilcene* became a motorboat! All it took was two strong men and a big crane. This was a first for us and it felt very strange to set off with the mast resting on ‘horses’ on deck – even stranger when we passed under our first low bridge! We passed through Troy Lock, the limit of tidal inundation on the Hudson, before turning into the Mohawk River where we tied up to the floating dock at Waterford Visitor Center. Waterford marks the eastern end of the Erie Canal and offers free docking for 48 hours with free showers. Very civilised!

We decided to stay for a farmers market held on the dock on Sunday mornings, and stock up with fresh vegetables. The stall-holders had just about packed away when it began raining, hard – and didn’t stop for two days. This compounded the effects of a very wet spring and water levels began to rise in the Mohawk River and Erie Canal approach. Soon it was flowing fast. After the first flight of locks at the eastern end of the canal, the route follows the Mohawk River which was now in full flood. A canal closure was announced due to high water and strong currents, and the 48 hour docking rule suspended, not that we could have gone anywhere anyway as the rushing water was pinning *Quilcene* firmly to the dock.



On the floating dock at Waterford, which had been 5ft lower when we arrived!

We spent an anxious night listening to the water surging past the hull and hoping that the dock was secure. By next morning the water level had risen by 4 or 5 feet. Our floating dock, which had been 5 feet below the concrete dock wall when we arrived, was now level with it! With little else to do but wait we took a bus to Albany, the capital of New York State, and spent a lovely day sight-seeing. There were also enough pretty walks around Waterford to keep us occupied.

A week later, and after a few dry days, the water levels had subsided sufficiently for

the canals to reopen, but just to be sure we gave it another day or so before heading into the first flight of locks. The first one on the Erie Canal (perversely numbered Lock 2) is a 'biggie' with a 34ft rise. We were quite apprehensive, but managed okay and once through the first five and into the Mohawk River we felt like old hands.



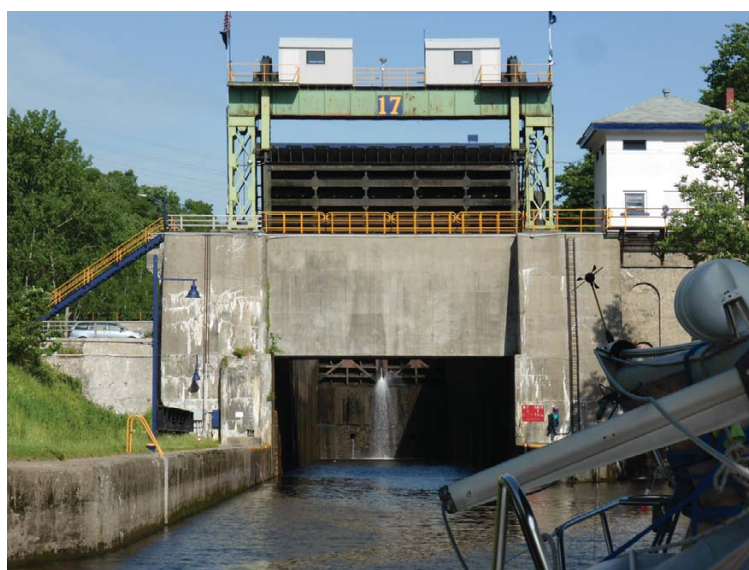
A lock on the Erie Canal – note the turbulence set up by the dam



Quilcene and Espirit on a free dock in the Erie Canal

We left Waterford with another yacht, the US-flagged *Espirit*. The skipper, Pete, was singlehanded apart from his dog Allie – we were very impressed that he could manage alone as the Canal locks, especially the rising ones on the river sections, are quite hard work. Most are next to dams where rushing water sets up turbulence on the approach, and once in the lock there are only pipes, cables or sometimes just ropes to hold on to. It can be difficult to control the boat and stop it swinging when the water rushes in. The deepest lock has a rise of 40 feet and has no opening gates but an overhead gate that drops down – it felt like heading into a dark tomb! We stood on deck at the bottom hanging on to just a rope each and peering up as the lock filled.

The locks are perhaps more difficult for a yacht than a motor vessel because the mast overhangs at both ends – ours by 5 feet! We tried to alleviate the problem with a wooden plank tied across the boat close to the bow to keep the masthead fended



off, but it snapped in the second lock. Even so we only had one casualty, when the VHF antennae hit the lock wall and was damaged. Luckily Kit had another and was planning to replace it anyway.

Entering Lock 17, the deepest on the NY canal system



*To port for Buffalo, Lake Erie; to
starboard for Oswego, Lake Ontario*

New York State Canal System was enjoying its centennial year in 2017, and as part of the celebrations waived all transit fees for 12 months. We travelled 184 statute miles on the system from Waterford to Oswego, partly on canals and partly on rivers. There are numerous free docks along the route to secure to overnight so our passage through cost very little. We kept company with *Espirit* for a few days, but Pete was

in a hurry and had further to go than us as he was bound for Buffalo on Lake Erie. Our route saw us leaving the Erie and entering the Oswego Canal to get to Lake Ontario.

We rose to 420ft above sea level, but the descent in the locks to Lake Ontario (245ft above sea level) was much easier – like going down in a lift! Overall the canals were very interesting, with several museums and historic canal sites along the way. We enjoyed spotting wildlife such as bald eagles, osprey, beaver, ground hog, deer, snapping turtles and numerous small birds. It was also good to visit some inland places and many pretty canalside towns where people were very helpful and made us feel welcome. Even so, it was a good feeling to pass through the final lock and arrive in Oswego on the shores of Lake Ontario. Oswego is a nice town with many small, individual shops on the high street – something we haven't often found in the US.

In Oswego Marina we looked askance at the 'gin pole' used for stepping the mast. It really didn't look strong enough, but the marina hands assured us that they'd dealt with bigger masts than ours ... and sure enough the guys were very methodical and professional and the job was completed in no time.

Stepping the mast at Oswego





Sailing again. Raising the Canadian flag

We bent the sails back on and checked that everything was shipshape, and we were ready to go. We'd booked a week in Kingston Marina on the Canadian side of Lake Ontario, and were about to set sail when we received an apologetic phone call saying they couldn't accommodate us – their visitors pontoon had broken loose due to strong winds combined with extremely high water levels in the lake. To make matters worse the Canada Day holiday was approaching and most of the nearby marinas were fully booked. After a few frantic calls we managed to secure a berth in Cobourg Marina,

further west than Kingston, so *Quilcene* finally headed out onto the lake. It felt wonderful to raise the sails once again and switch off the engine!

The 78 mile crossing was a little disappointing, as despite a good forecast we soon lost the wind.



***Rough weather
on the Lakes.
Photo Peter Roth***

However it was fine and bright and we motor-sailed most of the passage in sunshine. Eight miles out from Cobourg the sky darkened and we were caught in a very nasty thunderstorm – lightning all around for a while, and we saw the dark funnel shape of a waterspout in the distance – not a pleasant welcome to Canada. The same storm had passed over Lake Erie *en route* to Lake Ontario, and Peter and *Espirit* had also been caught in it – he later sent us a picture.

We arrived in Cobourg looking like drowned rats. The first priority was to check in with Canadian Customs. This turned out to be an easy process – we rang them up and two officers soon came along to *Quilcene* with the paperwork. They were helpful, welcoming and friendly, telling us that very few British yachts arrive in their port. Once checked in we left the boat in Cobourg Marina for a week and celebrated Canada Day, July 1st, with Kit's brother Peter and his wife Pat at their home in Scarborough, just



Celebrating Canada Day with Kit's brother

west of Cobourg. Previously called Dominion Day, Canada Day is the anniversary of when three separate colonies – Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick – became a single Dominion within the British Empire – Canada. 2017 was a particularly big celebration as it was the 150th anniversary. After reunions and celebrations we had a whole new cruising ground to look forward to!

