

# THERE AND BACK AGAIN ...

## A BALTIC CRUISE

### Neil Matson

*(Neil has impressive single and two-handed racing experience, including the 2009 Fastnet and 2011 Azores and Back Races, in addition to family cruising around the English Channel coasts. But there's always somewhere new to explore...)*

The idea of heading for the Baltic started whilst cruising the rías of northwest Spain in 2016. There we met Frank and Tine from Hamburg, who said, “You must sail the Baltic, it’s beautiful”. Then in 2017 we met Bert from Amsterdam who said exactly the same thing. So, at the beginning of May 2018, I set off sailing solo on *Vela Fresca*, my Dufour 34 Performance, allowing myself plenty of time to get to Lübeck to meet my wife Liz, who would fly into Hamburg to join me. In 24 years of solo/short-handed offshore racing and cruising from my home in the West Country I had sailed to France, Ireland, Spain, Madeira, the Canaries and the Azores, but I had never sailed east past the Strait of Dover.

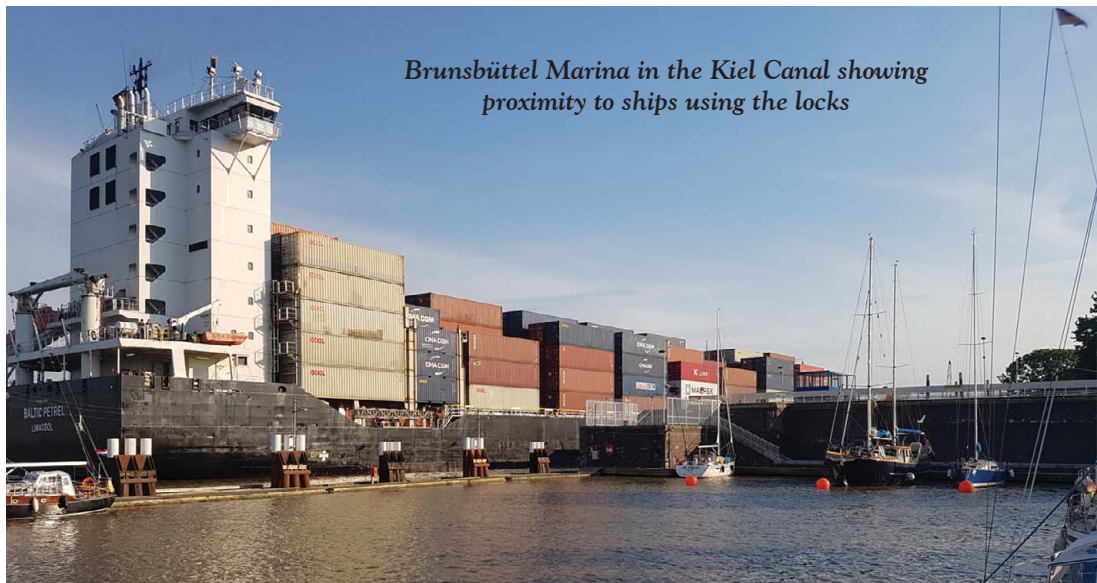
I had a number of options for reaching the Baltic from the West Country. One was to sail along the south coast, across the Thames Estuary, then cross the North Sea to the Netherlands and take the Staande Mast (standing mast) route from Ijmuiden or Den Helder to Delfzijl – thereby avoiding a good part of the (sometimes difficult) North Sea – and then enter the Baltic via the Kiel Canal. Another was to cross to Ijmuiden or Den Helder, stay outside the Frisian Islands to Cuxhaven, and again use the Kiel Canal. A third was to cross the Channel before reaching the Thames Estuary, coastal sail along France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, again for the Kiel Canal. After careful study I ruled out the Staande Mast route due to inconsistencies in advice as to whether, with my 2.1m draught, I could get through (I later discovered that part of the route had been closed for bridge repairs for nearly three months that summer ... always check!).



I hadn't decided which of the other two routes to take when I departed, but I was prepared for both.

After brief stops at Cowes and Brighton I started tacking along the coast in a pleasant

***A busy Dutch  
Bank Holiday  
in Oudeschild  
Marina on Texel***



force 3 northeasterly, planning to reach Dover and consider options there. However, a tack out of Rye Bay opened up the opportunity of an excellent reach across the Channel to Boulogne, so I took it. Arriving off Boulogne in the early evening, with a pleasant though dying breeze, I continued through the night, taking care through the shoals off Northern France. By late afternoon the next day, with a mixture of sailing and motor-sailing, I had passed France and Belgium and came into Breskens in the Netherlands and the pleasant marina there. All had gone well and I felt that I had made good progress.

A couple of days in Breskens was followed by a good sail past Europort – checking in with the port authorities as required before crossing the port entrance – and on to Scheveningen near Den Haag. From there a day sail took us past IJmuiden and Den Helder to Oudeschild on Texel, the start of the Frisian Island chain. With my 2.1m draught I had intended to continue outside the Frisian Islands rather than chance the inland waters, but a chance encounter with a very helpful Dutch couple moored next to me in Oudeschild, together with a poor forecast in the North Sea, tempted me to take the inshore route to Vlieland. This was via the Scheurrak passage, and my new friends emphasised the need to be at buoys 47 and 48 at high water to ensure safe passage. Stronger than expected headwinds and a consequent boat-slowng chop delayed my arrival at these buoys by 20 minutes and this was enough to give me some anxious moments with little water under the keel. The lessons were: be very careful with tides in Dutch waters, and follow the buoys and not the charts. There is so much silting and shifting of sand inside the Frisian Islands that charts are out-of-date almost as soon as they are published, whereas the coastguard check and move buoys regularly to give the best passage. If in doubt, call the coastguard – they are extremely helpful.

With my folding bike deployed, Vlieland and its marina were a delight. I was getting used to the sheer intensity of local sailing and the variety of craft, with the Dutch barges particularly impressive. The next stop was Lauwersoog where a long entrance and a badly silted 'new' marina caused some difficulties. From there, via a brisk overnight sail, I timed my entrance to the Elbe on a flood tide and put into Cuxhaven, poised for the Kiel Canal.





### *Sailing boats of all shapes and sizes share the Baltic*

With another flood tide I locked into the Kiel Canal (negotiating the extremely low pontoon that you have to secure to in the lock) and spent the night in Brunsbüttel next to the locks. The Kiel Canal was fascinating – what a piece of engineering! I had already been impressed by the amount of shipping in the North Sea, and could hardly believe the size and number of ships passing through the Canal in both directions (nor how close they pass you...). On exiting the Canal I made my way to Laboe at the entrance to Kiel, then on to Orth on Fehmarn Island, Travemünde and then inland to Lübeck where, having completed nearly 780 miles, Liz joined me.

Lübeck, with a marina close to the city centre, was very pleasant. Leaving there we headed north via Kühlungsborn and into Stralsund, opposite Rügen Island. An old Hansa town, Stralsund was friendly and full of fascinating history. The main marina was a short walk into town and there were pleasant beaches nearby. After a few days we continued to Sassnitz on the east coast of Rügen Island, and there congratulated ourselves on managing our first box berth (doing better than some fully crewed local boats!).

Next came a 70 mile beam reach across to Svaneke, a small harbour on the Danish island of Bornholm. Bornholm is advertised as the Baltic island with the most sunshine, but unfortunately it rained for one of the two days we were there. We crossed to the nearby small island of Christiansø with its natural harbour and peaceful setting. In the past it had been a place of exile, and from 1826 to 1841 its reluctant inhabitants included the Danish theologian, scholar and political activist J J Dampe.

An overnight motor-sail east brought us to Poland and the peninsula of Hel. This was fascinating with, like much of the Eastern Baltic, a mixture of long beaches, historical buildings and relics of its Soviet era. We had a short sail from Hel to Gdańsk, past the memorial at Westerplatte (ensign duly dipped in respect) and mile upon mile of busy shipyards. The marina was right in the heart of this vibrant city, 80 percent of which





*The entrance to the Danish island of Christiansø*

had been destroyed during World War Two. Large areas of historical buildings have been painstakingly restored and others are still being restored, all standing alongside modern buildings and redevelopments. There was history throughout the city, along with a sense of tragedy from its wartime near destruction, as exemplified by the imposing and impressive Second World War museum. There was also a sense of energy and



*Dipping the ensign  
by the Westerplatte  
memorial, Gdansk*

*Gdańsk  
as seen  
from  
the city  
centre  
marina*



purpose as it continues to strive to rebuild and develop itself. We were impressed. From Gdańsk we sailed a short way up the coast to the very different, fashionable town of Sopot, where we sat out a couple of days of strong winds.

The sea area off the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad sits across the direct route between Sopot and Lithuania. We had heard many tales of difficulty in crossing this area due to it frequently being closed off for Russian naval manoeuvres – and being firmly patrolled during such times. The Swedish Navtex service was invaluable in giving up-to-date

*The sand dunes of Nida in Lithuania. A Russian watch-tower from the Kaliningrad enclave can be seen in the background*





information, as dates and duration of closure can change at very short notice. We made it through, but only by dint of an unpleasant overnight sail with strong headwinds and an uncomfortable sea. Arriving at the port of Klaipėda in Lithuania, we were made welcome by the harbour master and given a berth in the Castle Marina. A day trip, by local ferry and bus, to the sands at Nida was excellent.

Another day, another country – Latvia – with a brief stop in Liepāja and then on to Ventspils. Since leaving Sopot we had been experiencing increasingly stronger and cooler northerly headwinds. The summer of 2018 was unusual throughout Europe and the Baltic was no exception – during the summer the winds are usually southwesterly, so the consistent northerly winds were not expected. In Ventspils we were weatherbound for six days as the northerly winds reached gale force with rain. We took the opportunity to travel inland a short distance to Kuldīga, a small, peaceful, medieval town boasting the widest waterfall in Europe. At the first weather opportunity, with the wind continuing to be northerly and with an eye on how much time we had left, we left Ventspils and reluctantly turned west rather than pushing on to Estonia. As if to validate our decision the sun began to shine and we enjoyed a glorious 80 mile reach across to the Swedish island of Gotland, arriving in the Fårösund at 0300 – but we were so far north that it now barely became dark. We secured to a rickety pontoon in a small marina and enjoyed the spectacular scenery.

In a way we were now heading home, although there was still plenty to see and do as we sailed from Fårö to Lickershamn and then on to the island of Öland and a superb quiet anchorage and abandoned quay at Grankullaviken. From there we sailed across and into the famous Swedish Archipelago – a myriad of small islands, anchorages and harbours. The locals say that “There are two types of sailors in the Baltic – those who have hit rocks and those who haven’t hit rocks ... yet!” Fortunately we were travelling very slowly under engine (looking for a transit line!) when we nudged our submerged





*The harbour at Utiklapan*

rock – it was not on the charts (paper or electronic) but it would be extraordinarily difficult for every rock to be shown. There are ‘safe passages’ shown on charts and used by ferries, commercial craft and leisure boats, and we used these, but in such surroundings it’s almost a ‘must’ to do a little exploring! As a precaution we were lifted out in Kalmar and a visual inspection showed superficial scratches on the bottom of the keel. Suitably chastened but reassured, we resumed our travels.

Kalmar was impressive, especially the castle. There were more islands to explore – carefully! – as we rounded the south of Sweden and headed west. The small isolated island of Utiklapan, first used as a place of refuge by fishermen and then fortified, was very atmospheric with its natural harbour and lighthouse.

We continued west through small islands with stops at Aspö near Karlskrona, Tärnö, Hanö, Simrishamn and Ystad before passing through the canal at Höllviken and



*Well-sheltered in Danish Bagenkop*



entering Danish waters. Dragør was a very pleasant harbour, a short bus ride from Copenhagen. Then we headed south-southwest along the Danish coast via Rødvig, Klintholm, the Femø Sund and Bagenkop to Kappeln in Germany. Kappeln is inside the entrance to the River Schlei and breathes boat building, especially wooden boats. The river and its towns were very pleasant and peaceful and the scenery stunning. It was only a day sail to Kiel, where Liz returned home and two friends, Steve and Rachel, joined me for the final part of the cruise.

We left Kiel in the latter half of August, by which time there was already a sense that the Baltic summer was coming to an end with more variable weather conditions. Making full use of weather windows we reached Vlieland, where we sat out some bad weather. Then, with further poor weather predicted, we cut inland, sailing from Vlieland to Harlingen and locking into the remarkable inland waters of the IJsselmeer and, after a brief stop in Enkhuizen, the Markermeer. We sailed through Amsterdam, exited into the North Sea at Ijmuiden, and stopped at Scheveningen. A superb sail from Scheveningen along the coasts of Belgium and Northern France, continuing through the night to the following day, brought us to Brighton and recovery time. From there, via Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight, we continued to my mooring in Devon.

The cruise ran from early May to early September, covered some 2900 miles including 1400 miles in the Baltic, and took in seven countries. The Baltic is steeped in history, has spectacular scenery, wonderful people and varied cultures, and has a real pride in its maritime heritage. From busy city marinas to isolated anchorages there is much to appreciate and enjoy. Just be careful of perhaps shallower waters than we are used to (unless you are an East coast sailor) and ... rocks!

A version of this article appeared in the August 2019 issue of *Sailing Today*.



*Scene on the  
River Schlei*

