

## A cruise to the Baltic

Hamble to Kalmar and return

Simon Butler



Getting a flavour of the Baltic seemed like a reasonable challenge for a ten week cruise. It is about as much time as I like being afloat at one stretch in *Meandro*. *Meandro* is forty years old and over the years has had pretty much everything replaced and has looked after us well. From the Hamble our route in and out of the Baltic was via the Kiel Canal, so the cruise fell into three main parts - getting there, being there and getting back. April and early May had seen persistent northeasterly winds so our departure date of the Sunday 7 May after the Coronation looked optimistic, but we were lucky to wake early to a calm misty morning. On board for the outward leg were Anthony Wickham and Will

Hughes-Jones, both experienced sailors, so a strong crew. We reached our first stop, Dover at 0200 and, as usual we were surprised by the tide running across the entrance. Thick fog in the morning meant we needed the plotter just to cross the harbour for fuel but by midday visibility had improved enough for a brisk sail with wind on the port beam across a quiet Dover Strait to Dunkerque. Will and Anthony loved helming and it was a good tonic after a rather dismal passage the day before.

Our clearance into the EU was straight forward, albeit an expensive taxi ride to the ferry port and we were able to get away by 1130 for an easy inshore passage through the Pass de la Zuydcoote in a grey sky and sea, but no rain, to Zeebrugge. We appeared to be



the only boat on the move, which made it rather lonely, but we tried to get ashore each evening for supper, for company and to warm up as it was still cold at sea. Two days of early morning starts followed, Anthony & Will were brilliant at getting the boat ready for sea while I fussed with planning and tides. They cooked hearty breakfasts and kept cheerful despite rarely seeing anything but grey sea and sky. Through the Scheven ship anchorage we had thick fog occasionally lifting enough to see the vague outline of a ship as the air and everything on board got damper and damper. The fog persisted to IJmuiden where we entered without being able to see the breakwaters.

Another early start and windless passage took us to Den Helder on the northwest corner of Holland. Shortly after us the patrol boat HMS *Express* incongruously squeezed into the marina to pick up fuel then left to join her companions in the naval base, we were to see them again later. Will needed to get home early next week and the forecast for later in the week was poor so we decided to make for Oost Vlieland on Saturday and if possible, go straight from there to the Elbe on Sunday. We took the longer but more sheltered inland route inside the island of Texel looping round past Harlingen before returning northwest up the channel to Oost Vlieland. This was a proper sail in a F4-5 tacking, reaching and running and as it was the weekend we had some other yachts for company. It was good that Will's time with us ended on a high with 50nm of decent sailing.

Anthony and I left Will on the dock at 0500 and set off into another grey day and it was rather dispiriting to have to go west for a



*Meandro en route IJmuiden to Den Helder*

couple of hours to avoid the shallow banks before we could turn eastwards. We saw no other yachts and very little of the coast but there was regular buoyage and wind farms for company. We calculated that 0600 the following morning would be the ideal time to reach the Elbe fairway buoy to catch the tide up the river to Cuxhaven, but we were well ahead of schedule.

Anthony's wife Georgi and my wife Catherine were bicycling from Kiel down the canal cycle path to meet us in Brunsbüttel at the southern entrance to the canal in a couple of days. But it looked as if we would be early, so we warned them that they might have to pedal faster!

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We crossed the mouth of the Jade and Weser in the dark with lights in all directions, passing many ships but none of them troublesome. We were expecting a tough trip up the Elbe against the tide but with virtually no wind it was a smooth and joyful ride as the dawn appeared and we went passed Cuxhaven,



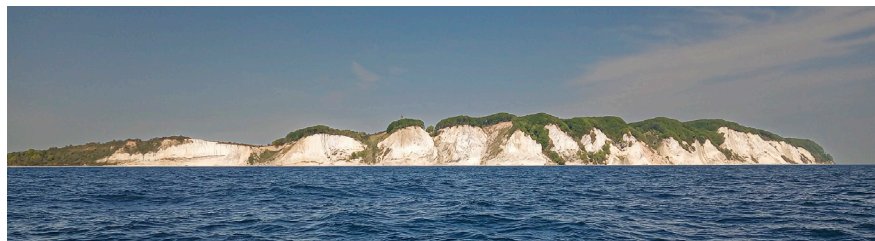
Kiel Canal

through the lock into the canal to moor at Brunsbüttel by 1030. The harbour is right beside the lock gates, but the ships are manoeuvring so slowly that there is no wash. Catherine and Georgi rode furiously to greet us, but Anthony and I were sound asleep after our 170nm passage. The cold, windy and rainy weather duly materialised for our couple of days transiting the 58nm long canal.

We arrived in Kiel, where Anthony and Georgi left us, 11 days and 600nm after leaving the Hamble. Considering it was early May I was pleased with our progress to complete the first part of our cruise; it would be interesting to see how it compared with the return journey.

We now had a couple of weeks on our own to reach Kalmar in southern Sweden but first we wanted to spend a few days in Copenhagen. With a north easterly wind forecast we chose to go north between Langeland and Lolland and then east. The coast was featureless and the sea and sky grey and I did wonder if I had chosen wisely to come so early. But perhaps it was just as well as there was nobody to watch our dismal and often failed attempts at box mooring. The key is not to rush in but go slower and then even slower and, if possible, have a neighbour to lie alongside while you sort yourself out. There was quite a lot of tension in our first attempts. By the time we reached Klintholm on Møn the weather was improving and the cliffs there were the first high ground we had seen since Dover.

70 million year old chalk cliffs stretch for 6 kilometres at Møn



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We moored at the Wildersplads Marina in the Christianshavns canal in Copenhagen. This is a perfect location in the centre of the city, but we were lucky to get a space and had to move three times in the rain before the harbour master was happy, which certainly improved our box berthing technique!



Our first Swedish port was Höllviken at the north end of the Falsterbo canal, which cuts out going round the windy peninsular. We got a very friendly reception, which was repeated in all our subsequent Swedish landfalls. The harbour master lent us cycles so we could go over the bridge and into the seaside town. In the morning HMS *Express* and *Charger* turned up to go through the canal with us at the 1000 bridge opening and we presumed they were on their way to the NATO naval exercise that was building up. They were out of sight quickly while we enjoyed a downwind sail to Ystad where we lingered for a second day. We were lucky to meet a Swedish sailing couple who offered helpful advice on places to visit.

It was now becoming warmer and the winds were favourable, so we enjoyed easy day sailing up the southeast coast. We stopped at the island of Hanö and had a long walk over boulder fields and through small hornbeam woods to the English

Catherine and Simon aboard *Meandro*



cemetery where sailors were buried when the Royal Navy used the island as a base from 1810 to 1812. The graveyard is reasonably flat, free of rocks and has a peaceful atmosphere. It faces north, towards the mainland where we headed the following day in a freshening breeze on the quarter to the naval port of Karlskrona. It was a rather threatening sail, rolling in a short sea with the clouds gathering and a heavily camouflaged Swedish warship passing us added to the menace. Nelson had called the harbour impregnable and the approach is long and well defended with rocks, islands



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and fortifications. This was the busiest harbour we had visited so far, with plenty to see in the town including Sweden's largest wooden church and the excellent maritime museum.

We chose to depart by the eastern route among rocks and islets that takes you out into the sea at Torhamnss udde at the corner of the mainland. We had been warned that the final channel was very narrow and more like a drain, and so it proved but we were glad to experience this type of rock hopping navigation and get used to sailing with so many hazards close by. We carried the wind to Kristianopol and the next day to Kalmar. 5 June was Catherine's birthday and we spent the morning visiting the almost fairy tale like castle.



Kalmar Castle, Sweden

During this cruise I read Caroline Boggis-Rolfe's *The Baltic Story* which recounts the constant struggle between the countries bordering the Baltic, from the Middle Ages to the present day. The ruling families were intermarried but often fought each other. The territory, particularly Poland, being carved up and then reassembled, with Britain and France unable to leave the area alone. We passed sites of battles and treaties like Kalmar where the Union of Kalmar in 1397 made Queen Margareta of Denmark ruler of all Scandinavia for a short time. In the afternoon Catherine went cycling, her much preferred method of transport and later Henry Flint arrived. He had just retired and bravely said he would like to join us. He turned out to be an ideal crew and companion. Competent, always enthusiastic and, best of all, he brought warm settled weather. So, we set off north up the Kalmarsund for some short day-sails. We hadn't seen any swimmers yet so asked a man cutting the grass if there was any reason like algae or jellyfish. "No," he replied, "we Swedes are not as tough as you think, we wait until the sea warms up in a few weeks." Thereafter Catherine and Henry swam regularly, me less often.

We crossed to Sandvik on the northwest end of Öland Island and sadly decided that this had to be our turning point for home. We had had our taste of the area but still even in June many of the facilities and attractions remained closed, though there was never any trouble finding moorings.

Henry and I enjoyed an easy sail south and under the Kalmarsund bridge to Färjestaden on Öland opposite Kalmar. 33nm by sea for us and a good cycle ride of 42 miles for Catherine following on a folding Brompton. We repeated the process the next day but arrived in Grönhögen first as poor Catherine had got a puncture and had to take a bus and taxi to meet us. A German warship was hovering at the entrance as if marking the edge of the NATO exercise, reminding us that the struggle for power in the Baltic continues to this day. For a while Kalingrad, Russia's enclave between Lithuania and Poland had been messaging on Navtex that the right of innocent passage was suspended for all foreign warships and state owned ships. The small harbour of refuge for fisherman at Utklippan is iconic, formed between two small islets about 15nm south of Karlskrona. Everyone recommended visiting so we were expecting a crowd. Much to our surprise and delight we had the harbour completely to ourselves apart from nesting birds that you almost stumbled over, particularly fluffy juvenile gulls, razorbills and Arctic terns. It was a magical evening, out of signal, out of touch and just the sound of birds and waves for company. A lovely way to spend our last evening in Sweden.

We had been recommended Svaneke, on the east coast of Bornholm; another Danish island in Swedish waters. The harbour is small and the water was very cold as discovered by the brave swimmers, but we feasted on many varieties of smoked herring on the quay and later visited a smokery. Svaneke is a centre of glass blowing and sweet making. We watched vases being made in one workshop and had a very enthusiastic introduction to liquorice sweet making in another. We bought sweets but not vases.

Up early at 0400 on a clear and windless morning for a silent departure towards Poland. After eight days of good sailing, it was a shame to have to motor almost all the 80nm to Świnoujście on the western border of Poland. This was a bit of a detour on our way back to Kiel, but the cruise was designed to give a taste of the different countries and we were delighted to have made the effort. Świnoujście is a large commercial and naval port with all weather access, unusual on this coast. There is a large marina in what had been a Russian naval base. There was a regatta taking place, so the port was busy and cheerful, with only a handful of foreign yachts. For the first time this cruise nobody spoke English, but the marina staff were so friendly and helpful. We toasted our arrival in our seventh country in seven weeks with the local beer at the bar that evening.

Świnoujście is a pleasant city, I suppose a bit like Southampton. There are areas of the original architecture surrounded by blocks of Soviet style housing still in their original condition and blocks that have been restyled to make them look more modern. The shops were a mix of newish in style and distinctly old fashioned. The bakery we went to for rolls could have been in the 1930's and there were still shops with their owners sitting outside cutting up paper for wrapping goods in. The main tourist attraction, and a draw for the swimmers amongst us, is a long beach stretching from the windmill styled lighthouse at the entrance to

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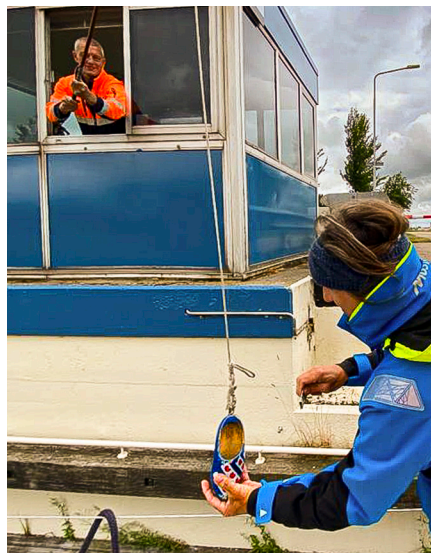
the harbour west towards the German border. Our next destination was Rostock in four days time for Henry to catch the train home and we went inside the island of Rügen in the shallow but well buoyed Griefwalder Bodden. We stopped at the Hanseatic cities of Griefswald and then Stralsund where it's easy to see the evidence of the wealth and power these cities controlled. There are large warehouses on the quays, beautiful churches and town halls to visit. We left the Bodden from Barhöft in a mirror flat sea and carried the calm along the coast much of the way to Rostock where we moored at the last marina beside the town. Henry left us in the morning; it had been a delight to get to know him better. It always surprised us that such a tidy person could cause such chaos in the galley. Every utensil would be used even for the simplest meal, but we did enjoy his cooking.

On our own again and with no incentive to get to Kiel early as it would be very busy with Kiel Week, we pottered leisurely west and anchored in Heikendorf Bay opposite the canal entrance on the evening of 24 June. We were treated to a sail past of tall ships and a float past of balloons in the setting sun. We had had a great five weeks in the Baltic, settled weather, good sailing and friendly people – being there had been a success.

Our friends Nicholas and Elizabeth Heaven had sailed with us in Scotland. This year they had signed up for some gentle sailing in midsummer mostly though the Dutch canals to Rotterdam. If only it had turned out like that; the weather was grossly disappointing, and they were stoic to remain so good humoured. All started well, we picked up Nicholas and Elizabeth from the quay at Holtenau which was busy with tall ships moving berths and returned to our anchorage for a swim, making the most of the sunny day. After a lot of hanging around at the lock we entered the canal and reached Rendsburg in the late afternoon just as the weather was beginning to change. With not much to do but steer down the canal the rest could take turns sheltering below from the rain and head wind. We spent the night at Brunsbüttel beside the lock like the outward journey.

It is only 18nm from there to Cuxhaven and we left the lock in time to catch the ebb down the Elbe. All was calm in the shelter of the lock but as we turned into the river it became a maelstrom, a west northwest wind gusting 25 kts had whipped up the most confused short sea. Our bows would one second be in the air and the next buried in a wall of water and our stern half out of the water and the propeller cavitating. We were lucky that there was only a little shipping as our visibility was as limited as our ability to manoeuvre. The only thing to do was crash on for the three hours it took to reach the welcome calm and safety of Cuxhaven. None of us wanted a repeat of this for the 25nm journey to the mouth of the Elbe. The forecast was now predicting worse weather for the weekend ahead, so we needed to press on to the Dutch canals. All of us were apprehensive when we set off the following morning, but fortunately it was a calm grey day for the 100nm passage outside the Frisian islands to Borkum arriving at 0400. The harbour doesn't get much of a write up but we were grateful for the rest and enjoyed cycling on the island.

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Paying in a clog. Lauwersoog to Leeuwarden

Until the Driebonds bridge at Groningen is repaired, the easterly entrance to the mast-up route through Holland is now at Lauwersoog, which you enter west of Schiermonnikoog island. At last, this gave us the chance to sail amongst the islands on a clear day. The winding approach between the sandbanks and low islands behind is impressive and intriguing with breaking water all around. You have to trust the buoys, not the chart as the banks so often move.

The weekend started as predicted with plenty of wind and pouring rain, so it was no surprise that the lock was full of boats heading for the canals rather than risking the North Sea route south. The canal started quite narrow,

crossing countryside with cows and goats grazing but became wider and deeper and more urban as we progressed. Our route took us west to Leeuwarden and then south to Sneek before entering the IJsselmeer at Lemmer. With only one lock and bridge we hoped to make the 50nm to Amsterdam in one day as even worse weather was forecast for later, so we left early. We made reasonable progress motoring into a 20 knot wind just on the starboard bow to the lock at Lelystad which divides the IJsselmeer from the Markermeer. We were the only yacht in the lock which is always a bit ominous and as we left the lock it became clear why. The wind had increased, Amsterdam was dead to windward and it was like being back in the Elbe but without any tide to help. Our progress was punishing and slow with water pouring down the deck and after 45 minutes we had all had enough and ran happily back to the Bataviahaven marina at Lelystad.

Storm Poly came through the next day and when you wake up with national weather alerts being sent to your phone you know it must be serious. It turned out to be Holland's worst summer storm on record. We doubled up the ropes while the wind rose to a consistent 40 knots with gusts of 53. Everything had been advised to close so there was nothing to do but enjoy being, mesmerised by the strength of the weather. It was all over later in the afternoon and as we had lost a couple of days we decided to go past Amsterdam on the Nordzeekanaal and branch south to Haarlem, a long day as we had to wait six hours for a bridge.

Finding an obvious place to berth in the towns is not easy. Shallows at the bank and overhanging trees are the natural hazards and misleading signs add to the difficulty, but we were more experienced by the time we reached Haarlem and





*Meandro's picture postcard mooring in Haarlem*

found a spot almost in the middle of the town beside a windmill. From storm to heat wave in a couple of days, we had a very hot night in Gouda moored up a narrow and mosquito infested canal at the edge of the town. Of course, everything in Gouda revolves around cheese and on a Sunday morning there were even cheese making re-enactors in the original cheese trading hall. Nicholas and Elizabeth had certainly endured more than expected but at least they had some stand out events to remember. They left us at IJsslemonde. Saying goodbye to friends and crew is a mixed feeling, you miss their company but enjoy the extra space.

Now it was just a question of getting home. Two more days in the canals before exiting at Vlissingen. As we turned into the Westerschelde there was another cauldron like the Elbe to negotiate. Again, a strong west wind against the ebb, so we bounced the short way across the river to Breskens. An early start with a cold southeasterly took us to Dunkerque where we and many others waited three days for a moderation. There was a mass exodus of yachts at sunrise and we had a straightforward passage to the Hamble with a stop in Eastbourne. So, it turned out that getting back (20 July) in midsummer was more trouble than the outward journey and had taken considerably longer.

We had been away for 75 days, visited 52 different ports and covered 2140nm. The further east and north we went the more interesting it was. I had enjoyed it all but really the Baltic needs a much longer time to explore properly. With the same amount of time again I would aim for Stockholm and see less of Germany, which probably means cutting out Poland too, but at least we had had a taste of the Baltic which is what we set out to do.