

Boating in a pandemic

Sweden to the waterways of Germany and Holland

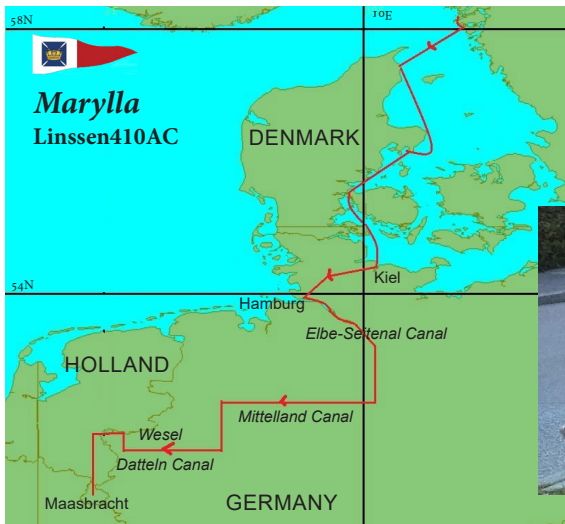
Mike Backhurst

Covid-19 hit in the spring. As we realised, like everyone else, how significantly our summer plans would have to change. We'd left our boat in Sweden for the winter and were planning to re-explore both the Gota Canal and the Stockholm Archipelago, having last visited there twenty-two years ago.

As Jersey residents we had bought *Marylla* ex-VAT and temporarily imported her from Norway to Sweden in September 2019 for 18 months. I wrote to the Swedish Customs in June to ask if they would agree to an extension should we be unable to return to the boat in time, but we received a negative reply, the email stating that we should not have gone home for Christmas! It appeared that Sweden interprets the rules slightly differently to other EU countries and they require owners to live on board throughout the period of importation, not to lay up during the winter and not to go home. So our choice seemed to be cruising either to Norway (a non-EU country) or to Holland where the customs had been helpful to other boat owners in a similar position

The position was further complicated at the end of July when I suffered a completely unexpected heart attack. Initially I thought that this was the end of my boating for the year but having made what I believe was a good recovery we decided to go ahead as planned with the additional support of Harry, my wife's nephew. We left Jersey in early September (without our two faithful dachshund dogs) for the

drive to Sweden, having filled the car with enough food to last us for almost the whole journey. Arriving at the yard three days later we were joined



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by Harry the next day. The forecast was not good and we accepted it would be at least three or four days before we could leave. As Norway remained firmly locked down for visiting yachtsmen, unless one went into quarantine, we abandoned our plan to go there and resolved instead to head south back to Holland.

We finally left Kungshamn on 14 September; it was still a SW4-5 with a lot of swell but by keeping in the protection of islands we enjoyed a 2.5 hour journey to Ellös passing en route the *Rainbow Warrior* anchored near Orust and a Swiss yacht heading north. These were the only non-Swedish boats we would see in Sweden. The weather looked fair for the crossing from Ellös to Denmark the next day so fingers were firmly crossed as after that the wind would be strong westerly and we wanted the protection of the Jutland peninsular to make progress south.

The next morning was misty but, with a fair forecast and the sun breaking through, we set off early and headed down the channel to the Måseskär lighthouse and the open sea. En route we came across a young deer swimming across the sound: there was little we could do other than hope it arrived on land safely. Crossing the Skaggerak was fine, lumpy at first but improving as the morning went on. Early in the afternoon fog rolled in and with it poor visibility for the rest of the 70-mile journey to Sæby in Denmark, which has a large marina and some pretty houses.

It took us a further four days to travel south through Denmark stopping at Hals (at the entrance to the Limfjord), the delightful town of Ebeltoft and at a



Sunset at Ebeltoft in Denmark

new marina in Assens. We arrived at Kiel having covered 363 miles since leaving Sweden; travelling in mostly calm and sunny conditions. At this point Harry had to leave us; so, with a worsening weather forecast, Marie-Louise and I decided to abandon the option of travelling outside of the Dutch and German Friesian

Islands and visiting Helgoland (which counts as leaving the EU). We opted for the alternative route to Holland through the German and Dutch inland waterways, familiar to us from our journey to Poland from Holland in 2018. We didn't know if the Dutch authorities would require us to have left and re-entered the EU so we had the option to go round a buoy 12 nautical miles off Holland which hopefully would suffice.

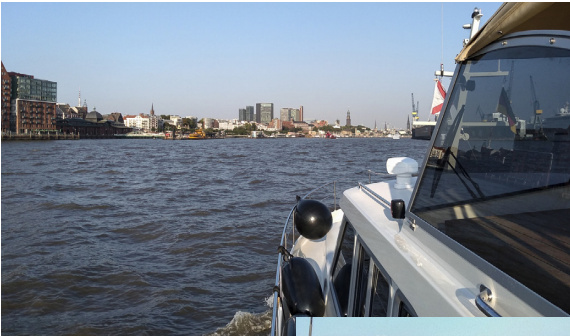
We left Kiel on the 20 September, entering the Kiel Canal through the lock at Haltenau; because of Covid-19 there was no fee to travel on the canal this year. We enjoyed a motor to Rendsburg in lovely weather where we arrived after lunch

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Marina by the Brunsbüttel lock, Kiel Canal

and enjoyed watching mini speed boat races taking place there. On the canal we met the only two British boats that we saw on the entire trip; one hoping to get to Devon, the other to the Isle of Man. The next day we continued through the canal exiting the following morning to make our way up the Elbe to Hamburg. We had been warned to expect a lot of tide on the Elbe as it was just coming off springs, as



we approached Hamburg we had four knots with us giving a SOG of up to 11 knots. It was with a certain amount of trepidation that we crossed the western channel to enter the Sporthafen; but all was well and we were met by both harbour masters

Approaching Hamburg
Mooring in the Sporthafen

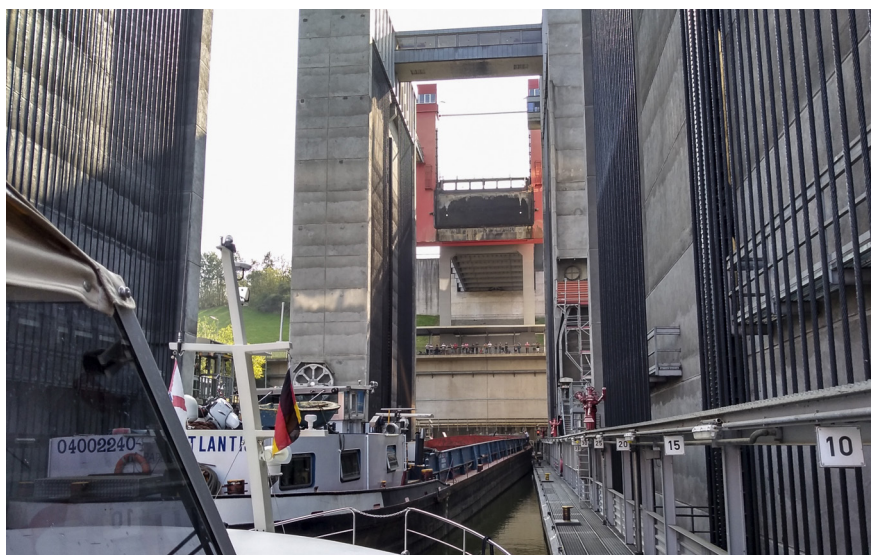
(there were two, both on duty) who showed us to a berth for the night.

We left early the next morning to carry the last of the flood up the remainder of the tidal part of the Elbe to the



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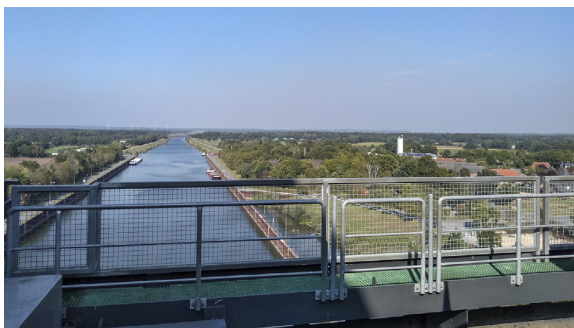
lock at Geesthacht where we arrived three and a half hours later. After a long wait we entered with one other small boat and on exiting found ourselves on the calm waters of the inland waterways, the next phase of our journey. After a short distance up the non-tidal part of the Elbe, we travelled the entire length of the Elbe-Seitenal Canal to where it joins the Mittelland Canal near the VW factory at Wolfsburg. A short distance down the Elbe-Seiten Canal we had the amazing experience of



View from the bottom ... and the top of the Scharnebeck ship lift

being lifted 38 metres by the Scharnebeck ship lift, near Lüneburg.

Arriving at the Mittelland Canal we turned west and covered 143 miles, to where it joined the Dortmund-Ems Canal near Osnabrück, stopping over the next three days



at small and friendly yacht harbours near Braunschweig, Iddensen and Bad Essen. Most of the marinas on the Mittelland are small and run by boating clubs with modest fees. In just over two weeks we had sailed for 714 miles.

The stretch on the Dortmund-Ems Canal and the entire Wesel-Datteln Canal were each covered in a day and were unremarkable, although none of the locks on the Wesel-Datteln Canal had floating bollards and some were quite hard work and muddy. By then we needed diesel and we finally found a bunker station at

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Dorsten on the Wesel-Datteln Canal although they only had bio-diesel. It seems that 'green' non-bio fuel is not widely available in Germany whereas it is the norm in Scandinavia.

We exited the German canal system on the Rhine near Wesel and there only remained the short leg down the Rhine to Nijmegen before we reached Holland. The Rhine was flowing at the expected three to four knots but does



Sunset at Wesel

A mighty Rhine barge (top left of picture)



not cause any problem provided you know the rules: keep to the edge of the channel but be ready to react to 'blue boarding', which means passing the upstream boat to starboard rather than to port. We found it incredibly helpful to utilise the 'sportboot' lanes which have been created around Nijmegen

which keep you out of the main channel and exempt you from 'blue boarding'.

The weather forecast for the next week with Storm Alex approaching was bad and we decided to continue to our new winter moorings at Maasbracht where we duly arrived two days later on 2 October, 904 miles from our departure. We subsequently received confirmation from the Dutch customs that since our entry into Holland we now have a further 18-months temporary import permit, without our having to round an offshore buoy.

Although it was not quite the holiday we had planned last year, and there were some minor challenges (including checking whether Covid restrictions allowed us into all the countries), the whole trip went very well and proved that being on board a boat is an ideal way to travel not only when there is a pandemic, but when one is recovering from a heart attack. We met hardly anyone (except at a distance) and were 'self-isolating' for almost the whole journey. Hopefully next year yachting will be rather more relaxed and convivial.