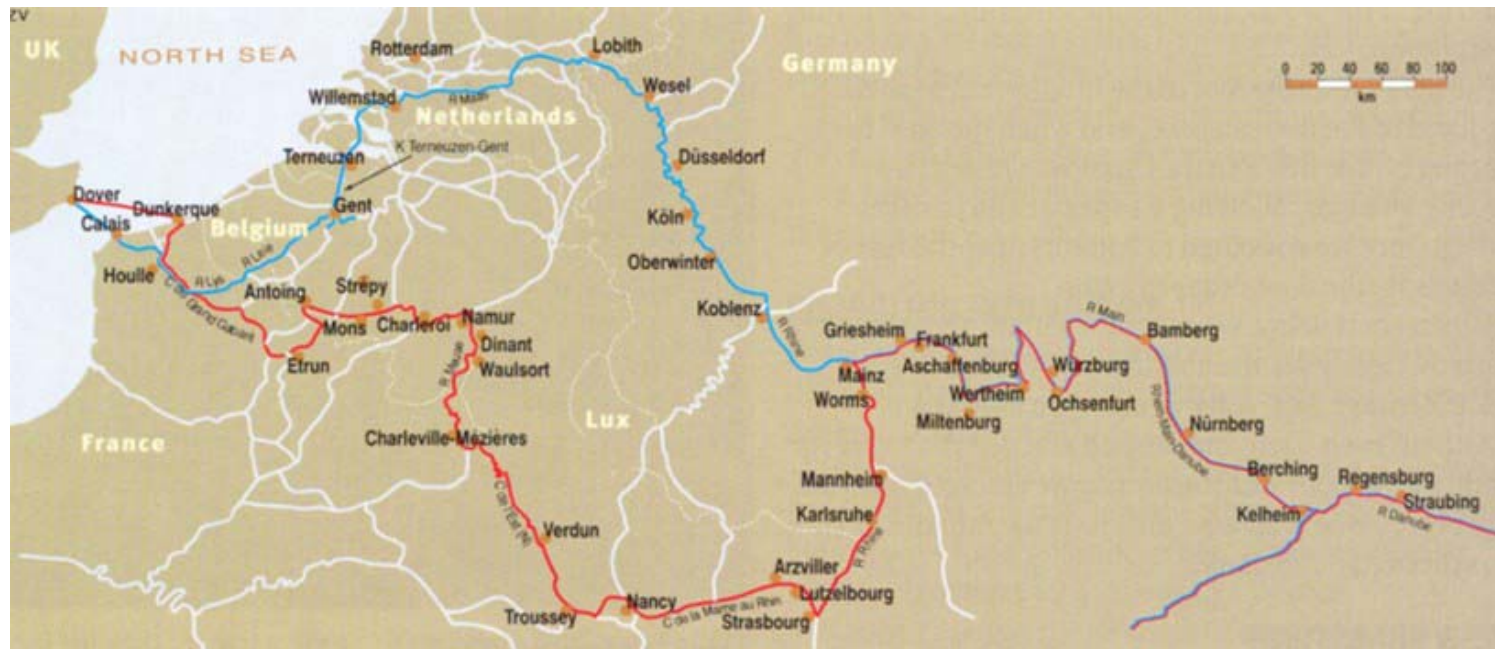


Danube waltz

A 2000-mile tour of western Europe took in French, Belgian, German and Dutch waterways, dotted with elegant cities, beautiful scenery and impressive canal engineering. And the culmination was reaching the mighty river Danube.



DISTANCES: Dover to Dunkerque 43 miles / Dunkerque to Namur 333km, 31 locks & 1 lift / Namur to Toul 334km, 79 locks / Toul to Strasbourg 170km, 63 locks & 1 inclined plane / Strasbourg to Mainz 208km, 2 locks / Mainz to Bamberg 384km, 34 locks / Bamberg to Regensburg 205km, 18 locks / Regensburg to Mainz 639km, 52 locks / Mainz to Willemstad 508km, 0 locks / Willemstad to Gent (via Lokeren) 130km, 4 locks / Gent to Calais 200km, 15 locks / Calais to Dover 22 miles. Total 65 miles at sea; 3111 km by waterway.

We breathed a sigh of relief as we locked into the French port of Dunkerque, and onto the inland waterways.

It had been an eventful sea crossing from Dover. Three miles off the entrance to Dunkerque, the port engine had stopped, and a glance over the side revealed the cause: a thick rope was trailing out from our sterngear.

With a coaster ploughing up behind us, now was not the time to try to free the prop. Instead, we limped along on one engine, allowing the coaster to pass before calling port control to arrange passage through Trystram Lock into the safety of the Bassin Freycinet.

Karen and I were setting out on perhaps our most adventurous cruise so far: through France, Belgium and Germany all the way to the River Danube, and hopefully downriver as far as the Austrian capital, Vienna.

Our route was carefully planned, for example making sure that we would be heading downstream on both our encounters with the fast-flowing River Rhine. But the way our luck was running so far, we wondered whether we would come anywhere near to achieving our goals.

FRENCH CONNECTION

Without stopping to remove the offending rope, we bought a 30-day canal licence from Voies Navigables de France's office, at a cost of €209 (about £ 140), and headed inland on the Grand Gabarit waterway.

The Grand Gabarit, or Dunkerque-Escaut as it is otherwise known, is a combination of smaller lowland canals enlarged to take big barges and pushers, so there are few locks and passage can be made quickly.

Taking a detour up the River Houille, to the village of Houille, we moored for the night at a pleasant halte nautique. This was an ideal, safe spot to get under the boat and, using a saw knife, hack the rope away from the prop. It was with gusto that I deposited this unwelcome stowaway in a nearby skip.

We stopped for the next night at Pont a Vendin, alongside a rickety pontoon in a small dock. These moorings are protected by unusual bat-wing gates, and you have to nudge a boat into these to enter. As hot weather began to set in, it was a long run of just under 100km to our next stop, at Antoing, just across the Belgian border.

CHEAP THRILLS, STEEP THRILLS

In the French-speaking southern part of Belgium, boats are charged for using the waterways by tonnage, which for Darius worked out at just €0.87 (about 58p). Another bonus is that Belgium still sells red diesel to leisure boats, and it's even cheaper than in the UK, so we took advantage of this by refuelling at the Captain Neptuna diesel barge in Antoing.

Having described a big loop the following day, we were now heading east again, towards Mons, where we enjoyed an overnight stop at the town's modern marina. Then we joined the Canal du Centre, anxious to see and use a modern wonder of the waterways, the recently opened Strepv-Bracquegnies boat lift.

Built to bypass a combination of four old lifts and one lock, this masterpiece of engineering is the highest canal lift in the world, raising and lowering vessels fully 244ft (75m).

The lights near the foot of the lift directed us to the left-hand of the two caissons, and when the steel door shutting off the lift from the canal was raised, we gingerly entered, following a trip boat and another cruiser. Once we'd secured to bollards near the rear of the caisson, the door dropped again.

After a short delay, we started to climb, and as we did we could clearly see the abandoned old lifts, now a World Heritage Site, stark against the blue sky.

Without even a jolt, the caisson reached the top of its climb, the far door was raised and we emerged onto the upper level, where an aqueduct took us onto the Bruxelles/Charleroi Canal.

FIRE & BRIMSTONE

The next stretch of our route was something of an infernal experience. Having turned onto the River Sambre, which runs along Charleroi's southern outskirts, we found ourselves surrounded by giant steel-works, with flames, steam and smoke belching from every quarter.

Below Marcinelle Lock, where the river is canalised into what feels like a giant drain, heavy industry continued to follow us, as we passed through lock after lock, plugging on in the muggy heat to Namur. Here, we turned up the River Meuse just as the heavens opened, with a crash of thunder and lightning raking the sky.

Port de Jambes offered the last chance to fill up with cheap red diesel, as we would soon be re-entering France. The harbourmaster gave us a signed piece of paper stating that the diesel had been lawfully purchased in Belgium. "If the French customs ask why you have red diesel in your tanks, you can show them this," he said. It was to prove useful later, although not in France but in Germany.

The River Meuse is a beautiful, slow-running river, with dense forest and craggy cliffs. It is much loved as a tourist area by the Belgians, in particular the town of Dinant, where we stopped at the quay for lunch, and took a trip up the cliff face on the funicular railway to the citadel.

Waulsort, where we stopped for the night, was a special place for one of the early continental canal writers, Roger Pilkington. He loved to sit in the little cafe here, talking to the old ferryman, and watch the barges plying up and down the river.

It was Pilkington's books that inspired me to explore the waterways of Europe, so it was a poignant moment when I received a phone call from my old friend Hugh McKnight that evening to tell me my hero had died.

POETRY IN MOTION

South of Fumay, the Meuse is officially called the Canal de l'Est (Branche Nord) by the French. Despite the prosaic name, the waterway is at its most beautiful here, winding through the forested hills of the Ardennes.

We spent a night in a marina at Charleville-Mezieres, before continuing, lock by lock, towards Verdun. The countryside around here is littered with the graves of the 800,000 men who fell during World War One, and it was a sober crew who moored for the night at the Quai de Londres in the centre of the city.

At Troussey, we joined the Canal du Marne au Rhin, and started to head east again, towards the Rhine. Nancy, where we moored in the modern St George Marina, is one of the most elegant of French cities, with its beautiful Parc de la Pepiniere and its botanical gardens and museums. But its crowning glory is Place Stanislas, a magnificent baroque square surrounded by gilded wrought ironwork. Bizarrely, the town's founder was the ex-King Stanislas of Poland, and a statue of him holds centre stage.

The inclined plane at Arzwiller bypasses 17 now-disused locks. In heavy traffic, we had a lengthy wait

before we could slide gently into the caisson for the 144ft (44m) drop to the lower level. Beyond, along the Zorn Valley, sandstone bluffs overlook the Marne au Rhin, with several castles perched on top. Dropping down through automatic locks we came to Lutzelbourg, as lovely a town as any we have visited in France. Tightly packed red-stone houses sported window boxes of multicoloured flowers.

GOING WITH THE FLOW

Reaching Strasbourg on a scorching July day, we moored at the Koejac Marina. Exhausted, we decided to rest in this famous city for a few days before venturing onto the River Rhine. We knew this would be a complete change from the tranquil waterways we had enjoyed so far.

Leaving early in the morning, to avoid the heat of the midday sun, we edged our way through debris and duckweed to the northern entrance lock of Strasbourg Docks. The water level in the chamber did not change before the far gate slid back and we entered the river, turning left to head downstream.

We immediately felt the river current pick us up. With both engines at just 1100rpm, we were doing over 8 knots. Empty 2000-tonne barges overtook us, sometimes two abreast. But laden barges plugging upstream panted against the current on their way to Basle.

And we were still on the canalised part of the Rhine!

We had to pass through both Gambenheim and Iffezheim locks before we came to the free-flowing river, which has no further interruption for some 430 miles, all the way to Rotterdam.

This was very different again, with protective groynes on either side stretching their fingers into the river, some buoyed but others lying menacingly below the surface.

WRIGGLING INTO WORMS

Initially the river follows the Franco-German border, but our rapid progress with the current soon had us in fully German territory for the first time.

In Karlsruhe, we turned into Hafen Maxau, sheltered from the flow and traffic of the Rhine and home to the Motorboat-Club Karlsruhe, where we enjoyed a fine meal for less than €13 (about £8.50) each.

North of Speyer, the riverbanks are gently sloping and sandy, and we watched the local populace swimming, sunbathing and waterskiing.

In contrast, Mannheim was a hive of industrial activity, with warehouses, chemical plants and gravel docks lining the waterway for several miles. A perpetual stream of barges feed these industries with their raw materials.

Entering the Worms Motor Yacht Club's marina was a tricky manoeuvre; the entrance is very narrow and immediately inside is a sharp left-hand turn to the pontoons, made trickier by the sudden transition from fast-flowing river to still water.

The episcopal city of Worms was high on our list of places to see, so we spent several days here, visiting St Peter's Cathedral, restored after the heavy bombardment of World War Two, and the memorial statue to Martin Luther, who came here in 1521 to defend his criticisms of the Roman Catholic church and thereby kick-start the protestant reformation.

MAIN EVENTS

At Mainz, we turned to starboard and entered the River Main, whose meandering course we would follow eastwards. We were now heading upriver, and reduced to a slow trot.

Each barge lock has a small spoortsbootsschleuse (leisure boat lock) beside it, but these were too narrow to accommodate Darius, with her beam of 3.5m (11ft 6in). Being forced to use the larger locks became a real problem; we had to wait for barges, sometimes for up to an hour, before we could pass through.

The Main being a commercial waterway, there are also few facilities for cruisers, beyond overnight moorings in yacht club marinas.

On the outskirts of Frankfurt, at Griesheim, we pulled in to one such marina to be greeted very hospitably by members of the Wassersportfreunde Griesheim. After a convivial evening, and an exchange of burgees (I gave them one from the Moonraker Owners Club),

I was also presented with a 'Main Handbuch' river guide, annotated by one of the members. This was to prove invaluable.

Disappointingly, we could find nowhere in Frankfurt itself suitable to moor, so we carried on to Aschaffenburg, where there's a backwater that is home to several yacht clubs and a good restaurant in an old kettenschiff: a steam tug once used to haul dumb barges via a chain laid on the bed of the river.

Further upstream we pulled in for the night in Miltenberg, which is full of gaily-painted, gabled houses and narrow streets.

The 'Handbuch' indicated a small yacht harbour at Wertheim, off the main channel on a tributary called the River Tauber. This proved to be shallow and weedy but, creeping gingerly towards the moorings, we were helped by a genial harbourmaster to the only unoccupied space.

Similar in age to Miltenberg, Wertheim once thrived on fishing, and murals on the remaining fishermen's cottages depict the industry. But today tourism is the mainstay of the town, which is overlooked by a castle that defied several bloody assaults upon it.

We were now entering wine country, with vineyards clinging tenaciously to the steep slopes beside the river.

Entering Wiirzburg by water is quite impressive, not least because of the Alte Mainbriicke bridge, with its 12 statues. Amongst the figures depicted are the Irishman St Killan and the two compatriots with whom he founded this great ecclesiastical city.

Near the top of the Main navigation we turned into the River Regnitz, where a small yacht club has a line of pontoons. From here, it was a 60p bus ride into the ancient city of Bamberg, which was miraculously left unscathed by the war and is now a magnet for tourists.

NEW ROAD EAST

For me, one of the attractions of Bamberg was the junction of the first canal to span the rivers Main and Danube. The 172km, 101-lock Ludwig's Canal was built by Ludwig I, King of Bavaria, and opened in 1846. It was never a great success, but even in World War Two German gunboats used it to get to the Black Sea.

Ludwig's Canal was abandoned in 1949, but ahead of us now lay its modern successor, the Rhein-Main-Donau (Rhine-Main-Danube) Canal.

When it was built in the 1990s, the RMD was the subject of some opposition from environmentalists, **and** from Dutch and German bargemasters worried that the Eastern Bloc countries would undercut them. From what we saw, their fears were unfounded; trees are growing on the canal's grass-covered banks, and we did not meet one Eastern European barge.

The first four locks on the new canal introduce you gently, as the deepest has a mere 10m rise. But the locks are difficult to use, especially if, like us, you are shorthanded.

Oddly, for such a modern canal, many of the locks have fixed bollards set in the wall. Your bow rope has to be attached to one of these while your stern rope is taken round a ladder. The water enters with some force from beneath, pushing you away from the wall, so some strength is needed to hold a boat steady.

Erlangen lock, which is 18.3m deep, was almost our downfall. Unknown to us, the tail of our stern rope, besides going over a rung in the ladder, had dropped down between the ladder and the wall and looped itself around a lower rung. We started to rise, but suddenly stopped. Hearing a creaking noise, I looked out to see the stern rope stretched as taut as a bow string, and Darius started to lean over.

I grabbed the hacksaw I keep in the wheelhouse, and frantically sawed at the rope. It parted with a bang and we lurched upright.

BEAUTIFUL BAVARIA

We stopped briefly in Nurnberg (Nuremberg), at the Nurnberg Yacht Club, and explored the city made famous by Hitler's chilling rallies and the subsequent war crimes court. Then, on a blisteringly hot day, we climbed the last four locks to the summit level. We were now at an altitude of 406m (1320ft), the highest Darfus has ever been.

Starting our descent towards the Danube, we pulled into a marina at Berching and were treated to the most amazing reception. Anni, the harbourmaster, even cooked us an evening meal.

Of all the places we visited on this cruise, Berching stands out in our memory, typifying the hospitality and joie-de-vivre of the Bavarian people. The medieval town, still enclosed by its turreted walls, has no great historic monuments, no shopping malls and no great bustle about it, but, as one of the locals pointed out, "We have three breweries!"

In the small marinas where we stopped along the RMD, the enormous passing barges affected the water level in the same kind of way as the Severn bore. At Sportboothafen Riedenburg, one barge created such a wash that it ripped out one of our deck cleats.

Below Berching, the canal largely uses the route of the River Altmühl, wending its way between high cliffs with castles and chapels perched on top. On one stream running into the river, a beaver had built a lodge.

The final two locks had second, user-operated smaller chambers, which were wide enough for us to pass through.

DANUBE BLUES

Just past Kelheim lock we reached our main goal: the River Danube. Unfortunately our secondary aim was immediately foiled: the manager at Marina Saal, where we stopped to refuel and repair the ripped-out cleat, told us that Vienna would be out of the question. There was insufficient water in the upper river due to a local drought.



Darius at Kelheim lock, one of several on the Rhine-Main_Danube route, that has a small separate chamber to offer leisure craft a quicker passage.

To say we were disappointed is an understatement, but we determined to go as far downstream as we could. The following morning we reached the Danube's most inland port, Regensburg, where we found a mooring at the local motorboat club.

There are two possible routes through Regensburg: one via the big barge lock and the other, which we took, passing under the medieval multi-arched Steinerne Brücke. Beyond this lies a barge museum and the commercial port, where we saw barges from as far away as Hungary, Romania and Russia, as well as some of the large hotel boats that ply the river.

Below the city we passed through open countryside as the river meanders along its flood plain, just occasionally touching a hillside.

At Geisling, the schleusemeister (lock-keeper) informed us that the water level at Straubing was only 0.75m, which signalled the limit of our exploration. Reluctantly, we began the long trek home.

POLICE & SIRENS

Our return to Mainz was a hurried affair, as we were now hearing of low water levels on the Rhine.

Rounding one bend on the Main, we encountered a passenger boat coming up on the wrong side, heading straight for us. I held my course, expecting it to move to starboard, which it eventually did, its skipper emitting quantum oaths.

I thought no more of it, but was surprised to be pulled over by the police in Ochsenfurt and told I was in violation of the river regulations, which say that leisure boats must get out of the way of all vessels over 15m (49ft). I pointed out that the other vessel was on the wrong side of the river on a bend, and that if I had swerved to port and he to starboard the situation would have been even more dangerous.

"Boats under 15m have no rights on the river," was the reply, "so I must fine you €100, but as you are a foreigner I will reduce it to €20." Reluctantly, I paid up.

On the Rhine, we were relieved to see that there was enough water (at least 1.5m) for the barges still to be moving. So we continued downstream through the dramatic Rhine Gorge and past the famous Lorelei Rock, where the mythical siren Lorelei is said to have lured sailors to their death.

At each of the marinas in Oberwinter, Koln (Cologne), Diisseldorf and Wesel, we hit a silt bar as we turned to enter, and had to push through mud for perhaps 20m. Several other boats went aground and could not get in at all.

Passing Lobith, we entered the Netherlands with some relief, knowing that depth would no longer be a problem.



Above left: Lokeren proved an attractive diversion from the principal canal route through Belgium



Above right: The crew.

FINAL PUSH

After passing through Hollands Diep and stopping at our old favourite Dutch estuary port, Willemstad, we took the Zuid Beveland Canal to Wemeldinge, ran down the Westerschelde and joined the Gent Ship Canal at Terneuzen to take us back into Belgium.

In contrast to the token fee we had paid for using the canals of southern Belgium on our outbound trip, a passage from Gent to the French border, through industrial Flemish Belgium, meant having to buy a licence costing €23 (about £ 15).

After crossing the French/Belgian border we found ourselves back on the Grand Gabarit, fully three months after we had left it. Two days later we entered the Bassin Ouest in Calais, ready for a return crossing of the Dover Strait.

Factfile

CHARTBOOKS Carte-Guide Navicarte 14 'Nord Pas-de-Calais'. / 23 'Belgie'. / 17 'Marne au Rhin'. Guide Vagnon / 8 'Meuse/Canal de l'Est'. 'Rheinkarte, Bodensee to Nordsee' (Binnen schiffahrts-Verlag). 'European Waterways Map & Directory' (Euromapping).

PILOTS & GUIDES 'Cruising French Waterways' by Hugh McKnight (Adlard Coles Nautical). 'Inland Waterways of Germany' by Barry Sheffield (Imray). 'Main Handbuch' (DSV-Verlag) . 'Donau Handbuch, mit Main-Donau-Kanal' (DSV-Verlag) .

PAPERWORK

Essential Part I or Small Ships registration; evidence of VAT payment on the boat (or exemption); proof of third-party insurance; International Certificate of Competence with CEVNI inland waterways endorsement; passports for all crew.

Advisable E111 emergency medical treatment form; travel insurance.

FUEL

Average cost of diesel: France €0.85 (about 57p) per litre. Belgium / €0.38 (about 25p) per litre. /Germany €1.00 (about 67p) per litre.

MOORING FEES France mostly free; Nancy €7/night, Strasbourg €11/night. Belgium average €12/night. Germany average €23.50/night.