

Baltic Sea Cruise

Part I: Roffhausen to Rugen

By Peter Tait

By local canal to Wilhelmshaven, out into the North Sea, up the busy Elbe, through the Kiel Canal into the Baltic. The Baltic Sea, with no tide rise and fall, a long seafaring history, naked swimming the norm, medieval ex-communist coastal ports and a multitude of local boats proved to be a fascinating region to visit..

The North Sea

To an Aucklander used to the Hauraki Gulf sailing the North Sea is a nasty piece of water with strong currents, steep seas, shoals and wrecks, poor visibility and strictly administered rules and regulations with regard to commercial vessels. I was pleased to not be the captain!



Loading Orokawa for the 600 mile cruise

Jochen's 'Orokawa' is a Friendship 33, solid and roomy. The skipper is experienced in these waters - I had previously sailed with him to the island of Heligoland and down the North Sea to the Isselmeer and the Dutch canals. It's a well managed boat and always good fun!



Loading Orokawa for the 600 mile cruise

The familiar lists of provisions and things to be done was finally sorted and the boat loaded. During the summer months the boat lives alongside at the local boatyard and gets hauled out each winter as the canal freezes up - maximum convenience for just a nominal sum. We had a few miles of pleasant canal motoring to take us to Wilhelmshaven, a one time prosperous German naval town.

This Jade-Ems Canal is the northern end of the European network of canals. They are still used commercially and also by a large number of pleasure boats, both power and sail. Locks and bridges obliged as we readied for a dawn departure with the ebb tide into the North Sea. The next leg is the reason why not many craft from Central Europe make it to the Baltic - 100 miles of difficult water with strong tides, narrow channels, poor visibility and a lot of shipping.



Uncool marina manners but clever cod fishermen!



The Jade-Ems Canal to Wilhelmshaven



Rafts in the boatharbour often go 30 boats wide.



Sunrise departure into the North Sea

First stop Heligoland. Well sort of..

Once a WW2 submarine base Heligoland (Helgoland to Germans) is today a small resort island 20 miles out from the coast. Ferries make regular trips flooding the place each day with tourists. The island still shows signs of wartime damage - breakwaters pock marked with machine gun fire and the Uberland Wildlife Reserve is a mass of large bomb craters.

It's a Mecca for boaties who take the place over after the day-trippers get back on the ferry. The island nightlife is something else with cosy bars and friendly locals. As well as the social scene it's a great place to provision a boat, once duty free and these days simply cheap it was part of our plan to call in and load up with goodies for our four week cruise.

Two local folk tales always raise a laugh - the main headland on the island has a large thumb-like rock projecting up from the base of the cliff, sailors, homesick for their wives and girlfriends called it 'Lange Anna' and the name stuck. The numerous bomb craters in the rather bleak wildlife reserve offer respite from the keen wind providing a popular 'nest' for breeding seagulls and lovemaking humans alike.

But we didn't make it to the 'Mecca for boaties' on this trip (pics above are from a previous trip) - a faltering diesel finally stopped altogether just a couple of miles short of the island and with a nice sailing breeze wanting to take us towards the Elbe we headed off that way while the problem was looked at. A blocked fuel filter was the cause but by the time it was all back together we had settled in to a nice sail and with the tide under us we kept going. The breeze held and took us past the city of Bremen and on up the Elbe River one of Europe's busiest waterways with tankers, dredges, container vessels and all types of commercial craft going past in both directions. The 4 knot tide swept us up the channel edge, just clear of this amazingly busy 'ship motorway' - see heading photo page one.

The 99 kilometer Kiel Canal

The canal is a man-made waterway linking the busy Elbe River with the Baltic Sea, shortcutting the journey from Europe to Scandinavia, Russia, Poland and the Baltic States.

Facts and Figures: Length 99km, width 90 - 162m, depth 11m, speed limit 15 km/hour. There is a lock at each end but only a small difference in sea levels/.



The entrance to the 99 kilometer long Kiel Kanal

We entered the canal late in the day and motored to a canal-side area provided for small craft to tie up.

The following day saw us motoring all day except for a short stop at Rendsburg for provisions. Passing traffic and recreation activities shoreside provided all-day entertainment. Ferries and bridges, some quite ingenious re-connected roads and pathways severed when the canal was constructed - the best being a road and train bridge with a gondola 'ferry' suspended by cables beneath the bridge, see photo at right.

A system of canal-side traffic lights controlled the larger vessels, avoiding close quarters and passing in narrow areas. Small leisure boats like us simply kept out of the way. Prop wash was a hazard, on one occasion almost washing us into the bull rushes!



Constant entertainment on this autobahn for ships.

Viking Ship thumbs a ride

The small 'Viking Ship' on our tow line is a group of teenage school children on a summer adventure. The crew is mixed, girls and boys, accommodation is on board under a boom tent and propulsion is by sail or oar-power. The mission in this case was to circumnavigate the Danish Island of Runen, a trip of about 500 kilometers during the summer school holidays.



Numerous bridges and ferries - this 'ferry' suspended on cables beneath the bridge.



Numerous bridges and ferries - this 'ferry' suspended on cables beneath the bridge.

Kiel in the Baltic Sea

After the confined canal it was a pleasure to pop out into the sea again. I now understand fully what it's like to leave the Panama Canal and arrive in the Pacific - cruise book writers always give it a big mention! The Kiel Fjord, named so but more like a harbour really, is a stretch of water with a nice aspect and covered in sailing boats even on a weekday. Much more so than Auckland - perhaps this is the true 'City Of Sails'? Interesting to see the German America's Cup base along with all sorts of interesting craft, old, replica and new. We slipped in to the local marina for the night.



Old timers at the dock and the view from the memorial



U-Boot engine room - any one for claustrophobia?

Naval Memorial Museum

At Laboe on the eastern shore of the Kiel Fjord there is an impressive Naval Museum/Memorial dedicated to sailors who lost their lives in the two world wars. The museum contains an underground memorial hall, ships models, charts and displays and a 72m high viewing tower. Over 300,000 visitors per year look through the U-Boot U995 on display. This submarine is the same class as the one used in the movie 'Das Boot'. It's staggering to see a hull cram-packed with the technologies of the era but with few comforts for the crew.

Fehmarn Island

After a shortcut through a military area (not advised, we were chased out!) the breeze was nice and we headed east sailing the 42 miles to the small passage between Fehmarn Island and the mainland. The bridge over was a striking design carrying both autobahn and rail. A marina on the island was the stopping place for the night.



Impressive bridge over the Fehmarnsund

Warnemunde

Next stop Warnemunde. The day was uneventful, we tried to catch a fish but no sign of any sealife although we did see some small fishing craft. Warnemunde, the coastal 'suburb' of Rostok, once would have been a fashionable resort but today it seems to be still struggling to get back on it's feet after the long years of Communist rule. Nevertheless an interesting place to visit with a busy town basin for pleasure craft and a major ferry terminal linking to Scandinavia and all ports east.



Faded glory and cobbled streets of Warnemunde

Dasser Ort

About half way between Rostock and our destination the island of Rugen was the tiny man-made harbour of Dasser Ort. Carved out of the sand dunes it was a handy stopping place for the next night. Moorings were provided, bow on to a wooden jetty with stern line on to a mooring buoy. The Baltic has virtually no tide (and about 50% normal salt content as a result) so this type of hole-in-the-wall becomes possible with minimal dredging. The small harbour was also a base for the region's Coastguard.



Magical northern summer sun sets



A calm anchorage in a National Park area.

CRAAACK!! - Donner und Blitzen!

Generally for this part of our trip the weather had been good - warm with light to moderate winds and often no wind at all. But approaching the very narrow entrance to Dasser Ort out of nowhere the wind blew, the lightning flashed the thunder boomed and rain pored down. But getting in wasn't a problem thanks to the well buoyed approaches.

Typically this was the case especially in the Rugen area where criss crossing man-made channels required a lot of marking and created some bouyage puzzles for the navigators!



Orokawa's crew checking out the beach at Warnemunde - Theo, Gunter and Jochen the skipper.

The 'A' Crew

The crew for this part of the voyage had sailed together previously. Hilarious good times had earned us the title 'The A Crew' and so it was although there are signs that things might be slowing down. Theo at left is now retired from the position of City Safety Engineer, Gunter a senior Air Traffic Controller and Jochen the skipper at right, a ships services Design Engineer.

Where did the name 'Orokawa' come from I hear you ask? Well, it goes back to a holiday we all had at Orokawa in the Bay of Islands in New Zealand. It means 'calm anchorage' or similar, nice name for a boat.

The next day an un-eventful sail saw us at our destination, a large area of islands, sheltered waterways and National Park. At the small Barhoft marina a new crew had arrived by car - this time wives daughters and babies and no doubt a change of pace!

