

Baltic Cruise 2015 with a Sealine SC35

By Roger Wilson

Over the past years I have looked at the various cruises offered to the Baltic which went through the Kiel Canal, then I got to thinking why not take our own little cruise ship Hector.

This was mentioned to Sheila whose eyes rolled and then a look of fear moved in. Still not daunted I started looking for articles and information by others who have done similar trips and as always plenty of information was available and the idea started to seem quite feasible.

The obvious route was through the Dutch Canals, along the German coast into the Elbe and then a transit of the Kiel Canal and out into the Baltic, now that sounds easy enough. So now the serious research started and an investment in a couple of Pilot Guides the "Inland Waterways of the Netherlands" and "The Baltic Sea". I am not sure if these Pilot Guides are a best encouragement as they include plenty of warnings which can put you off going anywhere.

The first concern was mooring which seemed in the majority of cases to involve going between 2 posts 4 metres apart, fixing your stern lines to them as you passed and then carry on forward, with a boat of 3.8 metres beam this did read like a challenge. Naturally I did not dwell on this subject in discussions with Sheila. Further once in between your posts you required to leave the boat at the bow and this required a suitable ladder so time for another engineering modification.

It really did pay to do the homework as we also required to have our VHF radio modified for the canals to be ATIS compliant and a number allocated so slowly the preparation continued. One real concern I did have was that we would be waiting on many, many bridges to open as we passed through the Netherlands and knowing how Hector never likes to keep still for more than a second how would we cope with this as the winds blow across the flat landscape. I decided to invest in a stern thruster to help with the challenges of many bridges, locks and the dreaded posts. This was a good decision for us and certainly reduced the stress levels on the crew and I believe the boat.

We departed in early May just as my daughter moved into her first flat in London and Dad's services were required, Hector must be one of the few boats to sail with 10 litres of Dulux Jasmin Shimmer paint and rollers. An extended stay in Dover with trips up to London with the Dulux delayed matters but eventually we were ready to start the adventure.

The Channel crossed and the trip really began, I will not attempt to list all the ports visited but generally cover the areas visited. We entered the Dutch canals at Vlissingen and the Netherlands proved to be the surprise of the trip in the most positive way. From berthing in the middle of Amsterdam to being tied up on the banks of a canal under a windmill we loved it.



Further the cost of berthing was a fraction of what we paid at home and no problems experienced in finding a berth for the night. We crossed the Netherlands including time in the IJsselmeer which gave us a chance to open up the throttles before back to canal speed as we made our way to Delfzijl and out into the River Eems. I perhaps became a little too relaxed in the canals and forgot the simple rules of wind over a 4 knot tide in the River Eems which was a real wakeup call as Hector took a bit of a bashing.

Our next point of call was the German Island of Helgoland which has a very interesting history having once flown the British flag, one attraction of this small rock was duty free diesel and gin, not sure why this is but ferries arrive every day from the mainland laden with folks with big bags attracted to this duty free enclave. But the slight diversion more than paid for itself as we bunkered with Bombay Sapphire gin, beer and diesel.

Days later we arrived at the entrance to the Kiel Canal and now I really felt we were getting somewhere. I am not sure what I expected of the Kiel Canal but it was an extremely enjoyable transit through the countryside with plenty of interesting shipping around to keep your attention.

Passing the Minerva cruise ship we really did feel small but would not wanted to swap places at all. We stopped overnight along the canal at a marina in Rendsburg and watched the world go by. So another box was ticked and I was not disappointed.



Departed the Kiel Canal into a very busy stretch of water as it was Kiel Week with boats everywhere. We headed down the Kiel Bight and into the Baltic Sea turning to starboard and the German coast. For the next few weeks we visited the Hanseatic German ports with a real history and also used the opportunity to take the train visiting Lubeck and Berlin where we stayed a few nights in a hotel and unashamed luxury. Our last port of call on this coast was Griefswald where we took the opportunity to visit the Hanse factory where Sealines are now built. I had toured the original Sealine factory at Kidderminster when Hector was on build and it was interesting to make comparisons between the two facilities.

Next stop was the Danish Island of Bornholm a holiday island and very pretty, a few days there and we were off to Sweden. It would have been nice to stay longer but it was one of those decisions made by the weather forecast, leave today or likely spend another week. So landfall was made at Karlskrona the naval port for Sweden, not the best arrival with rain beating down and the search for a berth. One difference we found on this trip is it is a rarity for a marina to acknowledge your arrival by VHF and you arrive and search for a berth which has a little green flag at the end of it showing it is vacant, still at least here at Karlskrona it was finger berths.

Now we had reached Sweden it was decision time, head North knowing we would leave Hector in Sweden for the winter or go East and then run for home. We made the decision to go East and explore the south coast of Sweden then run north up the West coast of Sweden and then cross to Copenhagen. So weeks later we were passing under the Oresund Bridge linking Sweden and Denmark the star of the television series "the bridge". Our last port of call in Sweden was at Larskrona when on entering the small harbour looking for a berth the harbour master leaned out of

his bedroom window advising us where to go. He followed this by coming down and offering us a great deal for three nights so good I wondered if he really was the harbourmaster as I handed over my Krona. An interesting castle to tour, a vintage car and bike rally, the sun shining a perfect end to our visit to Sweden.

From Sweden we headed across the Oresund (The Sound) to Copenhagen for a few city days taking in the sights, I had visited Copenhagen many times on business but this was a chance to see more of the city. They did appear however to be digging it up everywhere we went, just timing I suppose. From Copenhagen we now headed South on a great run stopping over at various small marinas as we headed towards Kiel. We knew the weather was going to blow up for a few days so we made sure we found shelter to avoid this and for the first time struggled to find a berth as everyone else had same idea. Eventually the owners of a Fleming motorboat invited us to raft alongside as many of the yachts were not quite so welcoming but in the end all was well.

On arrival at Kiel we found a Marina where we could leave Hector for a couple of weeks and then took the train to Hamburg and a flight home to catch up with family and all those other demands. We had taken a similar break on the trip out flying home from Groningham for a week , on a 4 month trip these breaks worked well for us.

Then we were back in Kiel our batteries recharged and waiting to enter the locks for the canal and there was another Sealine SC35 flying the German flag, they also were stopping en route and we tied up alongside and spent a pleasant evening discussing the merits and otherwise of our Sealines over a few beers, perfect.



From departing the Kiel Canal at Brunsbuttel into the Elbe and out to the North Sea and a repeat visit to Helgoland to fill up the tanks. Then it was off to the Dutch coast but we met some challenging weather and decided to cut short our passage past the German East Frisian islands and seek shelter in Norderney as life was not pleasant, it was an interesting approach with very strong currents and winds but once in the shelter of the island on the south side all was well. Time to relax, dry out and enjoy this pleasant holiday island. We were prepared for this and had looked at likely diversion ports knowing this stretch of water can be tough on a small boat.



Soon we were back in the Netherlands and the joy of canals; we were able to take a different route on the way back and visited new places including Delft and the chance to learn about pottery. We did have to pass through Amsterdam and it was the end of “Amsterdam in Sail “week held every five years, the waters were mobbed but a great atmosphere and some lovely vessels of all sizes on the water. The locks were very busy that day and fenders were a necessity.



We still had one last challenge to overcome on the way back and that involved crossing the Traffic Separation Scheme at the Dover Straits, preparing to cross I let a few ships go and then set off at the required 90deg and noticed it was getting darker and darker and then the heavens opened, I could not see a thing in any direction it was like someone was pouring water directly over us. Now this is a busy stretch of water for this but thank heavens the radar worked and so did the AIS and I really needed both. Entered Dover harbour after clearance granted and it was one wet and soggy Hector and two relieved crew members but we had made it and now back in UK and familiar waters.

Here is a summary of the trip:

Distance travelled - 1954 nm

Duration 121days

Marinas visited 43

Engine hours 221

Locks entered 29

Lifting bridges passed 166.

It was a marvellous trip and Hector did well with few issues to contend with and never a show stopper. So what now? I was thinking about a return to the Baltic and some unfinished business a transit of the Gota Kanal across Sweden now there's a thought!