

Netherlands Staandmastroute 2017

Levington to Oostende 7th & 8th August 2017 (87NM)

2215 finds us slipping out of Suffolk Yacht Harbour at the start of our 2017 summer cruise to the Netherlands. The ever evolving plan is to follow the Standing Mast Route from Vlissingen northwards to Amsterdam and the Markermeer. With just two crew aboard we have opted to take the shorter crossing to Oostende and to leave in the dark to be sure to arrive at an unfamiliar port in the daylight. We know that we have red diesel in the tank so are wary of visiting Belgium with their occasionally over-zealous revenue men, but have decided that if we turn away from everything that could go wrong on this trip we will never depart.

Having waited for a couple of windy days to pass we have a forecast that meets our criteria; we are happy to make this passage with F4 or F5 forecast but no more. As it turns out we have variable light winds forecast that will result in us motor-sailing the entire trip.

The full moon is already lighting our way as we motor past Felixstowe container port and on towards the Sunk Precautionary Area. By 0525 we are safely across the southern section of the Sunk TSS and by 0940 we are across both lanes of the Nord Hinder TSS; each crossed with very little traffic seen and only one change of course to pass astern of a Dutch coaster. The AIS is proving to be worth its weight in gold, the acronyms CPA (closest point of approach) and TCPA (time to CPA) seem to dominate most conversations. The facility to call up specific vessels by name is also an invaluable asset although we have not found the need to use DSC. The West Hinder TSS proves to be more demanding with a lot of traffic but it is mercifully narrow and crossed safely and relatively quickly. From there it is simple 'join the dots' waypoint to waypoint sailing into Oostende outer harbour.

We have had recommendations to visit all three marinas but have selected Mercator, dismissing the delays caused by the lock as we plan to stay and relax into the start of our holiday. On reflection this was a good decision, Mercator marina is central with good access to the historic city centre and some smaller 'metro' style supermarkets. Oostende proved to be a pleasant introduction to continental cruising with the highlight being the Manuscript bar specialising in Belgian beers and blues music. The annual festival was a disappointment, despite the Christmas theme, après-ski bar and animatronic flamingo.



Moon rising over Felixstowe container port



Mercator Marina, Oostende

The helpful harbour master did find the forms for us to record our entry into the Schengen area but once I had written our passport details on them he placed them in the box saying “nobody ever collects them”.

Oostende to Middelburg 11th August 2017 (27NM)

Our exit from Mercator was, as we had been warned, a slow process. Once through the outer bridge we were held in the waiting area before being allowed into the lock which seemed to take an age. Once out of the lock we were then held in the Montgomerydok as a tug entered the port. While waiting in the lock we resolved that considering all of the locks, bridges and box berths we were going to have to negotiate over the next three weeks, some gelcoat damage was probably inevitable before we got home.

Sailing up the coast was reminiscent of sailing along the Norfolk coast, albeit with the slight interruption of the huge port of Zeebrugge. As we crossed the Westerschelde, swapping the Belgian courtesy flag to the Dutch one, commercial traffic increased from three directions and it took a degree of brinksmanship to get across to the northern shore ready to enter Vlissingen (Flushing). A Dutch skipper in Oostende had recommended us to pass straight through Vlissingen and head for Middelburg a short distance up the canal which we did. This was our introduction to the fabulous Dutch inland waterways and the seemingly eccentric ways of the Dutch.



Into the canal system at Vlissingen

Middelburg was typical of many of the ports that we visited, a beautiful old quay, in the middle of the town, surrounded by historic buildings, bars and shops. You can call Dutch harbours on your VHF radio but most of the time there is no reply. They do answer the phone but generally don't take bookings, “call when you arrive, we find you a space”. This is all rather alarming to our British sensibilities but in the Netherlands we discovered that it is normal, if there is no space, there will be a space nearby.

Bridges

Bridges are all manned either directly or remotely by CCTV and will open for you either on demand, or at specific times. Opening times are detailed in the ANWB Wateralmanak Part 2 or on some of their excellent charts. While planning your day it is essential to look at the bridge opening times. Some bridges, especially the railway ones will open at specific times of the day, in many cases there will be only two or three openings



Rail bridge at Dordrecht

per day. Bigger road bridges will open to a schedule, for example the Schellingwouderbrug to the east of Amsterdam opens at twenty minutes past, twenty minutes to and on the hour; with breaks in service during the rush hours. Smaller bridges open on demand, there seems to be no value in calling up the control rooms, they can see you and will open as soon as they can. Very few bridges are available 24 hours a day so it is best to check operating hours in the Wateralmanak or on your charts. Our experience was that any bridge or lock that was likely to cause a lengthy delay would have waiting facilities, either a pontoon or piles. Many of the bridges have fixed sections that you are free to pass under at any time, the air draught is indicated by gauges often positioned on the bridge abutments or on posts as you approach. Most fixed bridge sections had an air draught of between 11m and 12m, slightly less than the 12.5m clearance we needed.

The lights indicating to skippers what is going on are clear and simple, some light combinations seem to be open to interpretation, others need to be adhered to strictly.



Waiting for the rail bridge at Gouda

- Red over red: No service, this indicates a lengthy delay and seems to be used when there is a problem
- Red: Bridge is in service and will open. A bridge may open on red, you must not pass through, there may be commercial traffic coming in the opposite direction or you may pass through to be blocked by a second bridge that will not open for many hours. You will then be trapped on a short inhospitable section of waterway with no waiting pontoon.
- Red over green: Service is imminent, road barriers will start coming down. As the bridge opens locals will often make a judgement and pass through.
- Green: Go.

Middelburg to Ooltgensplaat 13th August 2017 (35NM)

After Middleburg we had been advised to visit Veere but because we were conscious of the need to be in Amsterdam by the 20th August we decided to press on further. In beautiful sunny conditions and very light winds we exited Middleburg through the 0815 bridge opening and motored up to and through the Veere Schutsluis and into the Veerse Meer. The Veerse Meer is a beautiful stretch of water somewhat reminiscent of the English lake district. As we meandered our way broadly east we resolved to return and spend rather longer here visiting some of the beautiful bathing beaches and secluded anchorages. By

midday we were through the Zandkreeksluis and bridge and on our way north, then east through the Oosterschelde. This is a significantly larger area of water and was very busy with sailing craft. With the breeze now blowing F3-4, albeit from an unfavourable direction we decided to compromise our schedule and sail rather than motor, it was a joy to have the motor off for a while. We had planned to pass through the Krammersluizen, into the Hollands Diep and then over night at Willemstad, but as the sailing had cost us some time we elected to look for a spot just before the Volkeraksluizen. The first mate found Ooltgensplaat in the almanac, on paper it looked like somewhere to avoid with a narrow canal entrance and charted depths of 0.9m. A phone call to the harbourmaster revealed that there were spaces and that we could moor 'anywhere'. The narrow entry canal, overgrown with trees did require the keel to be raised about a foot but once in revealed a tiny but beautiful harbour. We selected a suitably sized box berth and were safely moored by 1830. We fancied a meal out and Trip Advisor offered a little hope listing the Café de Brak as being #1 of 1 things to do in Ooltgensplaat! It was closed.



Ooltgensplaat

Box Berths

We found this quote on the Woodbridge Cruising Club web site “There can be few greater spectator sports than an English couple attempting to berth into continental box moorings – nor a greater cause of marital disharmony!”.

There are many differing sets of advice on getting into box berths so I will only share a small number of the tips that we learned through experience. Fenders up! You will ideally be allocated a berth that is the right width to match your beam (know your beam, and add 100mm when you tell the harbour master) and it is easy to snag a fender on one of the post, this will wreck your approach line and slow the boat. Long lines on the stern; if you are allocated an over-length berth your stern lines will run out very quickly leaving you embarrassingly short of the quay. A long line on the bow in case you don't make it to the quay. If you are only able to lasso one post on the



Box berth in Middelburg

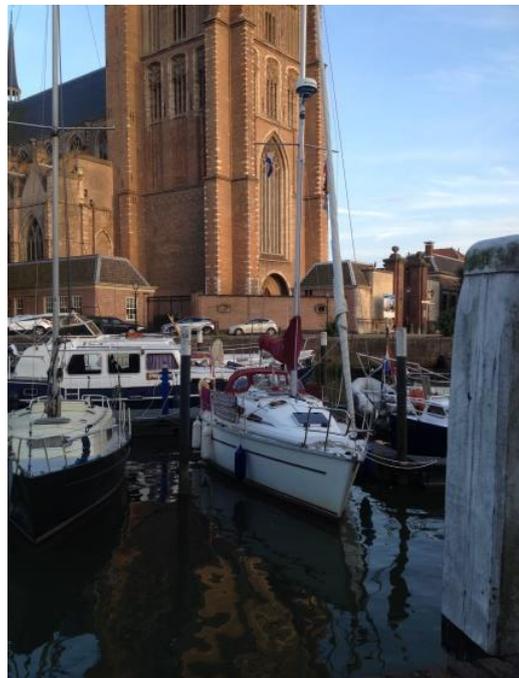
way in get the windward one, rigging the boat hook to pass lines around posts (and bollards in locks) is a big help. Try not to foul your prop with your own lines too often.

The final comment on box berths came from the first mate at the end of our trip “I wish we had box berths at home”. With a bit of thought and care we found box berths to be no more difficult than finger pontoons, and in many ways easier. There is also a joy in the way that a boat gently ambles around in a box berth rather than snubbing against a pontoon.

The Dutch don't share our obsession with talking about; worrying about or reading about berthing. This is probably because they do it so much more often than us. A typical day out in the Netherlands could consist of three locks and half a dozen waiting pontoons/piles so their boat handling in confined spaces is very good. This is handy because many of their 'marinas' are about twice the size of the average English back garden.

Ooltgesnplaat to Dordrecht 14th August 2017 (14NM)

Another beautiful sunny day with no wind. An agreeable lazy morning as we departed late to catch the favourable tide as we approached Dordrecht. Just the one lock today and a short motor through the Hollands Diep and then the Dordtsche Kil up to the railway bridge at Dordrecht. As we waited on the pontoon for the bridge to open it became clear that there was going to be an unseemly scramble for the few spaces remaining in the three available marinas. We elected to go for the smaller Maartensgat harbour hoping that they would be able to find a space for our relatively small boat. The cheerful and ubiquitously moustachioed harbour master waved us through the swing bridge, allocated us a berth and shouted something that we missed as we headed towards our berth. Having tied up safely in a very tight spot the



Maartensgat Marina, Dordrecht

harbour master arrived to tell us that we had to turn the boat around, part way through this manoeuvre I managed to wrap a line in our propeller! Fortunately we had lines ashore and were able to rope her back into her tiny spot. The harbour master then announced ‘in ten minutes we close, you (pointing at Belinda) must come to the office to pay, you (pointing at me) can swim’. Dordrecht is a lovely town and Maartensgat is a very picturesque harbour right alongside a beautiful brick built church, with a tuneful but persistent carillon. The highlight of our stay was an outstanding Vietnamese food and music festival that more than made up for the disappointment in Oostende.

Dordrecht to Amsterdam 16th to 19th August 2017 (41NM)

For four days we head north in beautiful weather stopping in Gouda and Oude Wetering heading towards Amsterdam. At 2330 on the eve of the skippers birthday we find ourselves moored in the Nieuwe Meer in the southern outskirts of Amsterdam, awaiting instructions for the night convoy through the city. One lock and ten bridges, including two railway bridges will open sequentially to allow us and another 14 yachts through the city and into the Noordzeekanaal giving us access to Amsterdam's marinas. As the clock ticks over past midnight we get our instructions on the VHF, the lock will open at 0030. This is the part of the trip that we have worried about most, there is intermittent drizzle but mercifully the winds are light making low speed boat handling less fraught. As we pass through each bridge everybody accelerates to make sure that they don't miss the next one, then we all stop and wait three or four minutes for the next to open. The whole experience is slightly surreal as you manoeuvre your boat through the centre of one of Europe's great cities. Once through the railway bridge next to the Central Station the local boats all unexpectedly dived for the bank and tied up so we followed suit. Chatting to a Dutch skipper revealed that it was best to stay here rather than find, and pay for, a marina berth. I can honestly say that I woke up on my birthday 'tied up in the street' in Amsterdam. The following morning we made our way through the last road bridge and across to the Aeolus marina. We had planned to go to the huge new Amsterdam Marina but it was closed for the boat show. Aeolus turned out to be a fantastic find as an alternative, tiny, cheap, friendly and with two supermarkets within 200m.



Tied up in the street in Amsterdam

Obviously a birthday in Amsterdam will involve all of the city's famed distractions so we headed off on the free foot ferry. We spent a very pleasant afternoon at a canal side café eating, drinking and listening the Dutch National Youth Orchestra play Beethoven's fifth Piano Concerto on a floating stage. My birthday was topped off by the arrival of our daughter to enjoy the last leg of the trip and to help us with the longer passage home from Ijmuiden.

Amsterdam to Wells-next-the-Sea 25th and 26th August 2017 (153NM)

Following a very pleasant stay in Amsterdam and a couple of nights in Marken it was time to head home. We departed Aeolus at 0550 (CET) and were out through Ijmuiden by 0930. Winds were light and variable as forecast, but it was sunny and warm so the majority of the return trip was conducted with the diesel and the autopilot on. The plan had been to head for Lowestoft but by 2140 we were making such good progress that we decided to divert north and head for home. Unlike the outbound trip there was no moon and by 2330 it was as dark as a pocket. The Ijmuiden crossing is much more straightforward than the more southerly routes with no TSSs and much more simple DWR to cross. Despite clearing a gas rig by a mile we were stridently ushered away by its guard vessel which came rushing across and placing itself between us and the rig. Solo sailing in the small



Gas rig on another flat calm North Sea crossing

hours towards Haisborough Gat the traffic was increasing and I was beginning to make questionable decisions due to tiredness so I roused the crew and headed below for my allocated hours sleep. I awoke three hours later to find us off Cromer at breakfast time! The crew looked justifiably proud of themselves having managed the ship superbly through the most complex part of the voyage (Cromer crab pots?). Back on a familiar coast with familiar tides we soon worked out that we could just about make Wells so for the last three hours of a busy month the poor old diesel was pushed to its limits. With a raised keel and a little ploughing we were rafted alongside in the familiar surroundings of Wells by 1330 (DST).

DATE	NAME	OWNER	LENGTH	LAST PORT	NEXT PORT	DE
16-8-17	BONNIE-MAC	HUNT	11m	ZAANDAM	GRIMSBY	
20-8-17	LIBERTY	LEE	14m	LOWESTOFT	GRIMSBY	
20-8-17	AMIGO II	HARTSTONE	10m	LOWESTOFT	GRIMSBY	
20-8-17	HORNA MAY	BULGIN	42'	-	GRIMSBY	
20-8-17	OCEAN SPIRIT	PRUDHOE	42'	GRIMSBY	GRIMSBY	
26-8-17	FRAMINGO	SMITH	8.4 ^m	AMSTERDAM	BRANCASTOR	

Wells Harbour berthing board

After a couple of days rest in Wells we made our way back to Brancaster, beaching the boat on Holkham beach over a tide to get her cleaned up. The total trip from Brancaster to Brancaster was 605NM, which included a week on the rivers Ore, Alde, Deben, Orwell and Stour before departing for the Low Countries. We sailed very little once abroad clocking up 102 engine hours, this would have been much less had we been able to sail the North Sea crossings.

Once you are abroad there are many opportunities to sail, especially in the south and further north in the Markermeer and IJsselmeer. In the canals it is possible to sail depending on your schedule but a significant proportion of your trip will be under motor. The perceived difficulties such as locks and bridges are generally navigated without difficulty and everywhere that you go there are lovely people to meet and fascinating things to see. During the trip we passed through 52 opening bridges and 14 locks, we also managed to avoid causing any damage to the gel coat and feel like the practice has left our boat handling significantly improved.

Plans for the 2018 cruise?
Netherlands again!



Traditional boats in Marken.