

DUTCH DODGE



Tony Fleming and the crew of a Fleming 55 put into the Netherlands on the basis that it was 'any port in a storm'. As it turned out, a long diversion via inland waters made their cruise.

Trying to keep the binoculars steady, I scanned the wildly gyrating horizon for the buoy marking our next waypoint. Cresting the top of a wave, the small black speck swam into the circle, a reassuring signpost in a watery wasteland.

I was glad to be in a boat with a fully-equipped wheelhouse and not perched on a flybridge at the top of a perilous ladder. We were 24 hours into our North Sea crossing from southern England to the Kiel Canal, bound for the Baltic. The wind had been out of the north for a week, and the shallow seas had built into a tumultuous confusion guaranteed to test even the most battle-hardened stomach.

Ozmaiden, a Fleming 55, was taking the conditions in her stride, but her crew were becoming a little frayed at the edges. Two out of six were out for the count.

"This is not a whole lot of fun," said Egil Paulsen, the boat's owner and skipper. "How many more hours before we reach shelter?"

One of the crew, Alex, checked his figures carefully. "I make it another 38 hours," he said. "Always assuming," he added as the 30-knot wind ripped the foaming crest from a growling greybeard and hurled it against the windshield, "that it doesn't get any worse."

Above left: the Flemings, man and boat. Background photograph: one North Sea crossing on which there was not much to look forward to. Right: a more pleasant route to the Baltic, a diversion through the Dutch canals and a glimmer of sunshine.

We looked at each other uneasily. Crew fatigue was becoming a concern, and even a minor problem could precipitate a crisis. It seemed like a good time to come up with an alternative plan.

Alex studied the chart. "If we act now, we could head for Holland. But if we wait, we will have to keep going." The final decision was up to Egil. There was relief all around when he turned the bows towards land.

With the wind and waves now behind us, what had been a white-knuckle ordeal turned into an exhilarating ride, as the boat picked up her skirts and fled before the mountains of grey water rising behind the transom. As we surfed down the fronts of the waves, the log registered speeds as high as 18 knots and spray exploded to either side in hissing

sheets of foam. Almost imperceptibly, a grey silver of land rose above the tossing horizon, and in less than four hours we were alongside Vlissingen Lock in blissfully flat water.

After a good night's sleep we reviewed the situation. With more gales forecast, no-one was very keen to return to the conditions of the previous day. But the tyranny of our schedule meant we could ill afford to sit around and wait for the weather to improve.

"Why don't we continue north through the canals?" suggested Alex, who had cruised before in the Low Countries. "We can exit back into the North Sea at the German border, and even if the weather is still rough it will only be a short run to the Elbe."

So it was that we came to enjoy a delightful



interiude through some of the canals of the Netherlands.

Although only 190 miles from north to south and 120 miles from east to west, the country boasts 4600 miles of inland navigation. Locks are few in number and small in their changes of level, but where seawater meets freshwater they prevent salt from contaminating the canals and rivers.

Many of the canals have low banks and are raised above the level of the surrounding countryside, and it is hard to think of a better way to see the

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Netherlands than gliding serenely over it by boat. Our spacious flybridge was like a magic carpet, but with more comfortable seating.

In this country of extraordinary neatness, it seems every blade of grass is in its appointed place. Black and white Friesian cattle, as sleek as seals, graze on immaculate meadows in broad landscapes under open skies.

Bridges are numerous, and come in every shape and variety. Some of the lower ones pivot around a centre point; others swing aside or hinge with an assortment of counterweights; we even passed

under one which lifted straight up. The only times we were delayed were at the occasional railway bridges which open just a few times per day to avoid disrupting busy train schedules.

Our route took us first in the general direction of Rotterdam, the largest container port in the world, alternating between rural waterways and open bodies of water such as the Oosterschelde, Grevelingenmeer and Haringvliet. Then we passed historic Dordrecht and spent our first night at the cheese town of Gouda, moored astern of a huge barge loaded with gravel.

Over 100ft (30m) long, with a single screw and twin rudders, these unwieldy vessels transport bulky cargoes across the length and breadth of Europe. They are often run by just a husband and wife team, with enviable lack of fuss. Even with wheelhouses sunk low into the hull, to clear low bridges, it is amazing how neatly they manoeuvre through the narrowest gaps. For the most part the barge skippers were very considerate, although on one heart-stopping occasion we were squeezed between the bank and a high wall of fast-moving steel wall by a maritime yahoo.

“How do you manage in the fog?” we asked one bargee. “We just continue, using radar,” he replied with a smile. “Sometimes we cannot see the bow.” We were told their children were sent to special bargees’ boarding schools during the week and returned to their craft at weekends.

Late in the afternoon of the second day we reached the charming little town of Haarlem, dating from the 10th Century, where the narrow canal twists and turns through picturesque streets. A cheerful operator waved as we passed through the first of many bridges. At the next, the face at the controls looked strangely familiar. By the third, there was no doubt — it was either the same man or his

Tony Fleming

The author of this feature is the Englishman behind the Fleming 50, 53 and 55 displacement cruisers, which were designed in the USA and are built in Taiwan.

Tony Fleming previously worked as yard manager for Grand Banks, but branched out several years ago with his associate Anton Emmerton.

The Fleming 50 was the subject of a Boat Report in the July 1991 issue of MBM.

Below: ‘it’s safe to come up top now, and the scenery has improved.’ Bottom right: ‘but let’s continue to keep a good lookout, eh?’



Documentation

Skippers of boats which are either capable of 20kph (10.8 knots) or over 15m (49ft 2in) in length must carry a certificate of competence if they are to enter Dutch waters.

If they are cruising only on rivers, canals and lakes (which exclude the Westerschelde, the Oosterschelde, the IJsselmeer and Waddenzee), after entering at IJmuiden, Hoek van Holland or Stellendam, a Helmsman's Overseas Certificate of Competence will suffice. Otherwise they must have at least a Coastal Skipper Practical Certificate.

Note that by entering the waterways at Vlissingen (considered to be in the Westerschelde), by exiting at Delfzijl, and by crossing the IJsselmeer, the Fleming 55 Ozmaiden had to comply with the more stringent requirement.

For details of both the Helmsman's and Coastal Skipper certificates, contact the Royal Yachting Association. Tel: 0703 629962.

All vessels cruising in Dutch waters must also have on board Vol 1 of the ANWB 'Almanak Voor Watertoerisme', which is published in Dutch only but should be available in the UK through leading chart distributors.

It is also compulsory to know the VHF radio listening watch regulations, and always to listen to the channel appropriate to the designated area you are in. This information is published on ANWB charts and in almanacs, but note that 1994 almanacs do not have up-to-date information on the Schelde radio channels.

Charts & maps

Admiralty

325 (approaches to Westerschelde and Vlissingen), 3510 (Ems estuary and Eemskanaal).

Hydrografische Kaart

1803, 1805, 1807, 1809, 1810.

ANWB Netherlands

Waterway Maps

set of 18 detailed maps covering Dutch waterways (excluding IJsselmeer).

Nauticring

map of Netherlands waterways.

(apart from the Admiralty charts, all the above are published in the Netherlands and are widely available there. Stockists in the UK include Imray and Kelvin Hughes)



twin brother. We watched as the bridge closed behind us, and saw him jump on his bike and start pedalling furiously to his next rendezvous. The canal was open only one way at a time, and he would work his way back and forth with each convoy of boats.

We passed around the west of Amsterdam, and it was already dark when we stopped in a crowded marina. Alongside was a well-equipped sailboat which had the look of a vessel which had been through heavy weather, and whose crew had just dropped everything and collapsed from sheer exhaustion. She too had obviously sought refuge from the ravages of the North Sea, reaching Amsterdam via the Noordzeekanaal from IJmuiden.

The next day we headed out into the open waters of the Markermeer, then through the locks at Enkhuizen into the IJsselmeer. These bodies of water are large enough that land only appears as a thin grey line on the horizon, but they are very shallow and the navigation markers must be followed carefully to avoid running aground.

Barely visible to port was the town of Edam, another famous for its cheese, while a line of modern windmills stood sentinel over the expanse of water. Tall, slender and two-bladed, quite unlike their quaint four-bladed predecessors, they nowadays generate electricity to power the pumps rather than pumping water directly.

On the east side of the IJsselmeer, at Lemmer, we entered the Prinses Margrietkanaal, which links a series of meers (lakes) like pearls on a necklace. Today was Sunday, and the paths on both banks were thronging with people enjoying the summer

sunshine. An oceangoing motor yacht the size and style of our Fleming is an unusual sight in this area, and we attracted a lot of attention.

We were now in the province of Friesland and both the boats and the buildings were unmistakably Dutch in style. The waterways were thick with pleasure craft of every type, and the meers were a mass of multicoloured yachts tacking back and forth in the wind, still a brisk northerly.

We passed through the city of Groningen, and thence into the Eemskanaal. It was nearly midnight when we moored alongside a deserted barge in a rather scruffy basin. We were now only a few miles from the sea lock at Delfzijl, which opens into the Ems estuary and thence into the North Sea, just across the German border.

The 'ill wind' continued to blow, but it had certainly blown us some good. Without its torments, we would have missed what had turned out to be the best part of the trip. The canals of the Netherlands had given us a unique insight into a country we had not even expected to visit. □

