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OUR VOYAGE THROUGH THE MIRABELLE REGION

IN THE SUMMER OF 2011, THE 'DELFIN', A LINSSEN GRAND STURDY 29.9 AC, WAS OUR NEW HOME FOR FIVE WEEKS. WE CHARTERED A YACHT FOR THE TENTH TIME FROM THE WELCOMING SCHÖNBERGER FAMILY IN MERZIG AM SAAR (GERMANY), WHO ARE ALWAYS PLEASED TO SEE US AGAIN. IN SOME WAYS WE COULD RIGHTLY BE REGARDED AS 'REPEAT OFFENDERS'.

All charter yachts in Merzig are just as well equipped as private yachts. Only the stylishly written 'www.saar-moselyachtcharter.de' betrays the fact that it's a charter yacht.

Our 'Delfin' is really spacious. To give but one example: the 'cellar' can house as many as 36 1.5 litre bottles of water and dozens of bottles of wine, and it could have taken twice as many. No space whatsoever has been wasted, every nook and cranny can be used.

MERZIG AM SAAR – CHARMES ON THE CANAL DES VOSGES

We started our journey downstream in the afternoon in changeable weather. After cruising along the impressive loops in the Saar (Saarschleife), we arrived in Mettlach at the first of the three high river locks. We passed through the first Moselle lock in Grevenmacher in Luxembourg before mooring at the municipal jetty in Nittel. Later,

in the Champagne hall of the Hellershof-Zilliken wine estate, we were welcomed with a delicious meal, which was accompanied by an excellent local Elbling wine.

While the locks along the Saar still have separate chambers for smaller passenger vessels and sports craft, boats on the Moselle must pass through the locks using the large chambers (at least 170 x 11.40 m). France is unique in still having three smaller locks (40 x 5.60 m) which were designed for péniches, a type of flat-bottomed boat for commercial shipping.

The next day, we sailed on towards Thionville. After passing four locks and completing 54 kilometres, we eventually arrived upstream of the locks.

After another three locks and 30 kilometres, we arrived in the afternoon at Metz. Disembarking here is a must. We were now in the heart of the mirabelle region, and we seized the opportunity at the local market to buy jam,

spirits and liqueur made from this special type of plum. A drop of mirabelle liqueur added to very dry white wine is a real treat. The moorings in the Société des Régates Messines marina are very well equipped and are located close to the city centre.

After passing through a number of locks and splendid forests, we arrived at Neuves-Maisons, the final destination along the Moselle for large commercial vessels. From here, we continued along the Canal des Vosges. Before we reached the first lock (these were now 38.50 x 5.20 m), we placed the clearance meter at the front of the bow. We had received this from Mr Schönberger in connection with the many low bridges and it was set to 3.50 metres. But you have to be careful. Heavy rain or high water may result in a sudden increase in water level and before you know it you are 20 cm higher than you think.

After 16 locks, we arrived the next day in Charmes, a small town surrounded by splendid forests. Thanks to the marvellous menu at restaurant Dancourt, we experienced the culinary highlight of our journey: warm trout mousse and stuffed duck leg with an elaborate cheese board and delicious desserts. They may have difficulty in maintaining their waterways, but when it comes to preparing food the French are still in their element!

CHARMES – STRASBOURG – MARNE-RHINE CANAL

Because several locks were closed, we took a new route which led us first back to Richardménil and then on to Toul. We were now on the Moselle again. At Frouard, we entered the Marne-Rhine Canal. Our next destination was the St. Georges marina in Nancy. All people we came across – on other boats or on land – were friendly and helpful. When mooring, for example, there is always somebody who is willing to help. This strong community

Grand Sturdy 29.9 AC 'Delfin' on the Moselle



bond is something we greatly appreciate.

Nine locks further on, we moored in Einville au Jard. Passing through the lock here is more awkward because of the often difficult currents. The next morning, we took on fuel for the first time in Lagarde. Since Schwebsange in Luxembourg we have consumed 134 litres of fuel or 1.8 litres per hour. This is certainly reasonable for a yacht with a 55 hp engine, which is silently doing service in the 'cellar' under the saloon. At one of the locks, a friendly old man was selling freshly-plucked mirabelles, which were again delicious!

The lock at Réchicourt is 15.70 m high and it was our final upstream lock. As is always the case, there was a lot of fuss and bother here. Only two boats can really moor properly here, and both of the others tried to make do with one line. However, the lock keeper was very patient today and allowed the water to flow in gently. That was not always the case in the past.

In the evening in Port de Houillon at the start of the Saar Canal, we enjoyed a barbecue once more. The extremely friendly harbour master also took orders for baguettes and croissants for breakfast. The diesel fuelling station that is still indicated on the charts turned out to have closed years ago.

The next day, we sailed through the shipping tunnels at Niderviller (475 m) and Arzviller (2,306 m). Lights control the one-way traffic in the tunnels. You have to concentrate on sailing in the middle, because contact with the tunnel edge would have damaged our Linssen's hood. Shortly after leaving the second tunnel, we arrived at the Arzviller boat lift. This is a tourist attraction in its own right. Many spectators watch how the boats sail into a lift container, which then bridges a height difference of 44.55 metres in 20 minutes. On its own, this technical

The Arzviller boat lift



masterpiece does the work of about 17 locks.

After another four locks, we moored in picturesque Lützelburg, a splendid twelfth-century village. The village has many moorings but they are nearly always full. But you can usually find a place somewhere. In 'Hotel des Vosges', you can order trout that has been caught in the River Zorn, which runs right next to the restaurant. For a decent glass of beer, Bierstub d'Eselsbahn is highly recommended.

In the splendid Zorn valley, the river, the canal, the roads and the railway line form a dense network. We sailed through splendid forests until we reached the small town of Saverne. Our mooring here was directly opposite Rohan Castle, but it offered little shelter. We took the opportunity to shop and to admire the historic houses. But we were soon on board again and relaxed six locks further on in a meadow near to the village of Dettwiller. Enjoying a barbecue with the children in the evening is still the best and most enjoyable way of ending the day.

After eight locks in the Alsace lowlands characterised by many villages with half-timbered houses, we arrived at Souffelweyersheim, a beautiful marina commune near Strasbourg. Just under three hours later, we arrived at the Bassin de l'Hôpital marina in Strasbourg. The warm welcome that we receive at this yacht club is always overwhelming. The old city centre with its cathedral and the splendid Petite France district are within walking distance. Strasbourg is always worth a journey, especially when the weather is as good as it was on this occasion.

STRASBOURG – DANNEMARIE – RHÔNE-RHINE CANAL (SOUTHERN PART)

The next day we sailed for the northern part of the Rhône-Rhine Canal. We were able to follow this idyllic

La Petite France in Strasbourg



waterway to Boofzheim. Like every evening, we talked at length while enjoying a glass of wine on the aft deck. Sitting by flickering candlelight and enjoying the nature as it goes to sleep is our finest holiday experience on board.

The next day, we reached the Rhine at Rhinau. Our original idea was to sail down the Rhine from here. But because the Canal des Vosges was closed, we now had to sail upstream. The engine throttle was wide open, but speeds higher than four to six kph were not possible, even though this part of the Rhine is managed by locks. After 30 km and two large locks, we were relieved to moor at Breisach marina. After this long and tough day of sailing, we limited ourselves to a short stroll through the town. The sultry summer air heralded a thunderstorm, so we were glad to find a few remaining free seats in a sheltered beer garden.

The next morning, we took on fuel in the marina on the French bank of the river. We then sailed upstream along the Rhine or – to put it better – the Grand Canal d'Alsace. We turned starboard towards the Kembs-Niffer lock, which provides access to the southern part of the Rhône-Rhine Canal. We then took the narrow Canal de Huningue, which is navigable only up to our intended mooring two kilometres further on. We had to take care, however, because there is a strong current in the canal that can make mooring very difficult. We were warmly welcomed at the Kembs marina.

The first part of the Rhône-Rhine Canal up to the first lock (number 41 at 16.5 km) has been widened for shipping and is therefore rather monotonous. After four hours, we arrived at the Vieux Bassin marina in Mulhouse. This marina is always busy, also because of the many yachts permanently based there. As it was early in the afternoon, we were able to find a pleasant mooring. And that left us with plenty of time to explore this fantastic town. We were delighted by the old town centre with its splendid 16-century town hall, the church of St. Etienne, the many half-timbered houses decorated with flowers and the picturesque squares.

To pass through the locks from number 39 you have to register the day before. Under the guidance of the lock service, we arrived after midday at the Dannemarie marina, which was the turning point of our journey before we started the return trip. That day we passed through 22 locks and under two raised bridges. But thanks to our guides, who rode on in advance, prepared the locks and then closed them again, the day went smoothly.

The reception in the relatively large marina was very welcoming. However, the harbour mistress, who is very much appreciated by boaters, was absent. It was, after all, the

holiday period in France, which nevertheless meant that it was very busy in the marina.

RETURN JOURNEY

Dannemarie has many opportunities for shopping and there are several good restaurants. Because our children would be leaving in the morning, we wanted to treat ourselves one last time to a splendid meal. Restaurant Ritter, located near the station and known for its excellent Alsace cuisine, turned out to be the ideal place for a farewell dinner.

DANNEMARIE – MERZIG

The next day at 10 a.m., our guides were waiting for us at lock 17. Heading for Mulhouse, we wanted to stop this time at lock 34 near Zillisheim. We moored near a very pleasant meadow. The municipality has driven a few wooden poles into the ground to create an idyllic mooring. In the evening, we enjoyed another barbecue. We sat for some time on the deck enjoying the view over the calm canal. It gradually became dark and the moon and trees were reflected in the water. It was just like a romantic painting by Caspar David Friedrich.

We were proud that we could sail our yacht so easily, even with just two of us on board. The cleat fixed amidships is very helpful in this respect, because it makes it easy to moor just using a single line. But it is, of course, a Linszen yacht, and that means a well-thought-out and ingenious design. But as is the case with everything, improvements are always possible. We would have benefited, for instance, from a side ladder at this meadow mooring, which would have made it easier to embark and disembark. Two rungs would have been enough.

After Mulhouse, we again sailed up the broad connecting canal to the Rhine. The water was quite choppy here and a smaller boat in front of us was soon looking for a safe jetty. However, our yacht coped very well. We sailed on to Kembs and were pleased to be able to find a pleasant and sheltered mooring.

It was really great to follow the Rhine downstream. On a low throttle we made good progress towards Breisach, where we arrived in the early afternoon. We again found a mooring at the welcoming Yachtclub Breisach. This time, we strolled through the historic part of the town and admired the cathedral. Breisach is apparently an important place along the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostella, because you see the symbolic scallop shells everywhere.

We took on fuel for the final time at Vogelgrün marina and entered the northern part of the Rhône-Rhine Canal near Rhinau. After eight hours on the water, we moored in Krafft at the marina of Voies Navigables de France, the

French waterways maintenance service. At a small restaurant, we enjoyed a large salad with goat's cheese and, of course, a real Alsace tarte flambée.

The next day, we really enjoyed sailing through Strasbourg, after which we continued along the Marne-Rhine Canal. We were now sailing upstream again and used both fore and aft lines in the locks. Luckily, these manoeuvres can also be carried out easily by two people. After eight hours of sailing we moored in Waltenheim-sur-Zorn. We strolled through the village which was decorated with flowers and full of perfectly preserved half-timbered houses and farmhouses with giant gateways.

The next day, after having passed through four locks, we arrived at the Arzviller boat lift again. The lift container brought us to the top of the incline and we passed through the two following tunnels without a problem. By now we were used to life on the water and everything was going smoothly. We did not need to pass through any more locks until Port de Houillon on the Saar Canal.

We sailed along the Saar Canal to Mittersheim. In earlier times, the canal was an important route for coal from Saarland to the Alsace and the Rhine. The canal is hardly used by commercial shipping nowadays and the landscape is really fantastic. We first sailed past the many small lakes located along the banks of the canal. These were followed by a variety of forests, meadows, villages and ponds. In Mittersheim itself the marina has recently been renewed and is now far more spacious. You are assured of a pleasant stay and there are always sufficient moorings.

We had arranged to be at lock 14 at 9.30 a.m. Although all locks are currently electrically operated, a lock guide travels along on a moped. We passed through the lock together with a friendly couple from Merzig. We quickly got used to working together and always used the most convenient bollards. Around 6 p.m., we arrived together in Sarreguemines where we soon found a mooring at Club Nautique l'Eau Reine near the town. Sarreguemines is known for its local earthenware. Although chinaware is no longer made, a variety of tiles are produced.

The next morning we sailed into the lock near Gündingen, which was the last lock to be specially designed for pé-niche barges. This was where we returned out remote control for the locks. We were sailing along the Saar again and were back in Germany. We passed by Saarbrücken without stopping, because there was plenty of building work taking place along the banks. We hope that the moorings by the old bridge will reopen in the future.

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Three locks followed downstream. The last of these was the lock in Rehlingen, which we always pass through very carefully because we have already let the boat hang here a couple of times. Fortunately, all you need is a timely kick to ensure that there is enough line, which means you never have to cut it. At 5 p.m. we arrived at Merzig marina and in the evening in restaurant 'Zum Skipper' we raised our glasses to our splendid voyage and a safe journey home. When we returned to the jetty for a final look, the Schönbergers were already fully occupied with their boat. In other words: we are already looking forward to our next voyage with the Delfin!

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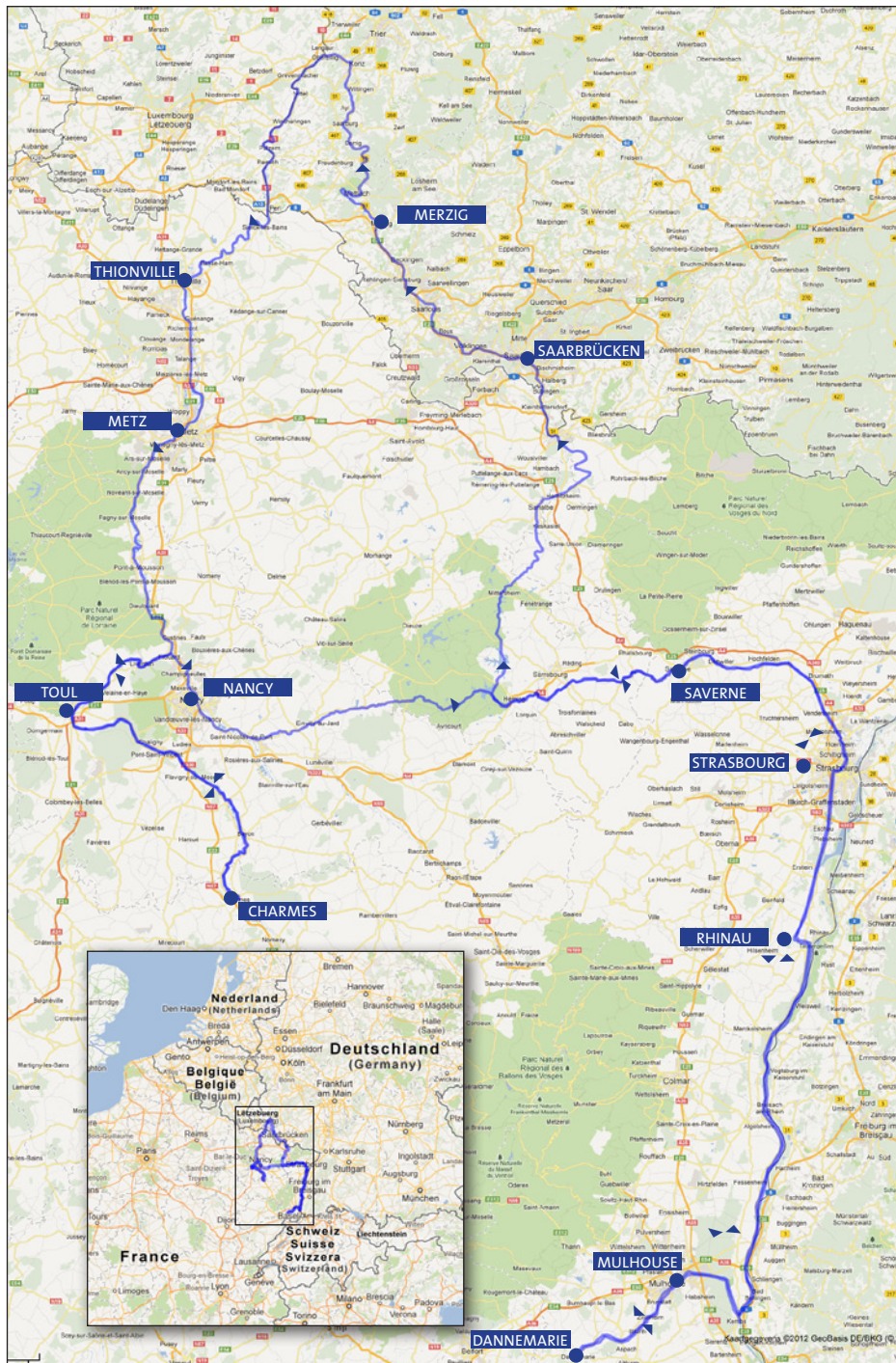
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ROUTE TAKEN:

Saar – Moselle – Canal des Vosges to Charmes and back due to closure – Moselle – Marne-Rhine Canal – Rhône-Rhine Canal (northern part) – Rhine – Rhône-Rhine Canal (southern part) – Rhine – Rhône-Rhine Canal (northern part) – Marne-Rhine Canal – Saar Canal – Saar: in total 1,005 km, 255 locks, 2 x 2 tunnels and 2 x boat lift

FUEL CONSUMPTION:

384 litres diesel, 211 sailing hours, i.e. a consumption of 1.8 litres per hour

DURATION:

5 weeks