

After my first long trip on a 'vintage' Linssen, the Dutch Sturdy 320 AC, I came into contact with Peter Schönberger of Yacht Charter Holiday Tours GmbH this year. He offered me a well-equipped, brand new Grand Sturdy 29.9 AC for my Merzig-Paris venture. If you're thinking of travelling from Merzig to Paris, the TGV would be the most obvious choice, or perhaps you would go by car because of the ease of travelling door to door. But how do you get there by boat? Is that even possible?



A trip from Merzig to Paris

A fantastic round trip through five countries

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It is possible, provided that you allow at least seven weeks for the 2,000 km journey and find a boat that not only has the necessary technology but also has all the conveniences and offers a degree of comfort. The boat will have to pass under bridges which have a clearance of only 3.5 m. Although not essential, a radio telephone is certainly very useful.

They've thought of everything

The journey began in Merzig, located on the River Saar. I received an extremely well maintained boat. They had thought of everything: warp anchor, long mooring ropes, short mooring ropes, mooring ropes of a very strong material for "lassoing" in case of high lock walls, power cables and adapters for every conceivable connector, water hose with different couplings, sturdy mooring pins and a heavy hammer, a powerful torch, a box full of super-thin toilet paper, etc. Together with the ten navigation charts we had brought with us, tourist information compiled into folders filled the bookshelf in the aft cabin. They all came in handy at one time or another.

Accompanied by two experienced motorboat-loving friends, I sailed down the peacefully flowing Saar and Moselle. The locks hardly held us up at all. But we were held up by a routine police check: they were looking for stolen equipment and boats. When the friendly policemen heard what our destination was, they wanted to swap places with us!

Nature, hillside vineyards, Moselle villages, weather, the good life

But after a hot day we were caught in a heavy thunderstorm before we reached Cochem. Despite the cloudburst and the resulting reduced visibility, navigation wasn't a problem because of the freighter in front of us. The hailstorm that then crashed down on to us did however cause us some concern under the sparyhood. Could the canvas withstand these hailstones, which were the size of golf balls? There was an ear-shattering clatter but the canvas held firm. And as we sailed into the harbour at Cochem, the sun was shining brightly again as if nothing had happened.

From Koblenz we sailed down the Rhine. At an engine

"...Vive La France:... the good life..."



speed of 2,100 rpm and assisted by the current, our journey proceeded apace at the rate of 14 km per hour. The 55 HP Volvo Penta was now consuming 4 litres per hour. That was kind on the wallet.

No skill

No skill is involved in sailing on the Rhine. However, it's important to keep a close eye on the big ships. In addition, it's advisable to sail on the other side as soon as the harbour entrance or a mooring place comes into view. The current in narrow harbour entrances should not be underestimated; always turn into the current.

The Rhine flows to Duisburg through a varied landscape. We saw not only green riverbanks, grey mountains and cityscapes but also industrial and port areas.

The solid brick entrance to Rheinau harbour in Cologne is interesting. Despite the fact that it has had to sacrifice some space, the marina is still very large. It would need a face lift, though, to stop it looking out of place in the completely redeveloped harbour area with new housing and business premises. You can reach Cologne's old town, cathedral and bustling Südstadt on foot.

New guests came aboard in Duisburg's new inner harbour. They turned out to be self-caterers. Three times they drove up with a shopping trolley full of provisions and drink. I hoped that we would have eaten everything by the time we reached France as wine and other culinary delights would be awaiting us there.

The journey continued: first to Arnhem and then up the Meuse, sailing upstream for the first time. However, the current was a mere 2-3 km per hour. In Venlo we struck lucky. It was lunchtime in the busy town centre. The attraction: real fresh herrings.

You can just eat them with your hands or more politely with a knife and fork: it doesn't make any difference to the taste. And after you've eaten, you just go and wash your hands at the fishmonger's sink. Holland at its best.

We sailed on the Meuse for a few days more and also made a stop at Maasbracht harbour. From our berth we could see the imposing boatyard buildings of Linssen Yachts. There were yachts lying there, some of them waiting for new owners, often with interesting destinations. In the large showroom you can view the latest models in great detail. It was also very tempting to sniff around a nearby army surplus shop.

The cities of Maastricht and Liège followed. As we sailed into Belgium, we were confronted with a minor surprise attack by officialdom. The lock-keeper demanded – in a friendly but insistent manner – that we underwent customs

clearance. Bureaucracy rules, but never mind – it didn't cost us anything. The town of Huy is well worth a visit and we found an excellent restaurant there. A boon for the whole crew.

Maas becomes Meuse

The river known as the Maas in the Dutch-speaking area now became La Meuse in the French-speaking area. We reached Namur. The surrounding area was changing, becoming more hilly. Impressive landscapes were passing by. The number of locks was also increasing. There had already been 10 locks by the time we reached Givet in France. Thirteen between Givet and Bogny and a further 13 locks the next day heading for Le Chesne. All the locks were operated automatically. The employees of the VNF (Voie Navigable de France) didn't show themselves but they are still drummed up occasionally when something gets stuck somewhere. And that's hardly surprising. After all, we sailed on a canal, part of which had been constructed as long ago as the 18th century. The locks had been manually operated for 200 years. This is now done by hydraulic systems. This



"...Canal lateral à l'Aisne..."

sometimes causes problems due to the old, crude mechanism and the often "happy-go-lucky" hobby sailors.

It was Thursday, 12 June. The day of the 28 locks. We were on the Canal des Ardennes. It was drizzling. What you can sometimes do with on board is a bit of exercise. Well, that day we didn't have anything to complain about. The locks were a real feat of sportsmanship. Ordinary seaman Horst-Dieter jogged from one lock to the next, tying up the mooring ropes. The helmsman practised passing through locks solo. By three o'clock in the afternoon we were soaked to the skin, but the job was done. It was not until then that we

"...The Eiffel Tower comes into view..."



heard that lock 22 had been blocked two days before. A lock door had come out of its hinges. The repair took five days. In other words, we were spared this misfortune.

We moored in Attigny, where there were no restaurants. That day, however, we were no longer put off by the frozen Chinese rabbit tenderloins. The galley smoked. And so we toiled onwards, along the Ardennes Canal, the Aisne and the Oise until we reached the Seine. We made a slight detour to Rheims. There we took part in a celebration to honour Joan of Arc. The event was graced by a colourful procession of guards, veterans clubs, the dean and chapter, etc. Rheims is highly recommended.

The Eiffel Tower comes into view

We drifted down the Seine with the greatest of ease. There was little traffic, just the occasional cargo ship or motor boat. A charming landscape slid by, alternating between densely built-up areas and industrial estates. There were quite a few shipwrecks along the riverbanks. In Paris, the first thing we saw was the skyline dominated by tower blocks and then we passed green slopes and finally we were sailing between typical Parisian buildings. The Eiffel Tower came into view. The bridges became closer together, varying in style and age.

Our destination was the Paris-Arsenal marina. It is situated between the Seine and the Place de la Bastille and is therefore very centrally located. However, before reaching this marina, we first had to navigate our way around dozens of sightseeing boats during our way through the Cité. We were assisted by a tug-pushed barge which stoically forced its way through. We just followed it. Around the islands, river traffic is controlled by traffic lights. It is advisable to keep a close eye on the Navicarte as well as the busy river traffic.

Paris-Arsenal

Arsenal can only be reached by a series of locks. Two continuously overworked harbourmasters control the locks via a video screen and allocate moorings. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are actually free. You take another place instead. This is where the radio telephone comes into its own: you can save yourself a long trip to the capitainerie by requesting a new berth number.

Another nice touch: throughout the marina there are four sets of toilet and washing facilities. Each wash house also contains a washing machine and dryer. What does a sailor who has been travelling for a long time do in Paris? Correct. Washing day.

But Paris-Arsenal has even more to offer. You climb up the steps on the quay wall and you are in the middle of the Quartier Bastille, a vibrant district that offers everything that the visitor to Paris seeks: opera, cafés, restaurants, shops and sputtering scooters. You walk a few streets further and there are all the well-known sights of this international city. The metro station is literally on your doorstep.

We were travelling with other wanderers. In June, the water trotters head south. An older couple from Rotterdam had all summer to do this. A young family came from Finland with a beautiful wooden sailing boat. Their destination for 2008 was the Mediterranean. Just the year after, they wanted to travel to Helsinki by sea. And that's what makes long journeys so nice: talking to your neighbours, exchanging experiences and stories by boaters about boats. Often you maintain the same course for days. Sometimes, you bump into them again by chance in locks and harbours after weeks and there are more new stories to tell.

Champagne-Ardenne

We left Paris and kept to port as we sailed up the Marne. The surrounding area soon became rural and hilly again. The number of locks increased. However, things remained peaceful on the water. In the narrow canals we encountered péniches, cargo boats which are 35 m long and fill the old locks down to the last centimetre. Not every péniche is still used as a cargo boat carrying coal, sand or grain; an increasing number of them now serve as chic houseboats. The imagination of their owners knows no bounds. One boat had even been designed as a real Provencal house.

We were now crossing Champagne-Ardenne. An unspoiled, almost rugged landscape containing woods, cornfields and rock faces passed us by. The champagne grape grows on the slopes of France's most northerly vineyards. Large silos are a reminder of how important the canals used to be for transporting wheat. Nowadays, wheat is transported by road.

Le tunnel de Demange à Mauvages

After Epernay, the canalised Marne becomes the Canal latéral à la Marne. At Vitry-le-François we turned into the Marne-Rhine Canal, reaching the Rhine at Nancy La Moselle. Halfway along, there was another attraction: the tunnel de Demange à Mauvages. What is meant to happen is that an electric boat tows vessels through the 5 km long tunnel. But as the last lock-keeper told us laughingly: *"The tugboat has broken down, so you can continue under your own steam. If the traffic signal at the entrance is at red, just carry on. You'll be accompanied by a cyclist who will make sure that you*



"...le tunnel de Demange à Mauvages..."



"...The 'Pont Alexandre III' in Paris. Designed by Résal and Alby. Built between 1896 and 1900..."



don't call too loudly, stop midway or play with the lights. Bon voyage." Now we were certain: we were in France.

The journey through the tunnel is wearisome. If you actually kept to the 5 km/h speed limit, it would take you an hour to get through. The tunnel is well lit. However, because the tunnel ceiling is reflected in the calm surface of the water, you don't see the water. It seems as if the boat is floating along an empty canal bed. It's a special experience.

Nancy is worth making a stop for. With a little bit of luck, you'll be there on one of the evenings when the houses on Place Stanislas are lit by a laser show. The Carrière takes you to the old town (11th century). There you'll find a large number of friendly restaurants and cafés. The Art Nouveau buildings in the new town are also worth a detour.

The Moselle

We were now in Lorraine, sailing on the Moselle. The Romans also sailed here on boats of a similar size. However, they were made of wood and were pulled by tow men. Downstream, they rowed the boat or allowed it to drift along with the current. Two hundred years ago, some vessels were already 24 m long and were sometimes drawn upstream by as many as six horses. It was not until 1964 that the Moselle between Thionville and Koblenz was tamed by the construction of weirs and locks, which made the river navigable for large ships all year round. Tug-pushed barges of 172 m in length can pass through the locks. If there is no professional shipping coming, you can pass through the lock for some small change. A 10 m yacht on its own can do so as well if it doesn't fit into the lock for pleasure craft.

Along all the canals on which we travelled, we could still see

the old towpaths, which also continued under the bridges. A large number of them are still maintained as they are used for purposes such as cycle paths for tourists.

We enjoyed our final days on the Moselle. It was tranquil and the countryside was beautiful. The towns that we passed have had an eventful and not always peaceful history.

Before we sailed up the Saar, there was another must: to refuel in the Schwesange in Luxembourg. Even without the cheap diesel, this marina would have been worth a visit. A skipper can find everything he needs in the large modern filling station. We made our penultimate stop in Saarburg. Is this a wine capital? We were extremely happy with the small restaurant where we moored and which was away from the tourist bustle. The waterfall, Saarburg castle, carefully restored timber-framed houses, remains of the old town walls – this what attracts so many tourists to this town.

Just a little bit further to Merzig. The circle will then be completed. The yacht was handed over undamaged. We had a wonderful journey behind us. France: we're certainly coming back, most definitely with a Linssen.

Want information about chartering on the Saar? Yacht Charter Holiday Tours GmbH

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The author Bernd Orgassa
“... from Merzig to Paris. 2,000 kilometres in 7 weeks. An experience!...”

Summary

- 46 days on the water
- Navigation solely by means of the French Navicartes and Fenzl's "Mosel und Rhein"
- 2,000 kilometres travelled
- 293 locks
- Refuelled 8 times, with a total of 756 litres of diesel
- Period: June/July
- Mooring fee: from free to €30, with an average of €12 per night
- Lock times: varied considerably. Ranging from 9.00 am - 6 pm to 24 hours per day

