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THIS IS LIVING THE LINSSEN DREAM

MIKE AND SUKEY PERRY SPENT THE 2013 SEASON CRUISING FROM MAASBRACHT TO LÜBECK VIA BERLIN AND THE MECKLENBURG LAKES ON THEIR 43.9 GRAND STURDY SALAMANDER II

JUNE 2013 – THE VEENVAART

So here we are alongside, just before the double lock on a brand new Dutch canal – The Veenvaart, connecting Erica with Ter Apel. And here on the warmest June evening so far, it seems the entire population of Erica and Emmen has come out to have a look. They come on bikes, on foot, on roller blades, on motorbikes, on quad bikes and even just now, two swimmers. They stripped off, leapt into the peaty water and swam off into the sunset.

What a thing this is. A new canal! Everyone's pleased and proud. They stop by the double lock to look at the workings, they shout "Hi there" or "Evening" in Dutch and if they speak English, we exchange enthusiasms. It's fabulous, it's amazing, it's just plain nice. And all the time, a late cuckoo adds an extra note of joy.

It's such a celebration to have a major engineering project completed in a recession. Now on this June evening, all the tax hikes and job losses are forgotten. It's just about smiling people coming to see what European money can buy – the benefits of membership – and they like what they see.

FIGHTING FOR POSITION ON THE DORTMUND-EMS

Travelling in convoy has its advantages. The locks are more obliging for a start but the downside is the jockeying for places and the waiting. That's what happened on the stretch between Lingen to the last lock before the Mittellandkanal. We were a convoy of seven 'sportboats' following 'Luisa Lynn', a Polish commercial barge.

One of our party, sportboat Mustang, had made his mark earlier on. He rocked to the front of the queue while the rest of us were idling politely in order. In fact on this oc-

casian, he waited his turn when the lock opened but nevertheless he'd shown some worrying form. Mustang's driver wore a black singlet. He sat back on the high bridge of his boat and let his stomach take the sun. Ms Mustang sat squarely beside him.

It was only towards the end of the day when the pressure began to tell and at Rhede lock, it came to a head. Here, we were greeted by another red light and the prospect of another long wait. Luisa Lynn pulled over and tied up. In front of us, the yacht from Bremen did the same and we too nosed over towards the tie ups only to be pipped to the post by Mustang who cut in on the inside.

Oh dear. It's not good to have bad blood when you've got to face each other at close quarters in a lock. It is, however, possible to minimise eye contact by concentrating on the ropes and the slimy wall.

So we continued with our frosty body language until the last lock before the Mittellandkanal at Bevergern. Here we were all forced to stop for the night because of problems with the gates. It could have been tricky. Luckily there were enough spaces for the seven of us to go alongside and luckily Mustang went in well ahead.

Actually, when all's said and done, there's nothing like a swim and a bankside barbecue to put things in perspective. Sense of humour restored and the promise of a different canal in the morning.

THE MITTELLANDKANAL

The Mittellandkanal is fringed with ox-eye daisies and wild purple lupins in June. It has a reputation – dead straight and boring all the way to Magdeburg – but so far that reputation's unfounded. In fact it's delightful. We cruise along under high bridge after high bridge, uninterrupted by locks, catching glimpses of great sweeps of landscape between the trees as we follow the line of the Teutoburger Wald in the distance. The barge traffic is heavy. We think it's because the Elbe is in flood.

DIANITA – SÜLFELD LOCK – MITTELLANDKANAL

Dianita is carrying scrap. Her owner always swore he'd never carry scrap but times are hard. Before, it was only really old barges that took metal cargo because it ruins the boat. Dianita has been forced into it early and now she and her cargo of mangled metal are heading for Berlin – that is if the flooding on the Elbe subsides. Of course, scrap has its advantages when there's a hold-up. It doesn't go bad so you don't have to run the generator



Fast Track to Berlin - The Mittellandkanal. High bridge after high bridge, uninterrupted by locks

to keep it cool. Apparently it's the big Dutch barges that have done the damage. The Dutch are building bigger and better barges all the time and it's bad news for the Dianita's of this world

Dianita is a family affair driven by father and sons. The sons take it in turns to accompany Dad – three weeks on, three weeks off. Dad's getting on a bit now – like Dianita. Probably another three or four years then that'll be it.

We learnt all this from one of the sons as we shared an overnight lock stop at Sülfeld. He came from Flushing. Would he go on after his father retired? Probably not. Business is too tough. He spoke Dutch, English, German, Polish and Russian. This was because before coming in with Dad, he'd been a seaman and visited every port in Europe. In those days he gave orders. Nowadays he has to obey the orders of the lock keepers on the Mittelland.

Dianita was leaving at six the next morning. We could follow if we liked.

WOLFSBURG – HAUPTBAHNHOF

There are some public tie-ups at Wolfsburg, right by the back entrance to the main station. Welcome to Wolfsburg home of everything Volkswagen.

In the shadow of the four chimneys of the old car works, we watched the early trains arrive and the workers spilling out from the underpass to set off along the canal bank for another Volkswagen day. Early workers wear anoraks, jeans and trainers and carry stuff in rucksacks. It's only after eight o'clock the suits and briefcases make an appearance and for the women the occasional skirt and pair of heels. And oh yes, the iPods come after eight as well.

What a spot for people watching as we munch our warm Brötchen from the station bakery!

WOLFSBURG – AUTOSTADT

At Autostadt visitor attraction, standards are very high. It's run like the city with teams of officials to make sure you stick to the rules and behave properly.

These Stadt 'police' wear dark suits with name badges. They also wear dark glasses, even on dull days. They carry walkie-talkie radios and patrol the glass covered bridge over the canal. It's forbidden to ride your bike across it or muck around on the moving walkways. They pick up litter and watch your every move. If you transgress, they swoop to correct but this is always done courteously. No, you cannot lean your bike against the clipped hedge outside the fancy bread shop. That is not acceptable.

In the huge glass atrium, Autostadt begins as it means go on – a fabulous celebration of corporate glitz. And through the massive glass doors you can see another world; a world that is neat and clean and beautifully behaved.

MEMORY LANE – LÜBBECKE

When a man remembers a place after 40 years, it puts a spring in his step. Watch how he pushes his bike up the steep, tree-lined hill, passing the church, onwards, tuning into the past with all his senses. There, to the right, the Tennisplatz. Yes, there were tennis courts near the mess and yes, it was up a steep hill in the woods somewhere here, somewhere near.

He walks faster, all the wear and tear of 71 years forgotten. He's on a mission. We take a turn to the right, then first left and there it is, Church House HQ 2 Div Mess, quiet and neatly kept. On each side of the front door there are plaques commemorating the 25 years of use by the British Army of the Rhine 1958-1983. It's now a religious conference centre.

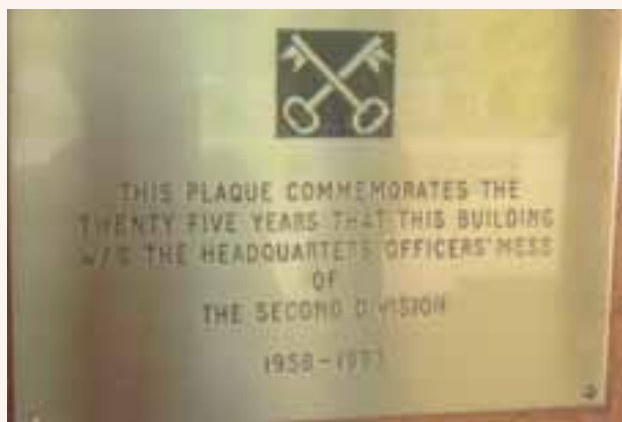
"It's gone now but look, here, come round the corner, up there, that was my room."

A small window looked out onto dark woods.

"I wasn't happy. I was on my own and missing home. I needed something to do so I had a small circular saw in there and I made things – boxes for my tools."

"Didn't anyone object?"

"No, I don't think so. And look here round the back. Here



are the garages. This is where Simon Lowman of the 4/7th Dragoons kept his Ferrari but the petrol ration was so small he could never take it out. He spent a lot of time tinkering with it."

"And were the gardens the same?"

"I don't know I can't remember."

And so back on our bicycles and out into the sun, free-wheeling this time, down the steep hill where more than 40 years ago the trailer bar on his battered Saab had broken as he set out for leave in the UK.

"When you were here, did you ever walk down to the canal?"

"No I never did."

JULY SUNDAY ON THE GROSSER WANSEE

All the boats from Berlin and around are out to play today. This is the only place to be when it's 36 degrees. Big beaches, little beaches, they're all packed. Big boats, little boats, boat bungalows, floating sheds, pedalos, kayaks, canoes, you name it they're all out on the water. It's frantic.

Then, as the shadows lengthen and the heat eases, there's a gentle change of pace – the sound of anchor chains, of sails flapping and motors starting. Time to pack up and head back home to the city.

By dusk they're all gone and we're alone at anchor. The water is still after all the activity, a heron flaps across lazily. And so now, time for a last swim in velvety, peaty water, a drink then supper and bed.

SPANDAU BALLET

Did you know the pop group changed its name from The Gentry to Spandau Ballet in the early 80's after a friend saw the words scrawled on the wall of a nightclub lavatory in Berlin? Allegedly the name refers to the infamous Spandau Prison and all the hangings. Victims would twitch and 'dance' at the end of the rope. Well, what with that and the Rudolf Hess connection, Spandau could have

a bit of a PR problem but we love this place. It's easier to understand than Berlin and they've pulled down the gaol.

You can take the train from Spandau Rathaus and be in the centre of Berlin in no time. You can also take your bike on the train – best if it's not rush hour. And if you choose to cycle back, it's exactly 12.4 km from the Reichstag to Spandau. Well, that's what the sign post says. The cycle lane takes you through the Tiergarten to Charlottenburg then up a gentle hill between GDR apartment blocks into a leafy suburb where mansions lurk behind lime trees and then down the hill to Spandau.

Although it's 12.4 km, it doesn't feel like it because you have to keep stopping at endless traffic lights and wait obediently even when nothing's coming. The cyclists here are as obedient as the pedestrians. This then is the very best way to see Berlin – by bike – or on an open-top bus where you can take it easy and have all the buildings pointed out to you and they're all (well almost all) designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel.

HIGH SEASON ON THE HAVEL WASSERSTRASSE – 1 AUGUST 2013

The early boat catches the lock. We weren't early enough and ended up spending a total of €17.36 on canal-side pro-

Welcome to Wolfsburg and all things VW

You name it, they're all out today





Muritz Elde Wasserstrasse - Beyond Bobzin it gets narrower and shallower



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duce to pass the time. First, at Strasen where we faced a long wait. Here we bought two bags of tomatoes, one ordinary and the other 'party'. "He means cocktail tomatoes", explained a helpful fellow boater. We also bought a cucumber.

When it was finally our turn to go into the lock all hell broke loose. Mayhem at Strasen. A canoe tipped over, a small boat crashed into a bigger one; more kayaks and canoes packed in threading their way between the other craft filling every gap, while the lock keeper shouted his frustration.

And so the day went on with more long queues. At Canow we bought two smoked trout and some Brötchen from the smoked fish man who rowed up and down the line ringing a bell. Even the ducks knew how to work the crowd.

MÜRITZ-ELDE-WASSERSTRASSE

The lock at Barkow is very slow and very lovely when you're the only one in it. For us, it was filled with thistle-down and white butterflies chasing each other in the sun. All

the madness of holiday time on the Mecklenburg lakes left behind as we now wind our way, alone, down this narrow, shallow (2 metres) waterway .

Beyond the deep lock at Bobzin, it gets even narrower and shallower and very reedy. There's very little traffic today. It could be because of the width and depth or because its charter boat change-over day and they're all learning the ropes or could it be because it's just not a very interesting canal unless you love water lilies or unless, like us, you're going somewhere? By the way, have you noticed how on a narrow canal the flow of water from the bow sucks down the reeds and water lilies making them look as if they're bowing in homage?

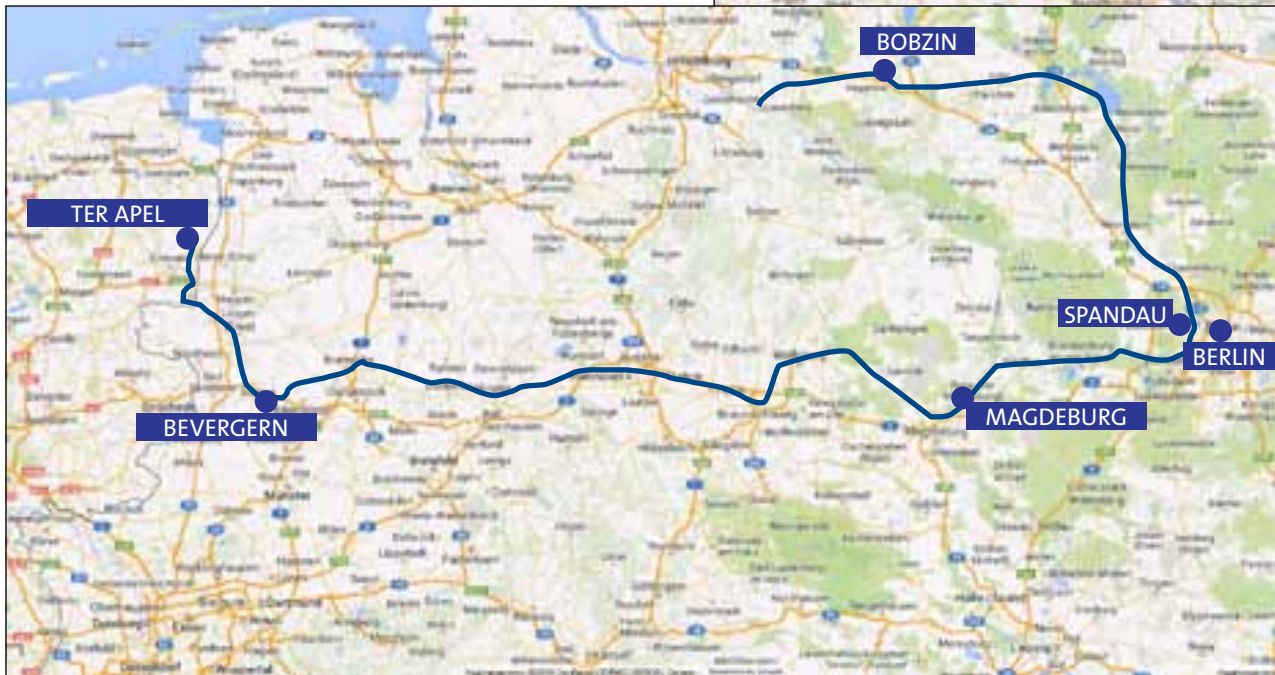
A welcome diversion on the stretch between Mallis and Neu Kaliß – we play a game with a white-tailed eagle. We come, he goes on ahead; we follow, he goes on ahead and so it continues until he gives up. We also got bitten by horse flies on this stretch.



BEST MOMENTS – MÜRITZ

At anchor with velvety swims, dawn and dusk and in between. Diving off the bathing platform into warm peaty water. Sipping perfectly chilled Chablis while watching the sun go down turning everything pink.

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