



De Dender

THE OPENING OF THE SEASON IS ALWAYS AN ADVENTURE

IT ALL BEGAN WITH A DREAM...

We live in Belgium by the river Dender, close to the picturesque Denderbelle lock. We walk past it regularly. We mainly see commercial vessels passing through. They aren't that big, as the lock is only 70 metres long. Some boats come by so often that we know them by name. We even get the opportunity to speak to some of the skippers while the boats are in the lock. These friendly chats meant that we quickly started regarding Denderbelle Lock more or less as "our" lock. And we had an increasing desire to "take" this actual lock one day. And so began the planning of this trip.

Familie De Ruytter hebben deze tocht gemaakt op de Grand Sturdy 40.0 AC "Amalie", die ze huurden bij LBH-partner Aqua Libra in Ophoven.

AQUA LIBRA
EXCLUSIVE YACHTCHARTER

LINSSEN
BOATING HOLIDAYS®

Since 2018, long before Covid, we have been infected by the Linssen virus. We have been sailing the beautiful boats supplied by Aqua Libra for a few years. It's not only the perfect condition of the boats, but also the great selection, and especially the unprecedented service from Luc and Arlette (the owners of Aqua Libra), that made us realise that we had found our favourite boat charterer. Although our initial introduction to boating was in summer, over time

we have made it a sport to open the season every year from Kinrooi.

We normally charter a Linssen for a week. However, one week is not enough to sail from Kinrooi to the lock in Denderbelle and back, especially if you want to build in an allowance for contingencies. So, if we now plan to charter a Linssen for two weeks this time, it immediately becomes clear that we would also be able to tick off



Namen

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other items on our bucket list. For example, the boat lift in Strépy-Thieu, but also the idea of sailing the Scheldt, all the way from its source in Ath to its mouth in Dendermonde, the town where we live.

A study of the available waterways gave us the following route as an option: Kinrooi, Liège, Namur, Charleroi, Strépy-Thieu, Blaton, Ath, Dendermonde, Rupelmonde, Lier, Herentals, Bocholt and back to Kinrooi. These two weeks made it possible to put together a very nice cruise where we could call at a whole lot of interesting towns and cities in Wallonia and Flanders.

The Easter holidays began and with them our journey. The first day was quite chilly, but everything else went according to plan. After nine hours of sailing, we arrived in Liège. However, we were unable to contact the



Na 5 dagen varen hadden we de kans om even bij de haven in Mons binnen te springen en zo de tank met 200 liter bij te vullen.

harbourmaster either by telephone or on VHF radio. So we didn't know where we could moor and just opted for a nice open spot. After we had moored up, a lady who lived in a nearby houseboat

told us that the harbourmaster was in fact not there (and seldom was). This meant that we could perhaps stay overnight free of charge but, unfortunately, there wasn't going to be any shore power or water supply. We therefore switched on the on-board generator, which allowed us to prepare our evening meal and enjoy the overnight stay without any hassle.

Over the next three days, we had similar experiences. It started with Namur. This really is a very pretty town, seen both from shore and from the water, but all that could be found of the marina were a few signposts and a couple of bollards. Likewise, there was no trace of the refuelling facility which we had planned to use there. So we had to moor at the quay below the citadel. There was nothing to complain about. It's not every day you get the chance to stay overnight in the centre of such a beautiful city. Once again, the

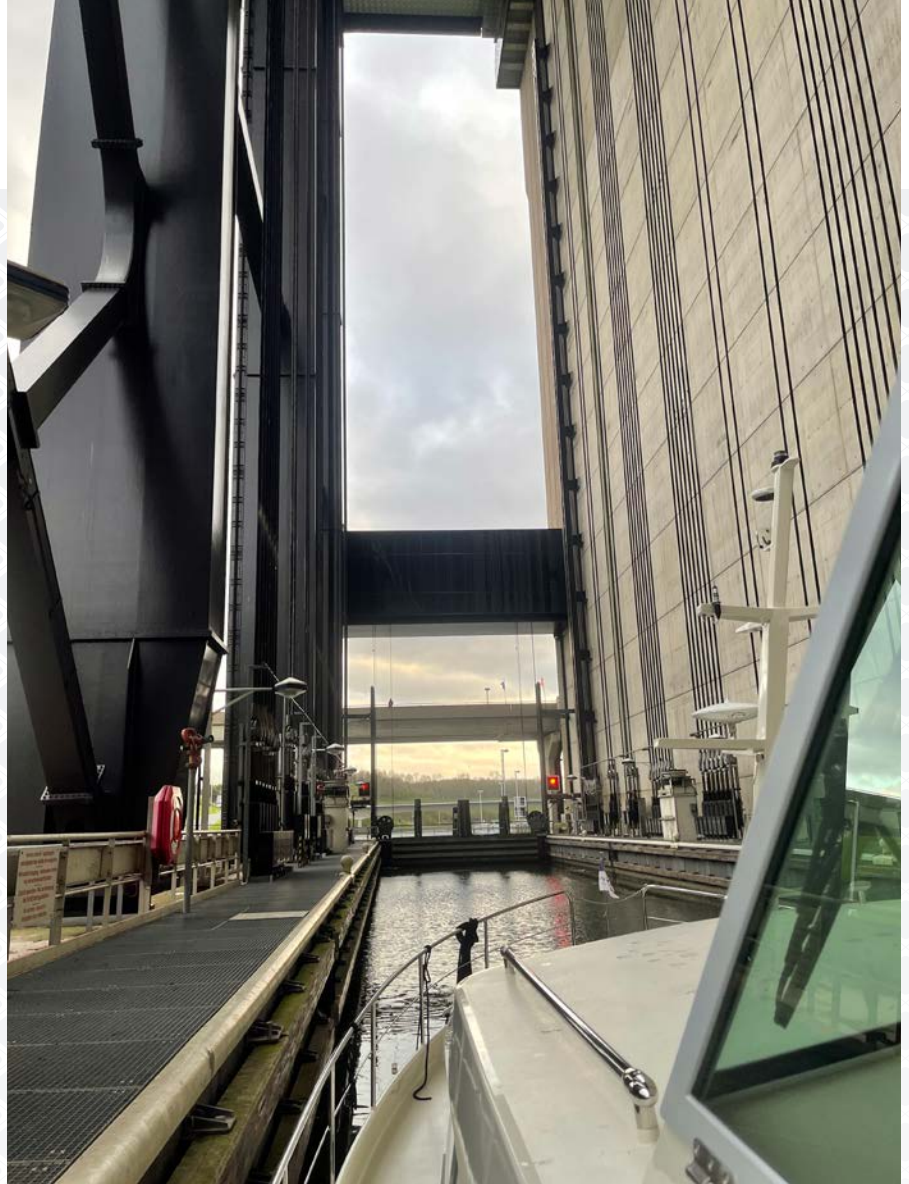
on-board generator eliminated any kind of inconvenience.

The next two overnight stops didn't have any power or water either. It felt like we were wild camping again, but now in the comfort of a well-equipped 40-foot motor yacht. Here too, we were really glad that the boat had a generator on board. The size of the water tank (440 litres) also helped to ensure that we could continue our journey for a considerable number of days without having to worry about filling up. After five days of cruising, we had the chance to briefly sail into the marina in Mons to fill up the tank with 200 litres. Maybe it wasn't really necessary at the time but we knew that we would definitely have to continue for three days after Mons without an opportunity to fill up.

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The first time on this trip that we were able to enjoy shore power was after five days' cruising. By then we were in Ladeuze-Chièvres, just before the fifteenth of the twenty-one locks on the Blaton-Ath Canal. This small but very pleasant and peaceful rest stop is well worth a recommendation. Although we didn't find it on the maps during preparation, this spot was suggested to us by the staff operating the locks and bridges on this canal. It was very windy that day. Force 6 on the Beaufort scale had been forecast and I think we got 100% of it, straight over the port side.

But back to the trip itself. After Namur, we continued towards Charleroi. Unannounced works on a lock on the river Sambre (which opened again the next morning) obliged us to overnight in Chambreville. A convenient pontoon is available there, literally in the backyard of an upgraded Lidl supermarket. This was therefore an ideal opportunity to stock up on provisions and to



Boatlift Strépy Thieu

Er stond al een behoorlijke wind, maar in de lift merk je daar niks van. Je gaat heel rustig het hoogteverschil van 73 meter naar beneden.

learn about the wartime past of this town.

The next day would be a big day for us. If everything went according to plan, we would be able to take the boat lift in Strépy-Thieu. We left the Sambre in Charleroi and reached our destination after a steady ten-hour cruise via the Brussels-Charleroi Canal and the Canal du Centre. We were just in time for the last lift descent and had the whole caisson to ourselves. A strong wind was now blowing, but you don't notice the wind at all in the lift. You

very quietly descend the 73-metre height difference. You can actually get out of your boat and admire this wonderful piece of engineering while the lift is moving. This lift was inaugurated in 2002, replacing four older lifts (dating from the early 20th century) which can still be viewed as part of a UNESCO heritage site. It's a pity we didn't have time to go and see these antiques. Maybe a good reason for a future trip? Shortly after the lock, we were able to moor up and overnight in a local marina. However, the opening times for the self-service access



Blaton Ath

bridge were already past but a large quay (but without shore power or water) was available free of charge and was an excellent spot for a good night's sleep

The next day was a quiet one. Our only aim was to get as close as possible to Blaton. Halfway there we passed Mons, which gave us a chance to do some shopping and fill up with 200 litres of water. The helpful harbour-master also helped us find out where we would be able to fill up with diesel (after we were unable to fill up with anything in Namur). It quickly became apparent that the only option was Tournai, a considerable detour from our planned route. So it was also clear from this moment that we had to see this cruise through with the full tank we had left with. We spent the night at a large jetty in Bernissart, near a lock that had been (temporarily) closed. We were ready to meet the challenge of the locks on the Blaton-Ath Canal.

So in good spirits and with a plan B in mind, we headed for Blaton to get this canal with its 21 locks under our belt. The previous afternoon we had been in touch with the lock keepers, who had advised us to be at the first lock by about half past eight. Fortunately, we

called them again just before setting off as they now thought that nine o'clock would be a slightly more feasible slot. The operation of the locks is actually controlled by two or three teams, each of which is responsible for a number of locks. The first ten locks are operated by one team. The operating team actually accompany you from shore. They are very helpful people, but if you don't agree when to arrive at the first lock well in advance, you might have to wait a long time if, for example, they are helping another boat in front of you.

We arrived at Lock 1 at ten to nine. Just in time. However, the operating team let us know that they needed a couple of minutes more to arrive at this lock themselves. So we decided to put the ship nose-up into the wind to avoid being blown against the bank. There was something resembling an old turning basin just in front of this first lock, which we thought would be ideal for turning the boat with its nose into the wind. When we started turning, we quickly realised to our horror that the water was very shallow outside the fairway. So we ran aground with the nose on a silt bank. While this is certainly another way of staying on the spot (and not being blown against



Blaton Ath bij 6 beaufort weer

the bank), it's not really ideal for keeping the engine cool. After reversing out, we shut off the engine so we could quickly clean the weed filter. We now knew that we had to keep a close eye on the draft in this canal and shouldn't stray too far from the fairway.

The first lock was quickly prepared for us. We could proceed. Everything had to be operated manually, including the bridges on this stretch. Quite an experience. We quickly noticed that teamwork between the lock keepers and ourselves was also becoming vital. We had to adjust our cruising speed to allow the lock keepers enough time to close the lock (or bridge) we had passed through, move to the next lock (or bridge) and then get it ready. It was pretty interesting and a fun exercise, were it not for the fact that the force 6 wind from the side gave us quite a challenge in trying to keep the boat neatly centred in the canal at (very) low speed. Certain stretches of canal had trees on the banks that broke the wind a bit, but these rows of trees then stopped closer to the lock. So the trick was to spend as long as possible between the trees, until you thought the "crossing" to the lock was possible without having to stop. In these situa-

tions, you quickly realise how valuable a humble pair of binoculars can be.

However, the wind force was still increasing. Each lock became a contest requiring extreme concentration and super-fast reactions to deal with each gust of wind and moor the boat neatly in the narrow lock. Some of these (descending) locks also offered very little space between the waterline and the edge of the lock, so the fenders had no chance to do their job when entering. After 10-12 locks, we had seen enough, and looked for a place to moor so we could wait for the better weather, as forecast for the next day. So we were particularly relieved to be able to tie up the boat for a while after Lock 14. This small harbour in Ladeuze-Chièvres did not feature on any maps but was recommended to us by the lock keepers. The cherry on the cake was that even shore power was available there. It was also nice to meet the Flemish owners of a local shop who had ended up there so many years ago and were still enjoying life greatly.

The following days brought us better weather and also the experience of sailing down the Dender from its origin in Ath to its mouth in Dendermonde. It had also become clearly noticeable that the sailing season had started, especially on the stretch between Blaton and Geraardsbergen. The draft in the Blaton-Ath Canal sometimes left a lot to be desired. At two of the locks, we just ran into the silt as we were exiting the lock (where we would normally have expected at least 70 cm under the keel). There was also a lot of dirt on the lock gates. It was not until after Geraardsbergen that we could expect cleaner locks. All in all, everything worked out fine. Also, most lock keepers are always willing to remove some of the floating rubbish before you enter the lock.



Sluis Denderbelle

And the Dender is a really nice cruising river. It's very quiet, has a tow-path and is embedded in a very rural setting (apart from the section in Aalst).

Geraardsbergen was a nice place to visit. It also had a particularly friendly harbourmaster. We helped him find the WiFi password as this was also the start of the season for him. We also received from him the *VVV Toervaargids 2022*, which is a handy guide to Flemish waterways.

We sailed on towards Dendermonde. At last, we were able to realise our dream and take "our" little lock in Denderbelle. We therefore took our time and moored up before entering Denderbelle lock. The drop in the lock is only a few metres, so you don't spend very long in there, but we enjoyed every second. This was *our* moment.

After the lock, we moored up at a small pontoon belonging to the city of Dendermonde. By now, we were so used to living without water and electricity from shore that we didn't even notice that they weren't availa-

ble there either. A pleasant walk into the city centre, even though we've known this centre for over 20 years, made us feel as if we were "staycationing". Even though our house is only a stone's throw from the pontoon, no-one on board wanted to go home to sleep. No, that wasn't on. Especially at this single, unique and long-awaited moment, when we sailed a beautiful Linssen on the Dender.

The next part of the plan was to sail down the Scheldt towards Rupelmonde, but *after* high tide, as the current in the Scheldt can run quite fast. Sailing with the tide meant that we were able to gain 4 km/h in ground speed, which in turn helped us sail as energy-efficiently as possible and therefore save on diesel.

In Rupelmonde, we moored at the same landing pier used by the ferry. The Rupel has quite a strong current and considerable tidal variations. We had fortunately been able to get prior confirmation from the ferry service that even their boats (with 1.4-metre draft) don't get stuck at low tide. There

was quite a strong current when we were mooring (just between high and low tide), which gave us a chance to try out the technique for mooring in strong countercurrents. It was quite fun to “hang on” while revving the engine at a point level with where you want to moor, and then letting the current push you towards the shore by pointing the nose slightly towards the quay. It worked perfectly.

However, there’s nothing much to see from this mooring, but it was the ideal place from which to leave for Lier the next morning a little after low tide. By choosing this time, we could be sure that we would be able to pass under all the bridges on the Nete Canal. Some of these bridges have a clearance height of only 3.5 metres. By departing an hour after low tide and keeping to a speed just slightly slower than the speed at which the tide swells, we were able to keep enough water under the keel and never run into problems with clearance heights. If you’re an engineer, these are great moments when you can use your mathematical knowledge to be aware of the situation and keep it under control.

We stopped briefly in Lier to meet friends, before continuing on our way to Herentals. In the process, we also took in a stretch of the Albert Canal, which gave us a chance to let the autopilot do its tricks for a prolonged period and keep us nice and straight on the starboard side of this wide canal. After passing through the first lock on the Herentals-Bocholt Canal, accompanied for a while by three fast canoeists, we finally arrived back at the Herentals marina. As we had called at this marina before, we felt quite at home. We were able to reverse the boat neatly into a narrow berth – after negotiating the many narrow locks on the Blaton-Ath Canal, you quickly gain

experience in manoeuvring, and we felt the benefit.

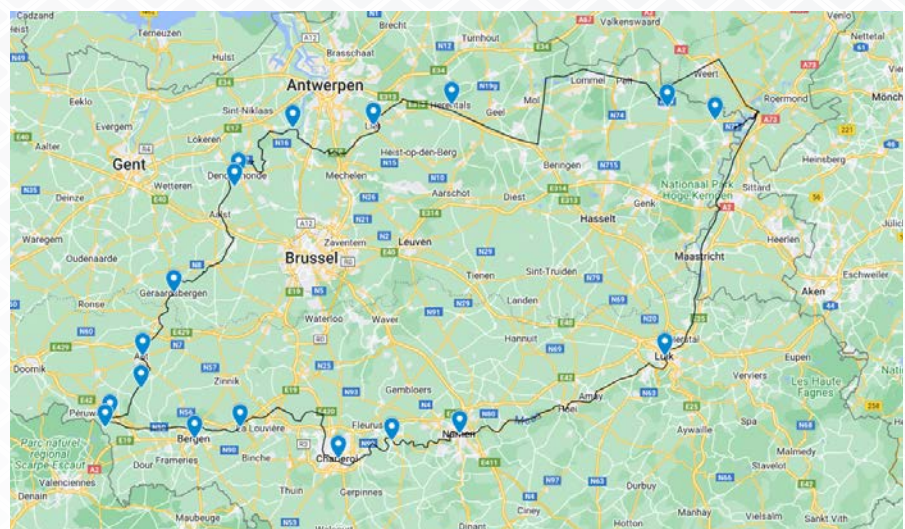
Our last few days were approaching. Actually, it was a pity as after two weeks’ cruising, it didn’t feel as if this was enough. So we continued to savour every moment. We left Herentals in a light fog, which made for a beautiful series of photos. After the characteristic locks on the first stretch of this canal, we stopped for a pancake at the Pancake Boat. This permanently moored boat is located after Lock 4, where the Dessel-Turnhout-Schoten Canal meets the Herentals-Bocholt Canal. It’s highly recommended and it may be better to book in advance on nice days. Bocholt was the last marina we called at before heading for Kinrooi.

The last few kilometres back to “De Spaanjerd” marina went by in a flash. We just had to fill up the boat before we delivered it back and our cruise was over. Quite an experience. And definitely worth the effort. But I now appreciate the qualities of a Linssen yacht all the more. Thanks to the Linssen boatyard for putting these yachts on the market. Thanks to Aqua



Kanaal Herentals - Bocholt

Libra for making them available to a wider public. Very special thanks to Luc Vanthoor for all the support and advise before, during and after the trip. ♦



Travel details: 14 travelling days, 12 sailing days, 12 rivers and canals, 70 locks, 84 sailing hours, but only managed to access shore power 3 times and fill up with water once. We consumed a total of 417 litres of diesel and 600 litres of water.