

Boating the world's busiest canal

Paul Miles joins the crew of a 45ft-long sailing boat on Germany's Kiel Canal as it completes its journey from Bristol to the Baltic

WHICH IS THE BUSIEST CANAL IN THE WORLD? No, it's not the south Oxford on a summer bank holiday. The inland waterway that claims this distinction is Germany's Kiel Canal. The boast refers to the number of ships transiting its 99km (61-mile) length annually: some 35,000, or about 100 daily. The 'busiest' epithet would not hold water if it were based on tonnage. The locks of the Kiel Canal are over 100 years old so are unable to accommodate larger modern vessels, such as those on the Suez or Panama canals. Nevertheless, sizeable container ships and tankers loom over us, overtaking as we chug along at about 6mph. I am not in a narrowboat but a 45ft long sailing boat, Bristol pilot cutter, *Peggy*, built in 1903. *Peggy*'s present custodians are Bristol couple John Potter and Rachel Haynes.

"*Peggy* has never been to the Baltic as far as we know, so we thought it was time to take her," says John, explaining their rationale for sailing their gaff-rigged boat from its home port of Bristol to eastern Europe. The Kiel Canal shortens the journey between the North Sea and Baltic by nearly 500 miles, avoiding the often-stormy route around the top of Denmark.

Cuxhaven to Brunsbüttel

I joined the adventure in

the German North Sea port of Cuxhaven, arriving by train some 13 hours after leaving London. *Peggy* was moored in a marina among sleek yachts and gin palaces. On a grassy bank, hooded wicker beach-chairs-for-two were the first sign we were somewhere different. Cuxhaven itself, with touches of *Jugendstil* (art nouveau) architecture and heavy chains from ship anchors decoratively edging pedestrian walkways, was pleasant to explore. We stocked up at a supermarket, filling a trolley with provisions including pumpernickel bread and gherkins.

The next day we manoeuvred out of the marina as the tide was rising, motor-sailing up the wide expanse of the Elbe Estuary, passing cyclists on coastal paths and factories manufacturing wind turbines. After 17 nautical miles, we arrived at the port of Brunsbüttel and the lock leading into the canal. We were able to enter immediately – the lock-keeper instructing us to do so via VHF radio. He was presumably keeping an eye on everything from a waterside structure that resembles an air-traffic control tower. A container ship was in the chamber to starboard while several yachts were moored on the pontoon to port. John steered *Peggy* in and two of our crew deftly jumped onto the floating wooden pontoon with stern and bow ropes. So far, it was not unlike the experience you might have on a narrowboat when entering the lock into Portishead Marina after the Severn Estuary passage, but all on a much larger scale.

The gates closed behind us and the pontoon dropped 22 bricks' worth of depth on the



HISTORY

Opened in 1895, the Kiel Canal was built to enable the German navy to sail between Germany's Baltic and North Sea coasts without passing through the enemy territory of Denmark. This border region had already seen several battles, including the Schleswig wars of 1848 and 1864 and the Battle of Helgoland, a North Sea island 65km north-west of Cuxhaven that was under British control until swapped with the Germans for Zanzibar in 1890. Military strategy aside, the enormous infrastructure project of the 99km-long ship canal – which took 9,000 men just eight years to dig – was a huge PR exercise for the German imperial family. When it was first opened, this waterway between Brunsbüttel in the west and Holtenau in the east, near Kiel, was named the Kaiser Wilhelm Kanal.

Today it is known as the Nord-Ostsee-Kanal (North Sea-East Sea Canal) in Germany but internationally it is called the 'Kiel Canal' after the port on its eastern, Baltic coast, where construction began.





Peggy heads into Holtenau Lock, as seen from the public viewing platform.



Rachel (l), Peggy's co-owner, and some of the crew travelling along a rural stretch of canal. Susanna Romans-Roca is at the tiller.



John, co-owner and skipper. Standing to steer provides a clearer view ahead.

chamber wall. Then the gates to the canal opened and we little boats motored out first into what seemed a melee of ferries, tug boats, container ships, a RIB and motoring yachts. Small car ferries to-ing and fro-ing across the canal (up to 162m wide) are a regular sight and their passage takes precedence over small craft. At one point along the canal there is even a transporter bridge, where a ferry-like structure dangles 2m above the water on cables descending from a gantry below a railway bridge on which double-decker trains cross.

On to Gieselau

Brunsbüttel's busy dockyard area soon gave way to rural surrounds, the canal edged by reeds where anglers sat fishing. Beyond the banks and canalside cycle paths on both sides, a backdrop of trees, deciduous and evergreen, lined the waterway and the smell of hay and silage hinted at the unseen agricultural landscape behind. Sometimes the tips of wind turbine blades peeped above the tree line. Ducks and swans and even, at one point, a couple of humans swam out to meet us. As is convention worldwide, we motored on the starboard (right) side of the canal, keeping a minimum distance from the banks of 25m or so, as stipulated by signs. Canal traffic quietened

and the occasional container ship became a welcome excitement. While they seemed vast compared to Peggy – at approximately 150m long and 25m wide, and loaded with about 500 containers – they were tiddlers compared to some container ships that carry up to 10,000 40ft containers. Similarly, many gigantic cruise ships are too enormous for the locks. Smaller ones though, such as Fred Olsen's *Balmoral*, can make transits of the Kiel Canal, which features on some Baltic itineraries.

At times – near 'sidings' where the canal is wider and ships can pass each other – there were tall columns of navigation lights, mostly red and white. Sometimes they flashed but the leaflet we had been given explaining their meaning was baffling due to poor translation. Were these occluding or interrupted lights?

Mostly it was not necessary for us to stop. Only once – on the second day – did we halt, our action confirmed by a day-tripping paddle-steamer – 119-year-old *Freya*, that had previously overtaken us, its captain helpfully shouting, "You have to stop." Here, about 80km from Brunsbüttel, was a stretch of single-file boat traffic where infrastructure work on one bank was going ahead with dredgers in the water.

After some six hours' motoring on the first day, we turned left at a junction with

Peggy motors towards Holtenau Lock, Kiel.



At just 45ft long, Peggy was dwarfed by much of the Kiel Canal's other boat traffic.

the Gieselau Canal that joins the Eider navigation, a predecessor to the Kiel Canal that soon became too small for merchant ships but remains open as a twisty, rural waterway from the North Sea, frequented by leisure craft. We moored on extensive lock landings among yachts as the sun set behind trees. Flocks of starlings flew in overhead and we found ourselves with ringside seats for their evening murmuration – shape-shifting from sailing boats to love hearts, or so we thought. Owls hooted and one of the crew spotted an otter. It was an idyllic site to moor and dine on deck.

The Kiel Canal reminded me of the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal, only much larger. Wide and quiet, mostly in a rural setting, straight and easy to navigate. No locks apart from one at the beginning and one at the end. Mooring spots, however, are few. You cannot just pull over and tie up to the bank. You can't cruise at night. Sailing is not allowed. A passage for most small boats – at a maximum speed of 8 knots (9mph) – necessitates at least one overnight stay somewhere. Other overnight options include a pontoon near industrial silos and a waterside café or a dead-end arm that, according to the Imray cruising guide, offered pleasant moorings near the attractive town of Rendsburg.

At Gieselau there was a toilet block by the river lock in the former lock-keeper's home. With its square proportions and pan-tiled roof with a slight pagoda-like uplift of the eaves, its architecture was the most distinctively different part of this rural scene that is otherwise similar to the Somerset Levels.

In the morning, before any yachts were on the move, Rachel and I swam in the Gieselau Canal while swallows and martins swooped down to the clean, clear water.

Reaching the Baltic

On the second day of motoring, the rural edges of the waterway morphed slowly into residential domain with large waterfront houses, one or two thatched, others sleek and modern. Again, their distinctive roof shapes, square proportions and narrow brickwork were obvious markers of difference from the UK. There were more road- and rail-bridges across the canal than on the first day. Then silos, cranes and canalside industry began to appear and we



Dinner on deck at Gieselau, moored with yachts, some of which have just motored down the Gieselau Canal.



Crew member Lucy Pedersen on the tiller follows John's instructions as Peggy approaches Kiel.



A container ship passing Peggy.

were near the Kiel end of the canal where it exits into Kiel Fjord through the four locks of Holtenau; only two of which are currently in use as the others undergo repairs.

John called the lock-keeper on the VHF radio and we were told to wait on a pontoon. It had a machine for card payment for the passage (€35 for a boat of Peggy's length) although we had already paid this online. At the pontoon, which was joined to the banks by a walkway, I disembarked and boarded a free passenger ferry across the canal to visit

the lockside viewing platform. This enclosed perspex shelter, with a view down into the chamber, is popular with families. Several watched in amazement as an enormous container ship entered the lock chamber just a few metres away. Then it was the turn of the little boats. Peggy motored in and tied onto the floating pontoon adjacent to a behemoth, a 110m-long cargo ship, *Sea Explorer*. Forty-five minutes later, after a change in water level so imperceptible it was hard to know if it had gone up or down, Peggy motored out into the Kiel Fjord, an inlet of the Western Baltic Sea.

We spent the night at anchor in a bay, enjoying an evening swim around the boat. The next day we headed out, setting sail to Danish islands. We had transited the busiest canal in the world. Peggy had reached the Baltic.



Peggy in one of the Kiel Canal's sizeable locks.

✳ Paul Miles travelled back from Germany as a guest of Raileurope, which has fares from £101 one way between London St Pancras and Kiel or Cuxhaven: raileurope.com.

✳ If you want to recreate a similar cruising experience, venturesailholidays.com has berths on historic vessels, some of which transit the Kiel Canal and/or sail in the Baltic.