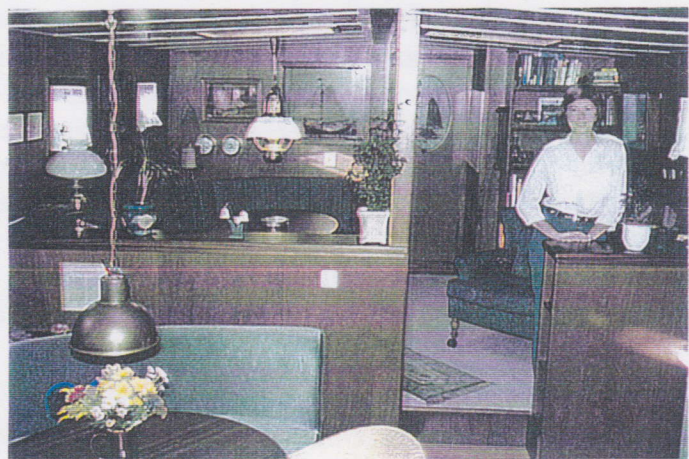




We arrived in Leer, Germany the beginning of a very cold February and not quite sure that 'Maria' was our solution. Dick mustered up some enthusiasm and besides studying and qualifying for a German Radio and Boat License; he transformed this 'weekend' barge to a live aboard cruising barge. We technically upgraded with similar systems that had been on Spurwing as well as adding a washer, dryer, a powerful bow thruster and skylights.

DICK & DEBBIE VAN HASSELT

2001-2002

April 24th we cast off the lines, the tidal lock opened and we were out into the Ems River gliding nervously downstream towards Emden. The old city (which we bypassed) was once the most influential city of the north. In the 1600's the Huguenots were established here with their trades. Once they left, the city fell to ruin and never regained it's former glory. Just before the Dutch border we used the wide river to do a series of turns and circles to calibrate our new autopilot, which immediately attracted a German police boat. Forever looking for the slightest infractions they informed us we had the wrong flag hoisted (the European circle of stars with the German colors). At least it remained the only time during the year we were interrogated.

We slipped into Holland by entering our first lock and actually sighed with relief. The people seemed more relaxed, maybe there aren't so many rules flying around. Groningen was our first attempt into a huge busy lock, swinging bridges and mooring on a main thoroughfare. Quite a lot to go thru on a maiden voyage. The weather was not our friend so we just stayed two days holed up in 'Maria' as the 'lows' passed.

We proceeded north into the shallow and narrow Dokkum Canal where we discovered how a 50-ton barge really does displace water. The boat's stern is sucked to the shoreline, the stern wave seemingly rushes to overtake you necessitating a lot of opposite rudder to control direction and if there is not much water beneath your keel in a muddy canal you learn your first barge lesson the easy way. Forget using the throttle when lying on the mud bed. S L O W down. Barging is not a speedy affair.

We bumped and ground our way to our first stop (again in the rain) to Zouthcamp located just before the Louwersmeer Sea separated by a dyke from the pounding of the North Sea. A day or so later the sun finally came out and announced it was spring. All was forgiven and we cast off the lines, honked to open a low bridge and barged into the marshes. It was quite beautiful. A strange livestock (we think it was a form of water buffalo) docilely watched us gliding past and small Shetland horses stared as if we were aliens. We tied up for lunch as ducks, geese, sandpipers etc. industriously fed themselves in the fresh warm sunlight.

Our trip continued up into the 'sea' area where we pushed the throttle forward full blast and shook the cobwebs of the 200hp Mercedes engine of 'Maria' as we reached our top speed of 13.5 knots. Every rivet vibrated as she rocketed forward. Sail boaters looked on in surprise and amazement as this 1931, 25-meter, iron riveted barge overtook them with a couple of Canadians smiling happily on board. Our 'open water' experiment was soon short lived as we ran out of sea and had to turn round and head back to the canal to continue our trip towards Leeuwarden, the capital of Friesland. We arrived in Dokkum after having spent the night tied up on a dock somewhere in farm country. Sadly all was barred off and disinfectant was left for us to wade through in case we went ashore to prevent the spread of the awful Foot and Mouth disease that was raging in England. Dokkum is a lovely town, with 2 windmills dating from 1829 although the town is probably much older. 'Maria' is also noted to be from Dokkum.

Usually there is a fee for the bridges – about .50¢ and as you pass with the road traffic queuing up both sides the bridge-master swings a wooden clog attached to a stick and line (like a fishing rod) towards your way for the money. On occasion I have dropped the money into the canal and swung a clog with only a chocolate back to the bridge-master. Traveling through the canals we were just about eye level with the sheep – there were many that kept the grass short on the dykes (saves hiring lawn mowers). It was lovely to watch the spring lambs leaping and bounding about amongst the beautiful black Friesian horses, a smaller graceful version of the old farm carthorses.

We enjoyed many walks through the fields and dykes of the polderland, admired some colorful tulip fields, watched huge frogs in pools and the abundant varieties of bird life. The beautiful Friesian farmhouses blend into the barns with steep thatched roofs just about touching the ground. Jumping has never been my 'forte' and arrival in Leeuwarden certainly proved it. Dick brought 'Maria' in perfectly, slowly and precisely. I had the long rope in my hand and after a few seconds pep talk closed my eyes and leapt down onto the flat bank. The landing was extremely soft and as I stepped forward I left my right shoe in the sinking mud. Needless to say my sock became heavy and slippery as I ran/limped to the bollard and wrapped the rope around it to stop the boat.

Leeuwarden, the capital of Friesland is also the birthplace of Mata Hari, Esher and it was the people of this city who were the first to recognize America as an independent country in 1648. The people of the town proudly show the letter of thanks from Thomas Jefferson. The ca. 500 000 Frieslanders joke about their Dutch neighbors in their own official national language but it was all double dutch to us. Fortunately most people in the Netherlands spoke English very well.

As the flowers appeared with the warming weather we invested in a couple of bicycles. Cycling in Holland is such a pleasure. There are specific roadways just for cyclists with traffic lights etc. protected from the hustle and bustle of vehicles. We traveled through Friesland across the IJsselmeer, a few days in Enkhuisen and down to Amsterdam where we found a wonderful quiet mooring amongst trees close to Grand Central Station. We spent about 2 weeks in Amsterdam and managed to see all the art galleries and museums including the sex and exotic ones. By now it was beginning of June and the end of the tulip season. We used the efficient train system for side trips to Alkmar, Edam and Gouda to watch cheese auctions and to Delft famous for it's china. We traveled by bus to The Hague; saw the Houses of Parliament, the Royal Palace and museum, which boasted paintings of Rembrandt, Vermeer and many other Dutch Masters.

Besides absorbing all the history and art of this lovely small country one has to be impressed with the diligence and unmatched cleanliness of the Dutch. One time we tied up next to a lake on a side canal and stayed 10 days. During that time I managed to pop over to UK and visit my parents while Dick managed some varnishing. It was also here that one fine sunny morning I heard a strange noise, went rushing outside only to see Dick climbing out of the canal onto the bank. He had attempted to re-tie Maria, overbalanced and did the 'splash' - it's hard to drown in 1.5 metres of water!

As we progressed further south the summer set in and we slowed right down to cruise mode and enjoyed the scenery, long warm days, bar-b-ques on the foredeck washed down with local wines or beers or both! We cruised into Belgium on 21st July, and followed the Albert Canal through the towns and cities of Liege, Namur and Dinant. We were now in the hills of the Ardennes. The scenery was spectacular, as we continued on the Maas (Dutch) now called the Meuse (Belgium) and glided towards France. The river over the years has cut a deep gorge which winds and twists through the hills. Castles and citadels perch on the edges of the rocks. Manicured lawns and chateaux grace the riverbanks; it was really lovely.

We arrived in France 10th August. Here the scenery changed yet again. The river mainly canal now became narrow (so did the locks) as we started to ascend (here now in Epinal we are 370 m above sea level). Each lock has it's own personality created by the lock keeper. The canals through the hilly French countryside have to be negotiated by locks every few kilometers or even by ladders of locks of 15 or more making anything more than 30 km hard work. We are quite happy to average about 50 kilometers a week. In France the size of the locks are generally standard at 36 m long by 5 m wide. 'Maria' measures 25 m by 4.80 m so you can see we have very little room for maneuver. 'Maria' is also 3.40 high and the low bridges and occasional tunnel are 3.50 high. We have now

been through over 190 locks, covered about 1300 kilometers of waterways including several tunnels the longest being 650 meters and crossed by way of aqueducts a number of rivers and 8 lane highways. We also clocked 1700 kilometers on our small motorbike 'Zippy'. One can fully understand why people flock to France for holidays and renting small barges is very popular... it's all here. Besides the scenery, the pace, villages, food, wine and this years great summer weather we find the people friendly and helpful. Admittedly very little English is spoken but we are enjoying trying to speak French.

Our trip took us through Verdun where we stopped for a few days to see the ugliness of war. The surrounding area where many, many soldiers lost their lives in the 1st. World War has now been made into a memorial park. One can still see the trenches in the woods and photographs show the devastation of battles. New trees are now growing in the forest; it seems each one represents a lost soldier. A mausoleum has been built that houses thousands of bones of unknown soldiers. We ended our sojourn by visiting one of the US memorial cemeteries. Here, countless white crosses cover acres of lawns creating a Garden of Remembrance. We walked amongst the crosses and could not help notice some of the American names, which obviously had German, French, Italian, English or Jewish ancestry. All of this filled us with sadness and still does, aware of such slaying. This year has certainly been the year of 'canals' for us as besides traveling along them we also unfortunately experienced a couple in the mouth! We have both been plagued with dental problems and fortunately discovered a good English speaking dentist. His main surgery is located in Nancy - the birthplace of 'Art Noveau' and such a beautiful city. Our tooth (teeth) aches developed into root canals (I had one & Dick had 3) and expensive crowns. We decided to halt this years canal travel at Epinal approx. 60 km south of Nancy. There are many places to visit and explore and we often pop onto our little 50cc motorbike (that fits on the deck of Maria) and zip of into the Vosges Mountains to pick wild mushrooms, a talent Dick acquired during his childhood. The area we are now in is known as 'Lorraine' which is also known for it's different crystal glassworks. One of the most famous being 'Baccarat'. It was here, September 11th, we stepped out of the museum having marveled at the brilliant talent of mankind only to hear of the devastating news, the cruel vicious capability of man.

The weather has now changed and we hear the wind howling and the rain beating against the hull of 'Maria', so it's time to leave, head to UK then on to Canada for Christmas. One great advantage of barging in Europe is that friends and family have managed to visit us. We have had quite a few laughs especially whilst learning the 'ropes'. We shall leave the boat here in Epinal for the winter months and plan to return in April to make our way south before turning north west to Paris. Our mobile phone is still Germany 0049 177 244 3645 and is rather temperamental so if you try to call and cannot get through please try againit will work. Also our email is still the same: spurwing95@aol.com.