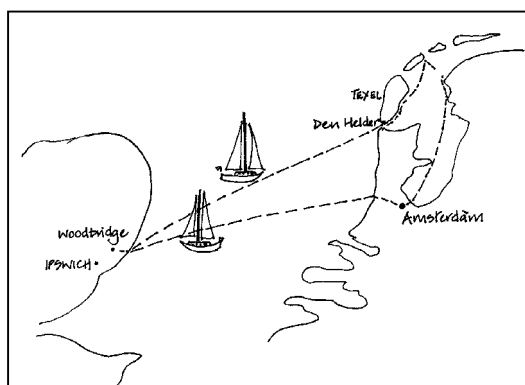


Aliz Motte in the Frisian Islands & IJsselmeer

As one day of strong North Easterlies followed another it looked very much as though a long anticipated early May trip to the Frisian Islands might have to be postponed for yet another year. The plan was for a single-handed, circular cruise from the River Deben making a landfall at Den Helder before visiting some of the southern Frisian Islands, then working down through the IJsselmeer to Amsterdam and home via IJmuiden.

In the same week in 2001 I had set out against a similar blast only to find myself spending the week enjoying the warm sunshine in Northern France!

A 5 day planning forecast from Metfax revealed the opportunity for a Friday departure. A trough of low pressure tracking slowly across the North Sea would mean light cyclonic winds and dodgy visibility but it looked possible. Thus it was that once again I became part of the morning school run, set down with my bags close to the river at Woodbridge.



The meaning of moderate visibility was quickly apparent as a lank mist hung over the water. I had anticipated the need to make liberal use of the motor in such winds but perhaps not the full 145 miles to Den Helder, however, this is more or less what transpired. By the early hours of the following morning a radar set had jumped several places up my wish-list as the mist became a definite fog with visibility down to a few hundred metres.

The apparition of a brightly illuminated oil rig hovering with no visible means of support above the fog and booming out its weird sound signal was at once, reassuring because it confirmed our position and eerie because of its surreal appearance. Twice in close succession ships loomed out of the fog alarmingly close to starboard – heard before they were seen, though I hope they were observing Aliz Motte as a blip on a radar screen for a good time beforehand.

The fog continued right into the harbour and I was within 200m before I sighted Holland having seen only two buoys as we crept slowly up the edge of the well marked channel. Oh for the wonder of GPS!

Den Helder is the Dutch Navy's equivalent of Portsmouth and I was made very welcome at the Naval club just to starboard once through the harbour entrance. Eager to make the most of my time I saw to Aliz Motte's needs and made straight for the town. Den Helder has little to of interest beyond a straight-forward harbour at the end of a long passage. However, I did enjoy the Maritime Museum which offers the chance to explore a submarine decommissioned in the 1960's.

Visibility was much improved the next day for my first barefoot sail of the year. Oudeschild on the island of Texel was barely 10 miles distant but even with the tide beneath the keel very light winds meant a passage of three or four hours.

Large deep sea trawlers moored three of four deep crowded the fish quay in the outer harbour and I understood the reason for the advice in the pilot book against yachtsmen arriving and leaving harbour on Friday evenings and Monday mornings. The marina at Oudeschild has recently been extended with an additional mooring basin and a smart new clubhouse. It was expensive and empty.

Regular stops to rethread the recently oiled chain to my father's Brompton punctuated a comfortably flat cycle ride to Texel (the town), capital of Texel (the island). Once again I was struck by the entirely appropriate scale of the dwellings and the sensible layout of the Dutch towns.

The sun shone with moderate winds from the South East as, early the next morning ignoring the warning in the pilot book, I joined the tail end of the fishing fleet departing the harbour. Following the withies and timing my journey to cross the watershed before the tide turned, the trip to Oost-Vlieland was to be my first real Frisian experience. As an East Coast sailor, I am accustomed to working the tides but it was still exciting to set off with the tide and to continue sailing the same course sustaining its support even after it had turned.

From the height of a Rival cockpit it is rarely possible to see more than one whithy ahead so this kind of sailing is a matter of nurturing the belief that the next whithy will indeed appear just as you reach the one in sight. What a strange experience it is to sail well out of site of land but to be following lines of twigs with only 0.4m beneath the keel. This said, it is the task of finding the channel in the first place that is the greatest challenge. The charts are excellent and the bouyage well maintained but one withied channel looks pretty much like another and you need your wits about you as work your way through that watery warren.

Oost-Vlieland harbour presents a relatively straightforward approach but the tide runs strongly across the entrance. Happily the strengthening wind allowed us to plug the tide once we made the turn west and south to approach the harbour. We entered following several of the 70ft sailing barges that are a common sight in the Dutch inland waters. Most operate as charter boats offering outward-bound type experiences to schools and youth organisations. I later counted 29 such vessels tightly packed into the harbour. With each vessel accommodating around 15 youngsters Oost-Vlieland coped remarkably well that evening with the 400+ stormbound hormone fuelled teenagers.

It was as well that I had planned the following day as a rest day because a most uncomfortable gale blew from the North East. Extra shorelines were run out and the rum ration doubled.

Oost-Vlieland, the town, is a short cycle ride from the harbour and offers pleasant cafes and lots of shopping for gifts to take home. The roll mop herrings are highly recommended but not as a gift for home.

The tides allowed for a civilised start the next morning which bought a South Westerly 6 and a cloudy sky. Two reefs in the main and a full genoa was the order for a reach then beat with tide and another reach across the Waddenzee for a late lunch at Harlingen 20 miles distant. The harbour at Harlingen reminded me very much of Middelburg with tall town houses around a town centre basin. Attractive as it was, I found the charge of 15 Euros relatively steep considering the poor standard of loos and showers.

Thursday morning brought sunshine and a Southerly 4. We made slow progress South against wind and tide tacking down the narrow channel towards Kornwerderzand where we locked into the IJsselmeer.

Leaving the lock along with up to 30 other boats is always a bit of a hazard and on this occasion I was far too hasty in my eagerness to get the sails up and the engine off. As the Autopilot steered and I hauled on the main halyard I kept a wary eye on a motor boat overtaking to starboard and realising just too late that the real hazard was a green channel marker which was now fine on the port bow. It was lucky that it was a glancing blow leaving only a scuff of green paint on Aliz Motte's white hull as a reminder to be more careful in future.

Hindeloopen was probably the most attractive port of call but only because upon entering we turned right for the town quay rather than left for the huge marina. It was like sailing into the pages of a picture book as we tied up under the earnest guidance of the harbourmaster looking very much as though he himself had stepped out of a the pages of a picture book in white peaked cap, blue blazer and the most impressive white whiskers. The fantasy atmosphere was compounded by the presence of a television crew filming what must have been a cookery programme of the 'Rick Stein cooks fish on the seashore' variety.

Besides the many fine restaurants and intriguing antique and bric-a-brac shops, Hindeloopen also offers a supermarket very close to the town quay and time was spent most profitably in restocking Aliz Motte's seriously depleted gin locker. A superb day was concluded with the most absorbing sunset over the IJsselmeer.

A leisurely departure the following morning had us underway by 11.30 the next morning. A North Easterly 3 provided a very relaxing mix of broad reach and run and the opportunity to try out the new cruising chute which I found did its best work with genoa and main both stowed. The pilot books advise sailing around rather than across the very long nets with which local fishermen lace the IJsselmeer though such an approach does take a degree of self discipline. Mine sustained for about a mile until a wind shift began to lift the luff of the chute and with fingers tightly crossed we sailed cleanly across the top. We arrived in Enkhuizen in time for tea.

Too good things happened in Enkhuizen, the first was the discovery of a tobacconist with stock of sufficient antiquity to supply a favourite brand which was sadly lost to the UK in the mid 1990's. The second was to arrange to meet up with ROA members Peter & Marianne van Kralingen (R34, Schuttevaire) at their home port of De Blocq van Kuffeler.

The passage to De Blocq van Kuffeler the next day was straightforward starting with a gentle South, South Westerly and but later veering and filling to give a good Rival reach. The tideless Makermeer provided the ideal opportunity to adjust the new electronic log against our speed over the ground provided by the GPS.

Peter and Marianne were in excellent form. He was shortly to retire and was looking forward to the many improvements he hoped to make to the distinctive red hulled Schuttevaire (R34).

The next stop was Amsterdam. The Sixhaven marina is widely recognised as the best place to stop being on the north bank of the Noordzee Canal and therefore out of the main city throng yet minutes from a terminal for the free foot ferry which drops off at Central Station.

The bustle of Amsterdam came as something of a shock after the delights of rural Netherlands. As an ex-Merchant seaman I know exactly how to spend my time in Amsterdam. So it was straight off to the magnificent Rijksmuseum (Art) Scheepvaartmuseum (Maritime) and the Houseboat Museum.

It is common practise to travel down the Noordzee Canal to await a fair wind at Ijmuiden though it is wise to avoid the grossly overpriced Seaport Marina. However, it is only 3 hours motoring from Sixhaven Marina to Ijmuiden so I waited and made the most of my time in this most fascinating city. After 2 days in Amsterdam the Metfax revealed a window in the weather before strong winds were due to build from the south west. I should leave the following morning.

Dawn broke clear and bright as we worked our way out of the densely packed marina. By 9am we were through the lock at Ijmuiden and close reaching in a light Northerly.

Despite a promising forecast of a reaching wind of force 5 or 6 it wasn't long before the wind dropped and the motor was back on. It stayed on for most of the next ten hours. A monotony broken only once but in the most charming way with a visit by dolphins which always lifts the spirits. For a while the wind filled in and we sailed making 4 or 5 knots with one reef in the main.

In the early hours of the morning I was below when I noticed a sudden change. The wind had dropped to dead calm and on deck the atmosphere was strangely uneasy. Instinctively, despite the complete absence of wind, I reefed. Not just one or two but most of the Genoa and the full three in the Main. As I reefed, the wind built and the rain came. I was at the mast completing the reefing when we were knocked sufficiently flat for the close reaching boom to drag firmly through the water. I returned to the cockpit in time to see the recently fitted anemometer register that the wind had dropped to the mid 40's.

Visibility cleared as the rain moved on and the wind settled at around 30 knots. Now the sailing began. Knowing we were within 6 or 7 hours from home allowed me to enjoy the ride. It was thrilling as the seas built and Aliz Motte got firmly into her stride.

After around 26 hours we had somehow timed the tide to sail directly over the bar into the Deben and the 8 miles up river to our mooring at Woodbridge.

Eric Orme
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