



East meets West

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The Germans have a name for it – Wasserwanderer. On Mecklenburg's great lakes, the word is used to describe those who explore these waters in craft ranging from small dinghies to cruising yachts like Suleika, our chartered Bénéteau First 265. Little craft keep to the shoreline, their crews spending the night at designated camping sites. Larger boats have great expanses of inland waters for sailing, and a range of marinas and anchorages around old towns and villages that, just a few years ago, were inaccessible to westerners, lying miles behind the Berlin wall.

After a week on the water, including time with the mast lowered and keel raised to enable us to pass from one lake to another, we did feel like 'water wanderers' exploring Germany's great lakes, some 100 km north-west of Berlin. This is a country blessed with over 200 sizeable lakes, many of which are used for watersports. Some are linked by waterways, others by short cuttings, and it is possible to navigate a boat from Berlin's city centre right out to the lakes of Mecklenburg.

Our destination was the Mueritz, Germany's second-largest lake. It is an hour-and-a-half by car from Berlin, via a motorway that runs close to Tegel airport, and in no time we were loading up Suleika at KUHNLE-TOURS Rechlin charter base. The 26ft (8.2m) Bénéteau First was ours for seven days.

KUHNLE-TOURS have several bases in Germany from which they operate fleets of motor cruisers, but Rechlin, in Germany's equivalent of the Lake District, is their only centre for chartering Firsts. I was impressed with Suleika, which had a double aft cabin and a roomy saloon with berths big enough for the taller members of our crew. The only modifications KUHNLE-TOURS had made were the addition of heating for Spartan types who charter outside the season (at enticingly low rates), and most remarkable arrangement for lowering and raising the tabernacle-mounted mast.

The helpful lady from the office singelhandedly demonstrated how this worked. After slipping out the forestay pin, the whole operation then took under a minute. I longed for a similar arrangement on our gaff cutter, which takes the best part of a day to organise. In Two hours we were loaded and ready to sail.

We familiarised ourselves with the ways of the boat by tacking over to the wooded eastern side of the Müritz, and than had a delightful broad reach over to the other side, only lowering the sails when we were two miles up the Binnensee (inner lake) and off one of the two marinas at Röbel. In the evening we dined outside at the marina restaurant, overlooking scenes of intense activity as dinghy sailors prepared their boats for a major regatta the following day. We slipped away from the marina before the first of Saturday morning's races got underway. We tacked back to Rechlin to drop off one of the crew, Michael, who would return in a couple of days with his son. We sailed back towards Röbel, but this time raised the keel and nudged into the shallows of the Binnensee, where we would swim and try our luck at fishing. The lakes are popular with anglers, but on this occasion it was pasta for supper – although we were assured the lake is teeming with pike, carp and perch.

The next day we sailed Suleika to Röbel's town quay, which is so popular that the Hafenmeister makes certain that visiting craft drop anchor and moor stern-to. We wanted to see the old town and to climb the belfry of St. Marien church for superb view of the Binnensee and the Müritz, dotted with sails as far as the eye could see. Much of the east side of the Müritz is a National Park, and a pleasure boats are not permitted inside a line of buoys 600m off the shore. Established in 1990, this nature reserve is now the home of many rare birds.



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Back on the water, we made for a stretch of shoreline north of the reserve, where many yachts were anchored in the shallows. The press of a button raised the keel, reducing our draught from 1.94 m to 0.66 m as we closed the shore before dropping anchor for a swim. If we had forgotten our swimming costumes, it would not have mattered as most people around us were naked, either swimming or attending to their boats. With typical British reserve, I had not raised an eyebrow two days earlier at the sight of a naked 'wrinkly' at the helm of his boat. My companions told me that this practice dated back to a time when nudity was one of the few freedoms East Germans could enjoy.

We tried sailing off the anchorage on the jib, with the lifted keel, but without success and, soon after hoisting the main, threatening clouds had us dropping the sails and motoring to the town of Waren at the north end of the Müritz. We just had time to secure the boat in the town marina before the heavens opened as we dashed to the nearest waterside restaurant, taking cover beneath the canopy of one remaining outside table.

When Michael returned with his son, we were now three adults and two children, which determined our stopping place that night. We had dropped the mast at Waren, and proceeded along the 3 km Rееckkanal. This has a fixed road bridge that cleared our mast, supported in its cradle, by four inches. This short canal led us into wide waters of another lake, the Kölpinsee, which has a narrow, buoyed channel down the middle.

The lakes are well buoyed, and the on-board guide is excellent, clearly showing the 10m, 5m and 2.5m limits. On the Müritz, which covers an area of 45 square miles, there is deep water exceeding 2.5m everywhere, apart from some isolated shoals in the middle and shallows that extend up to 1km off the western and eastern shores.

The wind had piped up, kicking up short, steep waves across the Kölpinsee as we approached a short cutting into another lake - the Fleesensee. On the outskirts of Malchow we sighted what looked like the ideal place to stop for the night - a small marina with a restaurant, a protected artificial beach for swimming, a children's play area and a place to pitch a tent to accommodate our expanded crew. It was a great success, particularly with the children, with the cost of our overnight stay less than 5 Pound - typical of most of the marinas around the lakes. I wanted to see Plau. Like Waren and Malchow, it had been a popular health resort in the middle of the 19th century, although the town dates back to the 13th century, when Plau was a fortified, walled town, complete with moat. Passage to Plau involved passing through the swing bridge at Malchow, where the bridgekeeper stuck out a fishing net for 2 DM toll, and then we motored into our fifth lake, the nine-mile long Plauer See.

The marina seemed a bit desolate, so we joined other boats hovering outside the lifting bridge, which would give us access to the town and the Müritz-Elde-Waterway. We secured alongside just beyond the bridge, and gave ourselves a couple of hours to wander round the town, with its attractive, pastel-shaded, half-timbered buildings so typical of the area, before heading back to Waren. That evening we raised the mast again, by which time we were becoming quite expert in the operation, almost able to complete the task on the other side without stopping.

We had a car in Waren so, while I sailed the boat back to Röbel, Michael drove round. In the afternoon, with the weather becoming unsettled, we piled into the car for some sightseeing and to collect, from a furniture factory, Suleika's repaired saloon table, which had been broken by exuberant children. The following day was again damp and overcast, so we drove along the west side of the Müritz to look at the harbour at Sietow Dorf and the castle and marina at Klink. That afternoon the sun came out and we slipped out of Röbel for a leisurely final sail on the Müritz before returning Suleika to the KUHNLÉ-TOURS base at Rechlin.

At someone familiar with the Normandy and Brittany coasts, I found this style of cruising rewarding, and with several advantages. Tourism came to the Mecklenburg lakes after the reunification of Germany in 1989. New marinas spring up every season, and you can leave your night mooring, sail, stop off in some haven for breakfast, another location for a picnic lunch, then sail for two or three hours in the afternoon, and still have plenty of time for a swim, a meal and an evening stroll round a typical Mecklenburg town.



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