

Boat Love is Universal

By Hilary Hunter

Have you heard the one about an Irish woman, a Dutch boat, and the English waterways? No, this isn't a joke, but my unusual tale has raised quite a few eyebrows amongst the sailing fraternity with whom I now find myself rubbing shoulders.

I moved from my native Ireland to Essex (UK) seven years ago, swapping rolling green hills and craggy coasts for an alien landscape of misty marshland and treacherous mudflats. Little did I know that life was to take a very unexpected turn for someone whose only boating experience had been on the car ferry to Scotland.

As it turned out, the career that I relocated for did not turn out as planned. My subsequent decision to downsize from an "empty nest" home led me to contemplate a tree huggers' catalogue of eco-home ideas. All came to nothing until friends living on a Dutch motor barge suggested I take a look at similar vessels. Always open to new ideas, especially after a delicious dinner and a glass of good wine, I resolved to research this idea.

I headed for Google, and after much investigation of barges, I had a list. My partner and I headed for the night ferry to the Netherlands for a weekend of viewing barges that appeared to match our criteria. They also were budget-friendly, selling more affordably than just across the Channel in England.

I had been told by several women friends that I'd know my boat when I saw it, as it would "speak to me." As I motored from vessel to vessel, my faith in my friends' advice began to wane.

The reputation of the Dutch as great boat builders makes sense as you explore this beautiful land of canals and windmills. Barges and leisure boats are moored around every corner — even where you cannot see a canal there will be a barge floating at someone's back door on an offshoot from the nearest waterway. I looked at barges that were pretty enough to adorn a chocolate box lid and others that were dark, rusting, and smelling of mold. Proud skippers took us on test drives but none of these little ships spoke to me as promised.

Then a chance encounter with a rusting vessel completely changed our search. This museum piece we dubbed "Spooky Ship" had managed to retain her mast and rigging when many had turned to motor. Quite a few of her original features remained, leading to my feeling that she should be preserved intact for posterity. We fell under the spell of her sense of history and the romance of her sails, but something about this one made the hairs on my neck stand up. She most definitely was not for me!

As our criteria now included sails, my research expanded and our search resumed with a second trip just a few weeks later. This expedition took us on a similar trail as before, finding barges we liked but never the right one.



a perfect 23-hour crossing, the three of them were delighted with her handling and obviously under her spell.

Two years on, *Drie Gebroeders* has become a local celebrity. She's an unusual and much photographed addition to the marina. I affectionately call her "My old Dutch lady" though the local electrician who rewired her spaghetti-like innards might call her something else. Countless large cans of paint and varnish have been applied inside and out *Drie Gebroeders*, and her one-ton leeboards have been craned off and on again. Her complete restoration has changed her lingering air of neglect to one of a proud survivor of 119 years of service.

Finally, my savings were well and truly depleted by the over 13 yards of beautiful Douglas fir that were recently hoisted aboard *Drie Gebroeders* to replace her long-rotting mast.

My tale is not complete despite owning the vessel of my dreams. I have climbed the steepest learning curve of my life and yet I am not content, as I have yet to learn to sail my beautiful boat. Wait — do I hear you laughing?

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