

# The Lady

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Pat Grillo

# PARADISE AFLOAT?

*John likes messing about on boats; his wife finds them cramped and uncomfortable. **Caroline Deacon** discovers how they solved the dilemma*



**W**HEN the Wheatons bought *Wilskracht*, a 100ft, 100-ton commercial Dutch barge, for £7,000, she was fire-damaged and derelict. She was one of the smallest working boats carrying commodities on the 30,000 miles of European inland waterways. One hundred years old this year, she was superseded by barges weighing thousands of tons in the 1970s and 1980s.

*Wilskracht* started life under sail, coasting around the shores and adjoining rivers of the IJsselmeer (then the Zuider Zee), probably carrying grain. In 1935, her masts were removed and an engine installed. Her working owners might well have brought up a family on board. However, most of her vast hull contained cargo, and the family was confined to a very small cabin in the stern, with a deckhouse from where the boat was driven.

The Wheatons thought she would convert well into a comfortable, floating holiday home. A friend and

colleague who enjoyed boats but was confined to a wheelchair, expressed an interest. A third family was found to complete the group of investors. It took a year and £100,000 to bring *Wilskracht* up to standard.

The partners wanted three double bedrooms, three bathrooms and "room to swing a wheelchair". They had in mind a Swedish house, smelling of wood, and so *Wilskracht* was lined throughout with white-painted panelling, pine floors and furnishings from IKEA: "So many of the barges we looked at were dark brown inside and felt claustrophobic." When the work was complete, the original owner's stern cabin contained only one double bedroom with *en suite* bathroom.

The cabins are below deck and access is by lift from the deckhouse. Once there, one forgets that outside lie dank canal waters. The fitted kitchen is roomy and the saloon/dining room comfortable and inviting. The barge is self-sufficient with onboard power,

central heating and a laundry.

Initially, *Wilskracht* stayed in Holland, taking her new owners down many familiar routes. One summer she was chartered by groups of disabled people. John stayed on board as skipper. "They certainly got a lot out of it. Hans, with Down's Syndrome, who hadn't spoken for the last five years, wanted to drive the boat. He sat at the wheel, wearing my 'skipper's' hat and I stood behind him saying left a bit, right a bit, and he managed to steer it. He had the time of his life."

One week a French group of teenage delinquents enjoyed *Wilskracht's* facilities. "There wasn't an ounce of damage, apart from the bike, which was knocked about a bit."

After a few years, the other two families decided they couldn't use *Wilskracht* enough to justify the investment, and wanted to sell. John, however, had just sold his business and was able to spend far more time aboard, so the Wheatons bit the bullet and





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: a small village *en route* in Alsace provided breakfast baguettes; on the canal linking the Marne to the Rhine in Alsace; the *Wilskracht*; and the Wheatons and a visitor enjoying lunch on deck

few years VNF (*Voies Navigables de France*) has started to manage them for tourism and leisure.

"Yet, few French people use them," Marietta said. "Instead, the canals are full of Dutch, Germans, Belgians, English and Americans. The nice thing is that you see the old villages as they should be seen – from the canal. Waterways were often in place before the roads, so the village was built up around the canal. Sometimes you arrive right in the centre of the village because it was built that way."

"We would never bring the boat to Britain," they told me emphatically. "The waterways are the wrong size for us, and the charges much higher. Anyway, there is too much of Europe still to explore. There are 8,000km of canals in France, another 8,000 in Holland and still more in Belgium. I reckon we've got another 10 years of cruising here. We could even go right down to the Black Sea. So there's lots to do and see here."

What are their plans for this year? "In June, there will be a British Dutch Barge Association (DBA) meet at Épernay. We intend to hold a big party to celebrate *Wilskracht's* 100th birthday, with lots of champagne. Later in the year she will go down through Burgundy, down the Rhône, and we will spend the whole winter in the south."

Long term, will they retire permanently on the boat? "No," said John. "I could quite happily, but I don't think Marietta wants to. If all else failed and I suddenly ran out of money and we were faced with the options, life in a flat in London or life on the barge... I should think it would be the barge for me and the flat for Marietta."

Let's hope they never have to make that decision!

bought out the other families. In 1996, they spent the best part of five months touring the small canals of France.

There are always friends who would like to visit. Have they fallen out with anyone? "No, the secret of having guests is not to have anyone for too long," Marietta said. "We never have anyone for more than a week, always with a week to ourselves in between visits. John wanted to squeeze some Australians into one of the gaps – I said 'All right, but if they come, I go.'"

"The crew mutinied," John muttered.

**W**hat do they find most difficult about living on a barge? "Shopping," they agreed. "We only have a bicycle and it is difficult to carry what you need on that. This year we will get a little scooter, so we can go off and do some serious shopping."

Marietta elaborated. "If you have six people all insisting on bottled water... you carry six bottles of water plus a

couple of bottles of wine plus food for six. It gets pretty hard. I cheat now – I fill the bottles from the tap. No one knows the difference and our water is gorgeous."

John was pondering why life on the barge felt so different from life in London. "I'm so relaxed on the boat, in a different state of mind. We are out in the countryside, but moving slowly, so we are not *sitting* in the countryside – it's a strange phenomenon. I thought I would just atrophy, but I'm too busy – there are lots of things to think about in managing the boat."

France is far more canal-orientated than Britain. There are three sizes or systems of canals – the construction of the smallest began in the early 17th century. In the late 18th and all of the 19th century they carried thousands of barges like *Wilskracht* with whole families living on them, each barge transporting 300 tons of every type of commodity. From the Sixties onwards these canals fell into disuse. In the last