

GRAND BANKS

European Style

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY BILL PARLATORE

Boy, it sure hurts to walk cobblestone streets in deck shoes!

I hardly ever get free long enough to attend the many trawler rendezvous events throughout the year. But when the invitation came regarding the 2003 Grand Banks Rendezvous in Antwerp, I shuffled schedules around to make it happen. There were a couple of stories afoot on that continent, so my travel plans came together nicely.

I'm sure you are aware of the travel restrictions and safety precautions these days, not to mention that a solo American needs to keep his wits about him as he moves from country to country. In addition to the demands of this "Condition Yellow" mentality, the reality is that I can no longer check camera gear and other expensive equipment as easily as I once did. Unlocked luggage is routinely searched, and checked film gets blasted with damaging radiation. Even the security folks warn us of this necessary evil and recommend hand-carrying all film.



How They Do



It On Their Side Of The Pond



So a trip these days becomes a personal challenge to bring just enough to capture the event without breaking my back. And judging from my recent trip to Europe, I guess I'm still trying to find that balance.

The British Airways flight to London with connection to Brussels was an unexpectedly delightful experience, with a cheerful and witty crew dealing with a full aircraft. (Aren't they all full these days?)

Many hours later, the taxi ride from the airport in Brussels to Antwerp gave me time to adjust my mood to being in Europe again, and I pondered what I hoped to learn from this trip. I expected to meet a number of GB owners, and it occurred to me that this would be a great opportunity to better understand how European owners use their boats compared to owners in North America.

I arrived a day early to adjust my internal clock, so when I walked from my hotel toward the nearby Willemdok marina along Napoleons Avenue, I came unto several GBs just coming into the marina for the event. The people I planned to meet at the event, specifically Rob Livingston, Seattle-based vice president of GB marketing, and Luc Colpin,

Above: Well-kept and manicured villages appear along the Dutch waterways, inviting the cruiser to stop for a visit. Opposite: Jeannie Livingston and family friend Timmy Voorham relax and enjoy the view while waiting for a lock outside Antwerp.

manager of GB's European dealer network, weren't arriving until the next day.

Despite a light rain, I stood outside the security fence as boat after boat slowly backed into several lines of that familiar profile. Interestingly, the boats spanned decades of GB production and it seemed every model was there, yet each had that striking similarity. It is the Grand Banks way.

It did not take me long to make another observation. Flat boat shoes are awful on cobblestone streets, and Antwerp is full of cobblestone streets. Something to add to my refining travel kit: better footwear.

By the end of the day there were 40 boats all together, and for the next several days I spoke with many owners and heard of their European travels and style of cruising.

Amicale is the Western Europe Grand Banks club, and there are 100 current members. There is a total





Antwerp's churches, like the one above left, date back centuries, and the city's marina seawall (above right) was constructed during Napoleon's occupation. Opposite page: A decidedly Dutch scene of old and new.

of 150 to 180 GBs in the Benelux area, and the club has held a similar rendezvous each year since 1980. The club became official in 1985.

GATHERING MOMENTUM

Jean Colin, a retired Dutch Grand Banks dealer, was instrumental in forming the cruising club and now enjoys cruising aboard his own GB32, *Jema*. He explained that more than 85 percent of European owners are ex-sailors, and they choose the boat for its rugged and seaworthy characteristics. But it took a couple of years for the boat to catch on when it first appeared in Holland, and he told of his boat show experiences with those first potential buyers.

"Such big windows, they would worry," Jean recalled with a smile. "This boat can't be very safe on the sea. What if the engine dies?"

Colin would answer these concerns by suggesting a sea trial. Often in less-than-perfect conditions, he would take prospective buyers for a boat ride into

the North Sea. At some point during the trial he would shut down the engines and let the boat drift in the open sea.

"It always worked," Colin reported. "We never, ever took water aboard to threaten those windows, and the boat always impressed these sailors that it meant business."

Another unusual feature that the Grand Banks brought to Europe was a larger galley than Europeans typically find on cruising boats. The layout and accommodations of the standard GB also impressed sailors used to cramped quarters. It is a feature that still brings smiles to owners.

Working with Tony Fleming (who was with American Marine before he went on to create the hugely successful Fleming line of motoryachts), Jean Colin introduced the Europa model that is now as popular as the Classic in the model lineup.

Jan Willem ten Broeke, current chairman of the club, owns a 42-foot Classic and told me he cruises





all over with his family. He's been to the Channel Islands, France's Brittany and Normandy coasts, and southern England. His boat, *Henderika*, is a very comfortable cruiser, and he was candid about how he and most others use their boats. The need for high speed is just not practical or desirable for cruising Europe, as the inland waters are too busy. Although the waterways don't have actual speed limits, there is too much traffic to make speed something a prudent skipper would entertain.

Willem van Barneveld is the club's secretary and owns *Decibel*, a spiffy '92 42-foot Europa. He made a west coast circumnavigation of Denmark this summer, and the seven-week trip was a lasting adventure that was both relaxing and full of good weather. His boat has twin Cummins 250hp engines for a top speed of 17 knots, although he cruises at 9.5 knots. Again, speed is not important to these owners.

Willem told me Dutch GB owners spend much of their time in the Waddenzee, an area north of the Netherlands in between the mainland and the barrier islands. Many owners do eventually make longer cruises to England, France and beyond, but there is plenty to enjoy near home, as there are over 2,500 harbors in Holland alone. Navigation isn't particularly difficult but some areas demand caution, such as the Dover Channel, with its intense commercial shipping traffic.

Decibel's flybridge is one of Willem's favorite features, even if it does limit his inland travels with its additional height. As a result, he runs most of the time outside in the North Sea. And he feels very safe on his boat. Its seaworthy nature is why he chose to buy a Grand Banks.



Above left: All of the Grand Banks are kept in top shape by their proud owners.
Above: The rendezvous dinner was a first-class affair.

Right: Willem van Barneveld wins the coveted Grand Banks steering wheel award for his summer cruise around Denmark.



Speaking of the matter of height restrictions, the lowest I heard about was for the older canals near Paris, which allow a clearance of only 3 meters 50 centimeters (11.4 feet).

Most European GB owners do not use air conditioning, even though it comes standard on the larger models. The same is true for stabilizers. But most Dutch owners do install a diesel furnace, which helps extend the cruising season from March through October. My impression from the owners is that they don't anchor out very much, as the protected harbors and cruising grounds are so well developed and it is so easy to tie up for the night.

A WHOLE LOT OF CRUISING IN 36 FEET

One couple I really enjoyed meeting was Gerrit and Frieda Andel, who own a 1990 GB36 Europa, *Houdoe*. And I was much impressed with their accomplishments on this boat. They even cruised her to the Canary Islands from Holland a few years

ago. Gerrit told me he was concerned about his fuel capacity for that trip, and obtained a 200-liter barrel to hold extra fuel so he would have a sufficient reserve while heading offshore to the islands located off the coast of Morocco. He wanted to fit the barrel between *Houdoe's* twin 135hp Ford Lehman's, but it didn't originally fit the space. A resourceful fellow, he bashed it into a flatter shape using a friend's bulldozer and got it wedged in just fine. He also told me it turned out he didn't need the additional fuel, but it was good insurance.

Houdoe has also been to the Lofoten Islands near the Arctic Circle and across the Mediterranean, and the boat is presently in Turkey. Gerrit and Frieda are really enjoying their boat!

That evening I was invited to join four couples, all GB36 owners, who planned a dinner at Casa Manuel, a Spanish restaurant a couple of blocks away from the rendezvous. We toasted the success of the four Dutch boats: *Shamu*, *Shamrock*, *Condor* and *Houdoe*. The dinner was great, but the company was better. Every round of wine brought Gerrit to sing another Spanish love ballad accompanied by the loud chorus of the other men. The jokes and laughter were contagious, and it mattered not that I didn't know the language. It was wonderful to see people having such a good time, and the young patrons and restaurant staff enjoyed it every bit as much. Older folks don't have much use for inhibition.

Saturday we toured the older section of Antwerp and learned of its many artists and churches and Old World architecture. We ended the walking tour at Grote Market, where the shops and square were busy from weekend activity, and I got the chance to buy Antwerp's famous chocolate.

That evening was the formal dinner reception aboard a steel party boat moored along a seawall in the marina. (The stone seawalls of the marina were built during Napoleon's occupation of Antwerp 200 years ago, yet they remain strong.) During the reception we learned that Willem van Barneveld won the club's Grand Banks steering wheel award for the longest cruise of the season. His Denmark circumnavigation took *Decibel* over 1,400 nautical miles.

The music played long after dinner, and the laughter continued, but Rob and Jeannie Livingston and I bade our farewells to the group, as we were headed out at dawn with Luc Colpin on a new GB46, bound for the Amsterdam boat show. The passage from Antwerp had a bit of a wrinkle, as the



The dawn departure from Antwerp, forced by storm conditions in the North Sea.

weather remained atrocious in the North Sea; we would have to make the journey inside. It was to be a much longer passage, and we would have to really boogie.

I feel I made some new friends at the Amicale rendezvous, and look forward to seeing them again. Perhaps the enthusiasm and potential for Benelux cruising is just too infectious to resist.

THE NEW GRAND BANKS

As Luc drove the 46 Classic out of the Willemdok marina through several canals to reach the major waterway in the predawn, Rob Livingston explained some of the new philosophy at Grand Banks, which is enjoying a renewed spirit and focus on the core business of building quality boats. Both he and Neil McCurdy, vice president of sales, are enthusiastic about the opportunity to bring new energy to a successful company, improving and updating the classic characteristics of a boat that remains timeless.



Rather than adding new models to its line, the company plans to determine which existing models best fit today's market and evolve these boats to be as friendly, safe and comfortable as possible. It is an admirable direction.

Case in point was the 46 Classic we were bringing to Amsterdam. There are numerous changes to the boat, some subtle and others obvious, each designed to make it a better and more comfortable trawler. Settee seating has been relaxed for better ergonomics, and the helm now sports a large console for a full suite of marine electronics.

The flybridge is quite different from previous boats, now with a centerline helm with a large electronics console. Grand Banks acknowledges that today's cruiser outfits a flybridge much more completely than folks did in the '70s. The center helm offers improved visibility, and the standard boat's helm seats are now Stidd chairs on pedestals rather than the hard, square teak benches of the past. There are now three Stidd seats on the standard GB46.

The boat also has many construction details to minimize future maintenance concerns, something that the builder knows after so many years of construction experience. Lockers and seating are now molded in. The boat seems more relaxed and contemporary overall, yet it does not lose its familiar profile or feel. It's still a Grand Banks, but it's a more modern interpretation.

This boat has twin 415hp Man diesels for the European market, which I've not seen before. Luc explained that European boats are built with features and equipment unique to this market, such as additional stainless steel on lifeline stanchions and a high-end Gaggenau stovetop and microwave/convection oven. Some of these upgrades are required for CE certification, while others are desirable for the style of cruising.

GB's Rob Livingston (top left) works the stern line in one of the many locks, while Luc Colpin and Jean Colin (left) wait for barges to fill the lock behind us. Far left: The additional middle stainless steel rail is a CE requirement and shows exceptional work.

Opposite page: A fellow GB owner heads into a lock. Can't have too many fenders!





Working barges make outstanding liveaboard homes. Note the satellite dish.

DANCING WITH WINDMILLS

Once we left the Antwerp area we almost immediately were in the Netherlands, a land of windmills and canals and an enchanting mix of unusual-looking boats, liveaboard commercial barges and land reclaimed from the sea.

At Tholen, we entered the canal that links Antwerp to Rotterdam (and connects these waterways to France and Germany). Rotterdam is the busiest port in the world in terms of size of barges and number of vessels transiting the area. Even on this rainy Sunday we saw nonstop traffic.

Luc Colpin added some helpful considerations about the choice of boat for cruising Europe. The GB46 is about the largest practical size for traveling these waters, and he explained that a larger motoryacht makes little sense here. If you were to cruise aboard a 50-footer (or a larger boat), Luc explained, you would have to find a place to stay for the night by midafternoon, as there are fewer choices available to larger boats. It is much better to scale down the boat size to better fit the reality of the local grounds and facilities.



The Amsterdam show is an enormous event, but few of these boats are ever seen in the U.S.

It is hard for me to describe the harmonious sense of well being that comes from cruising along a relatively narrow tree- or windmill-lined waterway through farmland (complete with cows and the smells of a working farm), interspersed with quaint little villages that are timeless. At the pace of our 9-knot passage, we passed hundreds of craft along the way, the flags of four nations gracing the transoms: the red, yellow and black of Belgium and Germany and the blue, white and red of France and the Netherlands.

Every barge large enough to live aboard had a car on its aft deck, with a crane to lift it on and off a bank. The folks who live this nomadic life are just as plugged in as the rest of us—all the barges sported satellite dishes.

We made it to Amsterdam in 13 hours, and I left the boat for the next leg of my trip, a visit to Vetus den Ouden in nearby Schiedam. Luc Colpin would make the last miles to Ijmuiden in time for the

Amsterdam Seaport Boat Show. (I did visit the show for a few hours the following day and can report that, with the exception of Grand Banks and Linssen Yachts, not one of the several hundred boats would be seen at any U.S. show, at least not the powerboats. Obviously, the evolution of European boating took a different path than our American boating heritage.)

If you've ever dreamed of doing this trip, on which one can spend years all across Europe, there is no better time than now. And with the ever-increasing popularity of the yacht shipping options, it has become a great way to tour the world on your own boat.

Thanks to everyone at Amicale Grand Banks West-Europe for a great rendezvous happening, and to GB's Luc Colpin for the opportunity to do a portion of the inland waterway experience. Nice job on the new 46 Classic.

I can't wait to go back.