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Subject
TO POLAND WITH A DINGHY.
PIERS and GRETA PLOWMAN.
To Poland—with a Dinghy

Piers Plowman on sailing a Wayfarer dinghy to Poland

RAMSGATE to Gdynia in Poland is close on 1,000 miles... that's a good outing for an open dinghy by most standards; this was our fun last summer.

Mark you, we do our dinghy cruising the easy way; we're not in a hurry, so most of it is really extended day sailing—only instead of coming back home for the evening we push on to a chosen spot for a good night's berth. Thus we get two good meals a day on land (in the boat) plus sandwiches and flasks at midday afloat.

A Wayfarer is a good enough seaboat to let one feel safe crossing the Channel—provided the essential homework is done: navigation, meteorology, tides—with a good lookout for collision bearings. But it is also small enough to help one out of difficulties in ways not open to a keelboat. For instance, the previous year we'd managed Ramsgate to Dunkirk using the ebb down into the Strait and then the flood up the French coast; this time the wind died away in the evening and we were only able to trickle down on to the sands three miles east of Calais—we carry no outboard. But we do carry pneumatic boat rollers, and it is hard to exaggerate the value of these for a cruising dinghy. This elderly couple can haul their laden boat (food, water, bedding, radio—everything needed for weeks of living) over soft sand or shingle and up above the high water mark. Here, with a boom tent, we can sleep unworried and in the morning can choose our own time to roll down and catch the right tidal stream, independent of the need to be floated off—possibly in the small hours.

The whole North Sea coastline, from Calais to the last of the East Friesian islands, Wangerooge, lends itself to this beaching strategy—though it's advisable to avoid points where high and low water are a mile apart: rolling-up is all right but enough is enough...

Another aspect of this coast favours the smaller boat: should we strike an unsettled spell, there are inland waterways through which we can work east, breaking out to sea again when things have calmed down.

We used the beaches most of the way to the German Bight. We had a blowy bit between Djuiden and Den Helder when we were very happy to leave a lee shore and sail through the calm waters of the North Holland canal, but it soon settled enough to allow us the outer route along the Friesians—though meticulous attention to weather forecasts is vital in these waters. We had another blow on Wangerooge where, to avoid a gale surge on top of a spring tide, we perched ourselves on an onshore sand-dune. In a howling sandstorm after midnight an ominous cracking announced the fact that cubic metres of sand had been blown away from beneath us and that a sharp rock was determinedly entering the plywood. Much torchlight activity cured this, but I suppose there'll always be a new way of being wrecked...

The mouth of the Elbe, leading in to the Kiel canal entrance, is an inhospitable place (echoes of The Riddle of the Sands) and you don't want to make any mistakes in it. Having sailed the 50 miles from Wangerooge round to the canal the previous year, this time, in more unsettled conditions, we bypassed that leg, taking a minor canal route from Bremerhaven on the Weser through the hinterland of Cuxhaven and so out on to the Elbe.

On the great canal, the busiest inland waterway in the world, sailing is only allowed as an adjunct to an engine. So while we were tied up in the immense lock I managed to arrange a tow with the master of a small Danish coaster. This is another point where the dinghy scores. A keelboat has a critical velocity above which she becomes unstable, she will try to lift in the
water and there is the risk that her keel will plane up and lay her on her side. The little dinghy lies back on her long warp, the 'OK' is passed to the tug, he opens up and at once she's away, up on the plane. With the plate nearly up and a knee near the towing warp (driftwood through the hull?) you can lie back and watch the ships and the countryside whizz past (a nominal eight knots, but it seems terrific). You don't even have to steer, she follows steadily.

Halfway along we stopped at Rendsburg and were able to take on duty-free stores — four bottles of whisky, very much the goodwill currency of the seas. I pressed one on to our towing Dane, though he was loath to take anything at all from us.

The canal is about 50 miles long — effectively a day's tow. At the eastern end one is out into Kiel fiord on the tideless Baltic. The whole atmosphere of the place is different from the salty, grey, wind-blown North Sea — trees, sheltered beaches and, since we're moving further east, something more of the feeling of continental warmth. One can well understand why so many German holiday yachtsmen throng the Baltic as opposed to our western waters.

Administrative problems lie to the east. The EEC countries ride their regulations fairly easily. Properly, one ought always to enter a Customs port when coming to a new land, but so often we have had to chase reluctant officials who just don't want to know about so little a boat. Now, candidly, we don't bother. We always fly Q on our first night ashore in case the coastguards come to inspect us — plus, of course, the courtesy flag. The only difficulty we have once encountered was 'you can't camp here!' 'We're not camping — we're mariners, and we're on passage.' Anyhow, they didn't want to cart the boat away, and since it was blowing somewhat they couldn't very well push us back into the sea. Goodwill usually prevails.

Tent up near Dan Horder, Holland, before sailing through the calm waters of the North Holland canal.

Sadly, Eastern Europe is not so easy — goodwill notwithstanding. The shortest way east (and we wanted to see how far we could get) is along the German coast to Poland. We cannot get permission from the GDR (East Germany) to follow this route. We could trail our boat there and sail it once we'd arrived, but sail it there? — well, not yet. So, as a coasting dinghy, we are left with limited choices — really, one: if we can't go along the south coast we must go along the north — through the Danish archipelago to points east.

Kiel bay can be a bit savage when the mood takes it — indeed most of the Baltic, as a fairly shallow sea, seems to develop a characteristic chop under surprisingly little blow. But with a good forecast, cutting north across to Langeland is no further than across the Channel — and there is not the same traffic hazard. It did become somewhat breezy as the afternoon wore on and we were glad to fetch, at last, the lee of this 30-mile-long island. A night on a stony beach just below a ripening cornfield, and then away on a hot, almost still morning, working our way up the broad sound leading to the inland sea (Smoland farvandet) that was our route eastwards. In fine weather there is something idyllic in being free to con over the chart and assess which island beyond the horizon will offer the wildest, happiest, evening landfall. The wayward midday airs steadied towards evening and at last our chosen shadow appeared low on the skyline. This was the day we sailed through great red swaths — visible hundreds of yards away — of drowned ladybirds. The sandy shore was alive with them as well, but otherwise — a magical place. Just enough wind to walk us ashore, then calm, a great full moon, and a wild flowery meadow fringed with pinewoods.

This intimacy with the land — actually putting on shore each night — is a rich bonus. Apart from finding wild strands, the fact that so few people seem to beach attracts the friendly curiosity of anyone within sight. Our fragments of foreign language together with their wish to try out any English make for wonderful exchanges. Before you know where you are you are away to someone’s exciting foreign household, and if — as happens — the weather holds up the passage, you may be pressed to stay, and stay. We make friends we shall not lose contact with.

Three days fine weather sailing (though persistent easterlies meant a lot of beating) saw us through the archipelago, under the great bridges, and across the Sound to Sweden. More sandy shores and pinewoods. But because the Baltic has a limited rise and fall (caused by the wind, and hence unpredictable for a stranger) the sand tends to be steepish with a storm cut shelf.
took a lot of hard practice to develop a technique for rolling up diagonally.

On along the southern shore — wind on the nose — past Ystad, our furthest point the previous year, to beach on Cape Sandhammaren, the jumping-off place for the 25-mile leg across to Bornholm. What a spot to visit with children — hillocks, pine trees, sand, with, on the cliffs at Käseberga, a great stone circle, clearly visible from the sea.

At last, an easy reach to the south — which developed into a run by evening. They all say Bornholm (about the size of the Isle of Wight) is an island to visit and visit again, and seeing its little towns, its hanging woods and hills, it was hard to be birds of passage; but the weather was set fair. Poland lay away to the south, and time was beginning to press.

Another enchanted night perched beneath a steep pine wood, and then a final night in Nexø harbour on the south-east coast before preparing to set off southwards. We telephoned home from here to report progress to our grown-up young. It still seems incredible to be able to march into a phone box, dial the code, and be in clear contact within seconds — across how many miles of sea? However, we had other miles in front of us now — about 70 to Cape Jarosławiec on the Pomeranian coast, plus another 10 to Ustka. And this time we shall get Customs and Immigration clearance before any attempt at beaching.

We don't usually sail at night — preferring to sleep. But when there's a passage in front of us where there would be a risk of arriving on a strange coast after nightfall we reckon to take it overnight, so that on the one hand the characteristics of the maritime lights on shore can guide us in (with dawn for the actual port entrance), and on the other hand if anything goes wrong late on in the passage, at least we have daylight for emergencies. So, having checked once again our settled spell of weather (Warnemünde Radio), we left harbour at 1445 and set course sou-east, over a somewhat lumpy sea with the wind comfortably on our quarter.

I suppose this crossing represents the limit of what we would willingly attempt. We hate being frightened. Force 5 is beyond enjoyment for us and since, even in high summer, it is possible to suffer a gale with no more than twelve hours' notice, this limits our range. One could sail a longer leg and nine times out of ten get away with it; we prefer to leave the tenth time to someone else. It is a matter of what one decides is an acceptable risk.

With the steady breeze, a good Force 3, Bornholm rapidly dropped behind us. As night approached we met one yacht coming in, and in the dusk two trawlers showed-up, far away on the beam; then — nothing, nothing but the afterglow, the surging waves and the breeze — freshening if anything. Ragged thunderclouds began to climb over the weather horizon so with the wind now Force 4 we reefed right down to the second batten. This made little difference to our speed though in a somewhat tumbling sea we were a good deal more comfortable.

On and on, hour after long hour; pitch dark now — moonrise due after midnight — with only the noise of the waves foaming around us and occasionally breaking as we slid and sidled over their crests. We must do something better for lighting our compass — it has a luminous blob on the needle but for our dinghy, where the compass is on the sole, that's useless. While the sky was clear steering by the stars was simple, but as the thunderclouds slowly came up we were reduced to flashing the torch on the compass every few minutes and keeping orientation in between.

At long last the horizon paled where the half-moon fought her way up behind the clouds. Flashes began to reveal the tangled wrack, but the storm skirted us down to the south-east, and from now on the intermittent moon made helming easier. We began to look out for Jarosławiec light — its loom ought to be visible way out to sea according to the chart, and we'd been trundling along merrily for many hours. It just didn't show up when we reckoned it should, and we'd even reached the point of seriously wondering if it were out, when suddenly it appeared over a wave crest straight on our bows as though only a few miles away. No loom; it would seem to be a nonrotating flasher. So, our first sign of the Polish shore — much excitement... sandwiches and vacuum flasks had kept us going through the night, together with two-hour snoozes on the sole.
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turn and turn about. Now we felt much more lively, though there were still many hours of sailing in front of us. Still quite dark, we began to notice navigation lights far off and kept a careful check on their movements (we're too small and low to carry effective lights ourselves — just magnesium flares if things are becoming uncomfortable). All went well, but a tug and its tow half-a-mile apart had us worried before we deciphered their lights. Clearly we were making our way through the coastal shipping lane and were very glad to have a radar reflector aloft.

Slowly, the dawn paled over the grey sea. A dark line marked the southern horizon where our faithful light was still flashing. We altered course and beat to the east (the wind having veered somewhat) for the last 15 miles or so to Ustka. Rain showers, the last of the night's storm, slid along the coast — wooded with low hills. Just before it was extinguished we picked up the last flashes of Ustka's own light to give us an entrance bearing. A few long, slow miles and we were off the harbour piers. Courtesy flag up, where shall we make for? 0630, and rod fishermen already on the jetties. Someone will sign us where to go. Enquiring signals to a soldier and a man in a white cap on the quay — tie up along here, at last. Climb up and on land — wish it would stop rocking about. White Cap is the Deputy Harbour Master and with a bit of German we are able to communicate. A warm welcome, plus surprise at our size — it would seem we are the smallest British boat ever to enter the port. Ablutions freely at our disposal; Customs and Immigration will be along in an hour or so to deal with formalities. So, here we are...

Yachting in Poland merits an article on its own, but some points can be touched on here. We want to stress the genuineness of the welcome we received — unstinted unofficial help over visa difficulties, lifts in people's cars, welcome into their flats, warm handshakes — but when shall we see you again? It will be no news to any Pole that they do have a weighty bureaucracy. We paid for our visas in London; in Ustka it was discovered that we had to have a fresh visa (at about £2.50 per head) for every port we wished to enter. These had to be obtained in Slupsk, 15 miles to the south. On leaving any port a visa would be cancelled, as one had officially left the country — with all formalities accordin'. Because the coastguards are the military — watchtowers every couple of miles — there could be no more casual beaching, this would be in emergency only and would be treated appropriately: I think the negotiations would be lengthy. Thus, though the Polish shore is sandy and welcoming, from the sea it was effectively closed to us — ports only — and this deprived us of one of our safety factors; running ashore. When one has to make 25-mile, 30-mile, 40-mile legs between the only available ports it rather is pushing it somewhat with an unpowered dinghy. We did put into Leba (only getting there after dark; harbour lights all changed — nasty!), Władysławowo (Graduate European championship — someone from Cheshire), and finally Gdynia, in the bay of Gdańsk, where we were the guests of the Naval Yacht Club at their quay. The various Polish yacht clubs (such as those of the Mercantile School, Trades Unions, University and Polytechnics) own large yachts which would grace any gathering at Cowes or Burnham. But they visit for example Balfour (where?) or Tilbury — which seemed odd to us.

Yachting is under firm official control; a Pole cannot take a boat to sea without a yachtmaster's ticket, likewise there must be sufficient certificated crew. Everyone ties up at the control office on the end of the quay on leaving or entering. But don't be put off by all this. Poland really does welcome visitors — and it is not merely that they want your currency, as indeed they do. Yes, they are a centrally-governed socialist republic, but they are Polish first and foremost. It is a big country, threaded with waterways connecting thousands of lakes. We shall go there again, though I don't know that we shall sail there — it takes a long time in a dinghy (seven weeks including bad weather breaks) and that was only a one-way ticket. We did, in fact, ship back remarkably cheaply, having intended to sail. And the whole ten weeks away from home cost only £375 for the pair of us (fares, visas, charts at £40, film £30, charges and dues, and even food). But as an example of the coasting possibilities open to a dinghy fit for beaching it certainly whets one's appetite. There are obvious hazards, which demand sober respect. But if you assess the risks, reduce them to an acceptable level, and extend your experience season by season; well, there's a lot of Old World coastline waiting!