

Green Fleet - human-powered houseboats on the Ruhr

Some years ago, Human Power associate editor *Philip Thiel* from Seattle designed the "Escargot", a tiny pedal-powered houseboat to sleep two or three. I was fortunate enough to be able to try out the first one built on the Norfolk Broads in England. A loveable houseboat, powered by two "Sea-Cycle" screw-propeller drives. These drives, which are configured for rather light boats, weren't ideal for the heavier Escargot and made for heavy pedalling at low revolutions. In the meantime, more Escargots have been built and used in the German Ruhr area. There should be a total of 5 craft for the 2004 season!

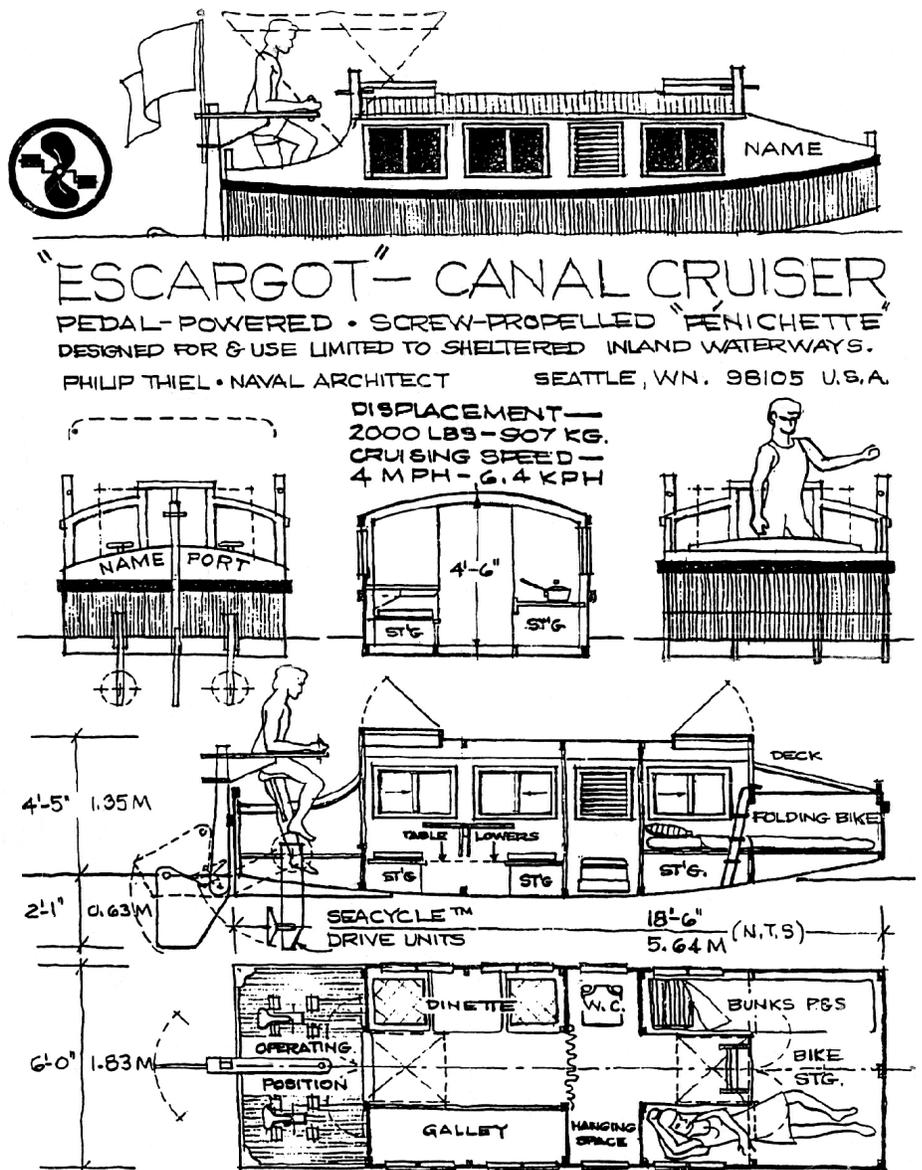
This new fleet is built to Phil Thiel's original plans, but uses custom built pedal drive units. The houseboats are constructed and operated by the Hesse Boatyard in Mühlheim, who let them out for charter and also operate a floating boat-café on the river Ruhr.

The Escargots are also fitted with a small electric drive which can be charged up by a small solar panel, although this is too small to provide direct solar propulsion. The unconventional craft are licenced to carry 6 adults and have up to 3 bunks. They are available from April to October, a three-day charter costing EURO 230.-. When it is cool, the small cabin can be heated, using an arrangement of 8 tea-candles!

A conversation with Ms. Hesse supplied interesting facts about the reaction of the public to the boats, e.g. it seems that the Escargots are especially popular with women, children and families, a complete contrast to the usual huge motor boats usually chartered by groups of men! The Hesse's success-story is also partially due to support by the local government, which is promoting low-impact tourism in this area formerly more known for coal and steel industries. [ts]

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More pictures of the Escargot, showing the interior with sitting headroom, the twin pedal-drive units and the propeller they are coupled to, and also the electric outboard drive incorporated into the rudder.

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Annotated Bibliography

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