

# PORT OF HAMBURG MAGAZINE

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE PORT OF HAMBURG | Issue September 2025

# River Passage

## Titans of the river

How a large container ship gets from the German Bight to the Port of Hamburg.

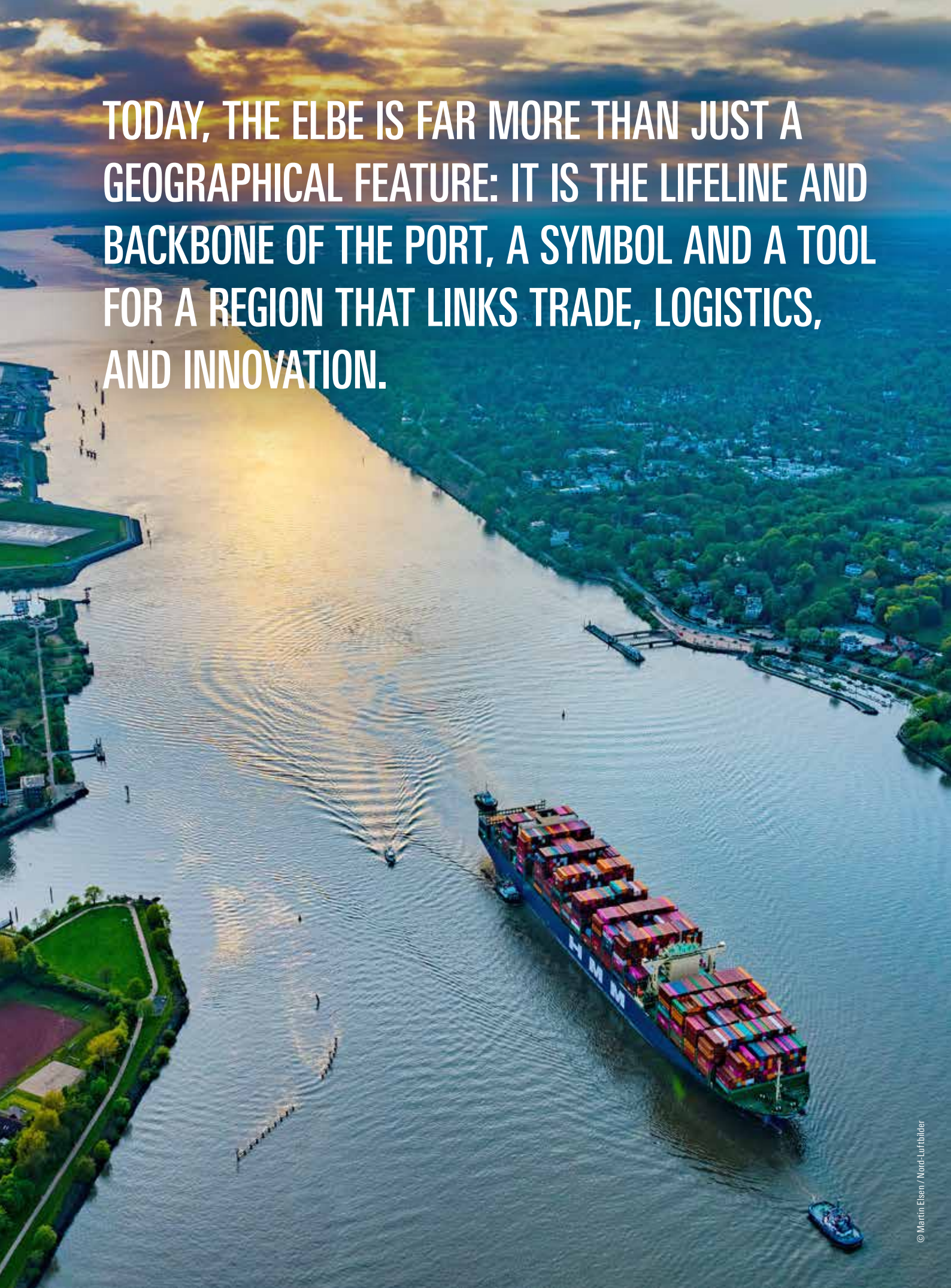
## Navigating by vocation

The senior pilots of the Elbe and harbour share insights into their duties.



Port of Hamburg

**TODAY, THE ELBE IS FAR MORE THAN JUST A GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURE: IT IS THE LIFELINE AND BACKBONE OF THE PORT, A SYMBOL AND A TOOL FOR A REGION THAT LINKS TRADE, LOGISTICS, AND INNOVATION.**



# Editorial

Dear Readers,

For centuries, the Elbe has been the lifeblood of trade and change in northern Germany. When Hamburg was granted the privilege of duty-free navigation on the Elbe, this laid the foundation for a development that would deeply connect the city and its port with global trade. The arrival of the first steamship in 1816 marked the beginning of a new era, establishing the Elbe as a modern trade route and Hamburg as the gateway to the world.



© HHM/ Johanna Würke

Today, the Elbe is far more than just a geographical feature: it is the lifeline and backbone of the port, a symbol and a tool for a region that links trade, logistics, and innovation. From the 'Elbe 1' buoy to the terminal berths, from Hamburg to the estuary at Cuxhaven and along the upriver banks, countless companies, tugs, river pilots, and mooring crews work to keep maritime operations running smoothly. They ensure safety, efficiency, and reliability in an environment that demands absolute precision.

This issue of Port of Hamburg Magazine takes you on a journey of discovery along the Elbe, introducing the people and organizations behind the scenes whose daily contributions keep the port performing at its best. As part of an intricate network, they help safeguard the Port of Hamburg's stability and competitiveness, even in an era characterised by global challenges.

In a time when resilient supply chains and sustainable practices are more important than ever, the value of close collaboration among the companies along the Elbe is evident. They are guarantors of reliability and progress, safeguarding jobs and prosperity in the region, and reinforce Germany's role as a business hub. Come with us to the banks of the Elbe. This issue shows just how closely the present and future of the Port of Hamburg are intertwined with the river, and highlights the vital role played by the companies along its course.

Stay curious,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Axel Mattern', written over a light blue horizontal line.

AXEL MATTERN  
*CEO Port of Hamburg Marketing*

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**MAKE FAST – CAST OFF!**





## 16 GAMECHANGER PASSINGBOX



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The container ship 'ONE Inspiration' impresses with a length of 400 metres, a width of 61 metres, and a height of almost 70 metres above the waterline.



# Titans of the river

The arrival of a container ship in the Port of Hamburg is always a spectacular sight. But what does it take to ensure that these floating giants make their way safely from the open sea to their berth along the quay? Join us on board the 'ONE Inspiration'.

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BY MATHIAS SCHULZ

When a container ship such as the 'ONE Inspiration' from the Far East arrives at the mouth of the Elbe, a finely tuned interplay of precision, experience, technology and trust begins. What may appear unremarkable from afar is, upon closer inspection, a logistical masterpiece carried out within the tightest of confines. The voyage upriver to the Port of Hamburg is a high-stakes manoeuvre in which no decision is left to chance.

## PILOTING GIANTS

From the German Bight onwards, river pilots take command. They know the Elbe fairway to Hamburg inside out: every bend, every current, every shallow.

What is often unfamiliar territory for ocean-going captains is home ground for them. The Elbe is divided into three pilotage sections: the Lower Elbe, the Upper Elbe, and the area of the harbour pilots, who guide ships over the final stretch right up to the quay wall.

From a ship's length of 350 metres, two pilots are usually required on board per section. One takes charge of navigation, while the other handles communication. Today, G. Schulz is navigating the 'ONE Inspiration' across the Upper Elbe with a steady hand. He has been doing this since 2010. Like all Elbe pilots, he began his career on the lower stretch and, after many years and



© HHM / Birte Hirsch

**G. Schulz**  
Pilot



© HHM / Mathias Schulz

countless ships, is now in charge of the section between Brunsbüttel and Hamburg. His seafaring career, however,

began much earlier – as an officer on global routes. ‘For many years, I sailed between the Mediterranean, South America and South Africa. Now I steer the really big vessels along the Elbe.’

‘Really big’ – today that means: 400 metres long, 61 metres wide, a capacity of 24,136 TEU, drawing 14.1 metres on this voyage and with an air draught of 67.7 metres. ‘I’m used to it,’ says the pilot. ‘But that doesn’t mean you can take it lightly.’ These dimensions also mean that a single mistimed manoeuvre, an imprecise course change, or a sudden surge of cross-current can cause serious problems. On a bend, the manoeuvre sometimes starts 500 metres before the actual turn, so as to ensure that the ship is precisely located in the fairway later on.

The most recent upgrades to the navigation channel have significantly eased navigation on the Elbe. In

particular, the creation of the designated passing box and the deepening of the navigation channel at crucial points are key improvements. ‘In the past,’ says the pilot, ‘we regularly had to postpone encounters with large ships or slow down until there was enough space, below the Stör.’ Those days are over. Now, two large vessels can safely pass each other simultaneously in the defined area off Wedel. This has resulted in greatly increased flexibility in shipping traffic. Only a few months ago, the permitted combined width of ships in the designated passing box was increased to 110 metres in a trial. This has further facilitated navigation on the Elbe. Nevertheless, timing remains crucial. Because when meeting other large vessels, there can be no delays.

### **HAMBURG: KEEPING THE GATEWAY TO THE WORLD OPEN**

For Björn Garbe, special cargo expert at Ocean Network Express (ONE), Hamburg is far more than just a German port. ‘Hamburg is a hub in ONE’s global liner network – this gateway to the world is part of our everyday reality,’ he says. Garbe works in ONE’s Hamburg office, which emerged from the merger of the container shipping divisions of the traditional Japanese shipping companies MOL, K-Line and NYK. The

## 'ONE Inspiration' and 'ONE Hammersmith' on the way to Hamburg.



© HHM / Mathias Schulz

founding of the company in 2017 and the start of operations in 2018 marked a turning point – today, ONE ranks among the world's largest container shipping companies.

'We currently operate around 260 vessels with a total capacity of over two million TEU. Our goal is clear: by no later than 2030, we aim to surpass the three-million-TEU mark.' The Port of Hamburg plays a central role in this strategy. As a gateway to Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and Southern Germany, it offers not only geographical, but also infrastructural advantages. 'Hamburg is strategically well-positioned for multi-modal links,' explains Garbe. 'Whether by road, rail or inland waterway – everything is closely interlinked. Added to this is the large number of logistics-related businesses that have set up around the port.'

The deepening of the navigation channel is a decisive factor for shipping lines such as ONE. 'Previously, with vessels of this size, we were extremely dependent on the tide. Now it is possible to enter even at medium or low water levels. This saves time, reduces costs – and increases safety.'

### NAVIGATING TECHNOLOGY, NATURE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Captain Deepak Mehra stands on the bridge of the 'ONE Inspiration' on this day. The experienced seafarer has been with the Japanese shipping company since 2003 and has undertaken numerous voyages to Hamburg. On this occasion, however, it is his first approach to the Hanseatic city with the comparatively young 'ONE Inspiration'. 'The Elbe is one of the most scenic rivers I have ever sailed on,' says Mehra. 'But it demands the utmost concentration. There are tight bends, strong currents, and constantly changing conditions.' Among the challenges is the so-called squat effect, which makes a ship sit lower in the water at higher speeds in shallow waters, adding complexity to navigation. On top of this, there are

**Deepak Mehra**  
Captain



© HHM / Mathias Schulz

shallow sections where there is often only limited clearance under the keel.

At Brunsbüttel, the first pilot switch takes place, followed later by a second just before entering the port.

'The passage between buoys 50 and 80 is especially complex – but also fascinating.' A captain responsible for a vessel of this size must not only work closely with nature, but also with the authorities, technicians and terminal operators.

Coordination with the tugboats takes place between the agents, the pilots and the captain himself. Depending on the weather, wind strength and berth, between two and four tugs are deployed. For today's berthing manoeuvre there are three – two astern and one at the bow. 'Precision is key,' says Mehra. 'Both in one's own commands and when working with pilots and tugs.' This need for accuracy will remain just as important on the Elbe in the future. Nevertheless, with the newly announced expansion of the turning basin in front of the Waltershofer Hafen from 480 to 600 metres, the 400-metre giants will have considerably more room to turn.

### IN THE ENGINE ROOM: POWER AND PRECISION

Deep in the belly of the ship, Chief Engineer Saravana Sundar Balakrishnan oversees engine operations. He has done this for more than three decades, 22 years of them as chief engineer. The 'ONE Inspiration' is equipped with a state-of-the-art long-stroke engine –



The main engine of the 'ONE Inspiration'.

© HHM / Sascha Haßkamp

**Saravana  
Sundar  
Balakrishnan**  
Chief engineer



© HHM / Saskia Has&Kamp

one of the most efficient in its class. 48,300 kilowatts of power drive the vessel and turn a 10.5-metre propeller.

'The heart of the machinery is an emissions-optimised engine with variable exhaust control, hybrid operation, and LNG capability,' explains Balakrishnan. On the Elbe, however, the challenges are significant: strong currents, sharp bends, and sudden changes in load all demand heightened attention. 'Every move has to be precise. We are in constant contact with the bridge, the pilots, and the control centres.'

Even before reaching Cuxhaven, life in the engine room is far from routine. 'In the North Sea, we operate in closed-loop mode, because discharging the wash water from the exhaust gas cleaning system – the scrubber – is prohibited. We must also not exceed 55 percent load in order to maintain its efficiency. This requires constant monitoring of all parameters,' explains the chief engineer.

**Encounters between  
large container ships  
are a daily routine on  
the Elbe.**



© HHM / Matthias Schulz

### **PEAK PERFORMANCE AT THE PORT OF HAMBURG**

What often appears slow and majestic on the water is, in fact, a highly sophisticated logistical operation. The arrival of the 'ONE Inspiration' is a prime example of how closely people, technology, infrastructure and nature must work together. From the first manoeuvre at the Elbe estuary until it berths at the Waltershofer Hafen, every moment is carefully calculated – while also demanding constant, split-second judgement. Once again, one of the world's largest ships has successfully transported more than 18,000 TEU up the Elbe. Many of these containers are handled at HHLA's Container Terminal Burchardkai, involving around 8,500 handling operations known as 'moves'. ■

**The 'ONE Inspiration'  
is being turned in front of  
Waltershofer Hafen.**



© HHM / Matthias Schulz

# Navigators on a special mission

Known as the invisible directors of a ship's journey along the river, pilots ensure that every vessel reaches the Port of Hamburg safely from the mouth of the Elbe – and leaves just as securely.

BY NICOLE DE JONG

Large seagoing vessels heading to the port are always accompanied by experienced Elbe and harbour pilots, as navigating the Elbe and the Port of Hamburg poses serious challenges even for the most seasoned captains. The channel is narrow, winding, and subject to changing currents and constantly shifting water levels due to the tides. In addition, there are shallows and tight encounter zones with other ships which demand the utmost attention and leave no room for error.

Pilots usually come aboard ships at the mouth of the Elbe to guide them safely along the Lower Elbe. Another key handover point is Brunsbüttel, after which harbour pilots take over at the state border of Hamburg. Their presence on board ensures a safe and efficient passage to the vessel's designated berth within the port. For large vessels, having a pilot on board is legally required to protect the ship, the environment, and people alike.

## HIGHEST POSSIBLE LEVEL OF SAFETY IN THE WATERWAY

The work of a pilot demands highly detailed knowledge of the waterway. 'This includes not only knowledge of current water depths, a precise understanding of currents under different conditions, and familiarity with all port facilities, but also mastery of communication procedures – knowing who is allowed to speak to whom on which frequency,' explains Matthias Schnittert, Senior Representative of the Elbe Pilots' Guild.

'Our core task is to advise shipmasters on navigational matters and to manage traffic in such a way that everything is in the right place at the right time. By doing so, we ensure the highest possible level of safety in the waterway,' adds Johann-Henrik Lüders, Senior Representative of the Hamburg Harbour Pilots' Guild. Unlike road traffic, where stops and traffic lights control movement, ships on the Elbe or in the port cannot simply stop. Every decision must be made with foresight to prevent dangerous situations. A combination of experience, planning, and team coordination is essential for this.

Within just a few minutes of coming aboard, pilots must gain the captain's trust, accurately assess the situation, and give clear instructions. 'When guiding a 300-metre vessel into the port at high tide, every second counts,' says Lüders. 'It's a similar situation in Brunsbüttel, where traffic from the Kiel Canal and from Hamburg converges. You need to know exactly what to watch out for,' adds Schnittert. 'Come aboard and keep your eyes peeled' is the motto. 'In addition to a good sense of orientation, windows and an unobstructed view are still indispensable,' Lüders notes. Even in fog or heavy rain, pilots can navigate a ship safely. In addition to the Automatic Identification System (AIS) and electronic nautical charts, they use charts specifically tailored for them, as well as hydrographic charts and other navigational aids that



are updated daily via the Portable Pilot Unit (PPU) – a mobile tablet-based system. They also receive radar advice from shore.

### MEMBERSHIP IN THE PILOTS' GUILD IS MANDATORY

But what makes someone want to become a pilot? Former captains like Schnittert and Lüders often choose this path. It allows them to continue to apply their nautical experience in a demanding role without constantly having to be on long voyages. As pilots, they continue to work on the water while staying close to home. All Elbe pilots are members of the Elbe Pilots' Guild, which is responsible for the section from the German Bight to Teufelsbrück and the ports of Cuxhaven, Brunsbüttel, and Stade. The Guild is a public law corporation, represented by the Directorate-General for Waterways and Shipping (GDWS). Its members are ap-



**The Portable Pilot Unit (PPU) supports the pilots' work as an independent system.**

pointed by the federal government, while pilots in the Port of Hamburg are appointed by the city itself. Membership in the Guild is a mandatory requirement for all pilots, and the fellowship is tasked with ensuring they are always available.

The pilots' income, known as pilotage fees, is generated through charges levied on ships, and varies according to their size. These fees increase accordingly when multiple pilots are used, or for longer transits. Their work is organised based on a rotating shift system: harbour pilots work for eight days and then have six days of rest. Meanwhile, Elbe pilots work for four months on rotation and then get three weeks off, although this schedule depends on the volume of shipping traffic. Both the 309 members of the Elbe Pilots' Guild and the 69 harbour pilots in Hamburg are former ship's captains. The route to becoming a pilot may involve various stages, such as training as a ship's mechanic, completing a degree in nautical science, and gaining relevant sea experience. There now exist several path-

ways to a career as a pilot (see 'pilot training'). In all cases, applicants must have seafaring experience, be medically fit, and possess excellent language and teamwork skills. The training emphasises detailed knowledge of the local waters. ■

### THE ÄLTERMANN

The senior representative of the pilots is known as the Ältermann, who is elected for a term of five years. He represents the interests of the pilots in dealings with the authorities, shipping companies and political institutions. Among other things, with the support of his colleagues, he coordinates training and further education, and looks after the finances, internal organisation and the provision of pensions for this profession. Public relations and coordination in the event of accidents also fall under his responsibility.

### PILOT TRAINING

Those who wish to become pilots in the various pilotage districts have a variety of entry routes to choose from. More information is available online at 'Wir Lotsen' ([www.lotsen.de](http://www.lotsen.de)), where job vacancies are also advertised. Applicants for harbour pilot positions must, at the time of writing, have served for two years as sea captains before beginning an eight-month training course in the Hamburg district. In future, the same entry routes as for federal pilots will be made available. The new provisions are scheduled to be written into law by the end of the year, with training under the revised model to commence in September 2026.



**Pilot transfer vessels bring the pilots to and from the ships they are guiding.**



# Make fast – Cast off!

**When ocean giants like the ‘Marie Maersk’ enter the Port of Hamburg, they rely on the assistance of tug-boats. Precisely coordinated down to the minute and in almost any weather, crews such as those on the ‘Fairplay-95’ take command of these massive movements in tight spaces.**

BY NICOLE DE JONG

A quiet dawn still hangs over the Neumühlen tug pier. The Elbe gleams a lead grey, seagulls circle over the securely moored boats, and coffee steams in the small galley. Then comes a ‘ping’ – the next assignment has arrived. For the crew of the ‘Fairplay-95’, the day has begun. Their task: assist in guiding the ‘Marie Maersk’, a 400-metre container ship slowly approaching the Port of Hamburg.

Due to the size of the container giant, three tugs were requested. The ‘Fairplay-95’ takes its position at the bow, and alongside stands its sister ship, the ‘Fairplay-96’ ready to push if needed, while the ‘Fairplay XI’ positions itself at the ship’s stern to control the enormous vessel’s mass and stabilise it against currents and the wind. “The Water Police are also present, securing the channel while we turn the ‘Marie Maersk’ into the port,” explains Andree Hessling, Associate Head of Marine Asset Management Newbuild & Innovation at the Fairplay Towage Group.

The operation proceeds as planned, coordinated via a central operations portal, where dispatchers manage the movements of the shipping companies. ‘In the past, we had to make numerous phone calls; today everything is done digitally and in real time. It makes coordination much faster and safer,’ says Hessling. The dispatchers are the invisible command centre, directing the tugs like pieces on a game board: who moves when, where, and at what speed? Everything must be just right – and it all depends on the tide and weather.

**The ‘Fairplay-95’ is extremely agile and powerful: it maneuvers the large ships calling at Hamburg with precision.**

The starting point is usually opposite Airbus in Finkenwerder. There, among industrial facilities and pilot boats, the crew awaits the signal. Three people are on board: the captain, an engineer, and a seaman – on this day accompanied by an intern learning the ropes as an aspiring marine mechanic. The main crew lives on the tug for two weeks at a time, followed by two weeks off. That is the routine: full readiness around the clock, then rest – only exceptional or emergency situations break the rhythm.

The 'Fairplay-95' is a modern high-performance tug of the Fairplay Towage Group and has been operating in the Port of Hamburg since 2023. At 25 metres long, with 6,700 hp and a bollard pull of 80 tonnes, it



© Elbename / Markus Grabsch

## Profile

From an early age, Andree Hessling's life has been intertwined with seafaring. Influenced by his father, who worked at Bugsier, he discovered an early passion for towage. After training as a mechanical engineer and later as an aircraft mechanic, followed by ten years' service in naval aviation, the native of Cuxhaven earned his Chief Engineer's certificate at the state nautical college in Cuxhaven. Since June 1997, he has worked in towage, first as Chief Engineer aboard the 'Bugsier 15'. He later served on various types of tugs in the Bugsier fleet, before taking up the post of Chief Engineer on the 'Oceanic' from 2001 to 2005. Since January 2018, he has headed the nautical-technical inspection for the entire Fairplay Group, including the former Bugsier fleet and Fairplay BV. In his current role, he is heavily involved in establishing and developing the Marine Asset Management department, a unit focused on new construction projects and innovations, with a particular focus on decarbonisation and environmental sustainability.

is among the most powerful of its kind. It is extremely manoeuvrable – ideal for the precise handling of large container and cruise ships. Its sister ship, the 'Fairplay-96', is identical, while the 'Fairplay XI' is an older model with a comparatively higher engine output of 8,100 hp, a 90-tonne bollard pull, and a hybrid drive.

As soon as the ship approaches, the harbour pilots take command. The tugs are directed via radio, with instructions that are short and precise: 'Make fast' – 'Cast off!' – 'Quarter ahead.' Only well-oiled teams know exactly what to do: the heavy lines are thrown over; the 'Marie Maersk' begins to turn slowly and precisely – it is to be drawn backwards into the Waltershofer Hafen. The manoeuvre ends at the Eurogate terminal, where the ship is to be unloaded. The tugs then withdraw – until the next assignment, either elsewhere in the port or when the 'Marie Maersk' heads back down the Elbe and out to the open sea.

This is everyday life for the crew, but not one that tolerates routine. Weather conditions can change suddenly, and deployments can come at any hour, day or night. Strong wind? From wind force 6 onwards, ships the size of the 'Marie Maersk' face a navigation ban. Fog? That extends the approach time. Despite the latest technology, the work remains hands-on – rough, demanding, often intuitive. Captains must master more than just steering; they must lead, radiate calm, and sense the dynamics at play in towing – almost like a dancer anticipating their partner's movements.

Nautical skill and technical competence are not enough. Equally important are experience, composure, and team spirit. 'A nervous captain passes his unease to the whole ship,' says Hessling. 'That can be dangerous.' He speaks from experience, having spent many years working on tugs. The work is built on team spirit and reliability. On board, there is a sense of camaraderie, as the crew works closely together. 'The team sticks together like family. Without trust, nothing works,' confirms crew member Jörn Kessener.

The captains are true professionals, masters at their craft. Typically, they come from a nautical background, many beginning with an apprenticeship as a marine mechanic, gaining experience on various tugs, before going on to acquire their professional seafaring qualifications. Some captains have decades of experience, having followed diverse international careers – from cargo shipping to salvaging distressed vessels. 'No assignment or day is the same, and that's what makes the job so exciting,' emphasises Captain Jens Bleckwehl.

The tugs are functional but comfortably equipped: each crew member has a small single cabin with a private bathroom, and meals are shared in the cosy common room. Everything meets the standards of the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) – a global framework guaranteeing fair conditions for seafarers. Yet, even with state-of-the-art amenities, life on board is challenging: space is limited, the pace relentless, and the weather unpredictable.

At the end of the roughly one-hour operation, the 'Fairplay-95' heads back towards Neumühlen. Nearby, the tugs of other operators lie in calm proximity, waiting for the next job, of which there are usually several a day. The cycle then begins anew: strength, precision, timing. And always the quiet elegance with which these giants glide through the narrow channel – guided by small but indispensable powerhouses. A ballet in steel on the stage of the Elbe.

Once a year, this everyday manoeuvre becomes a grand performance: at the Tugboat Ballet celebrating the anniversary of the Port of Hamburg, these powerful workboats show off their full potential –

not only in terms of thrust but also finesse. They dance in synchrony to music on the Elbe, spin pirouettes, rock to the rhythm, and act out elaborate choreographies. What normally happens behind the scenes becomes a show: a display of skill, teamwork, and timing. The audience is left in awe at the poise and finesse of these miniature yet mighty powerhouses. ■

**FAIRPLAY TOWAGE GROUP**

Based in Hamburg, the Fairplay Towage Group looks back on more than 120 years of history. Its roots reach as far back as 1866, the founding year of the Bugsier shipping company, now part of the Group. The year 1905 is considered Fairplay Towage's founding year. Today, with more than 100 high-performance tugs, the Group ranks among Europe's leading maritime service providers. With subsidiaries in Rotterdam, Antwerp and Poland, and the integration of Bugsier since 2017, it covers a wide range of services including harbour assistance, sea towage, offshore operations, and salvage.



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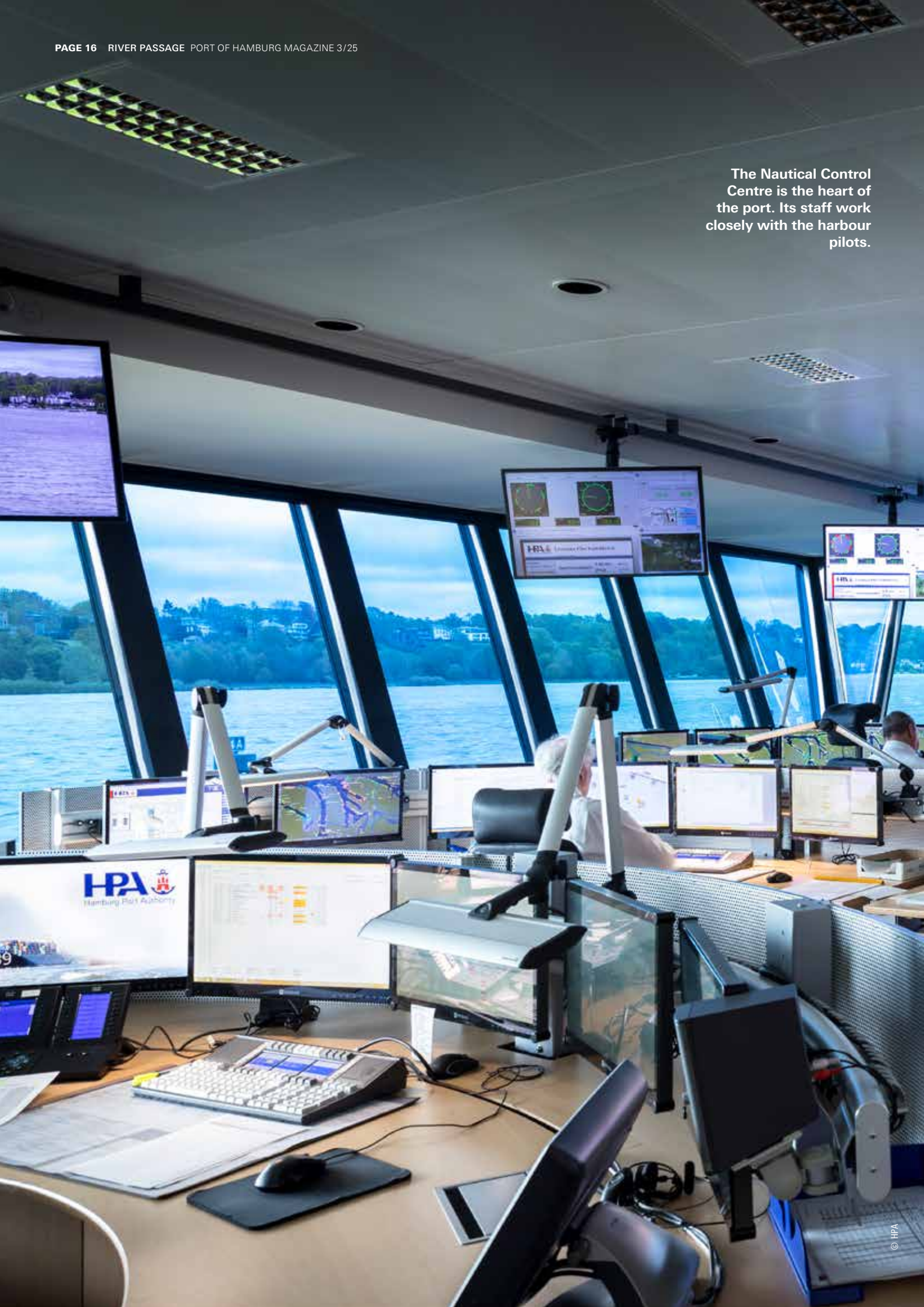
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The Nautical Control Centre is the heart of the port. Its staff work closely with the harbour pilots.



# Gamechanger passingbox

**Thousands of vessels call at the Port of Hamburg every year. Deputy Harbour Master David Gnutzmann explains the role of the Nautical Control Centre in Hamburg and the division of duties during the river passage from the Elbe estuary to the port at the heart of the metropolis.**

BY NICOLE DE JONG

***POHM:** What actually happens during a river passage – and why is it so critical for safe navigation?*

**David Gnutzmann:** Sea passages are mostly highly automated routine operations. A river passage, by contrast, is far more demanding. It entails a challenging navigation from the berth, down the river, to the final pilot handover on the open sea – or the reverse journey. It involves not only the ship's entire crew, but also a whole network of professionals working together.

*What makes the journey to Hamburg so challenging?*

At around 100 kilometres, the journey up the Elbe to Hamburg is unusually long and highly complex. As an open tidal waterway with almost four metres of tidal range in the Port of Hamburg – which varies downstream – many vessels must navigate according to the tide. Added to this are the river's narrowness and limited manoeuvring space for large ships, making it one of the most demanding waterways for shipmasters. With many vessels travelling the river simultaneously and the necessity of planned passing points at certain locations, extensive coordination is required, making highly skilled pilots indispensable.

*How does the Nautical Control Centre coordinate with everyone involved? Who talks to whom, and when?*

The Nautical Control Centre in Hamburg serves as the traffic control hub of the Waterways Authority

and holds full responsibility for all vessel movements within the jurisdiction of the Port of Hamburg. The downstream sections of the Elbe to Brunsbüttel and Cuxhaven, on the other hand, are handled by federal river control centres. To keep traffic flowing smoothly, the three centres collaborate closely, jointly monitoring the river all the way to the berth. In particular, traffic planning for the coming days and hours is coordinated jointly to meet the complex demands of traffic on the Elbe.

*What happens in the Nautical Control Centre when a large ship approaches the port?*

Quay operators, brokers, shipping companies or shipmasters report vessels at least 24 hours in advance, providing all the relevant data: unique identification, draught, structural specifics, and the requested berth. The Nautical Control Centre checks for feasibility based on this information – from sufficient depth at the berth to clearance under bridges, and potential traffic or tidal conflicts. Once this is verified, the berth is approved. Without this authorisation, the Cuxhaven control centre will not allow a vessel onto the Elbe. The approval specifies the berth, arrival time, and even the exact position on the quay down to the minute. Close coordination between pilots and the control centres makes use of radio communication and vigilant observation to ensure precise adherence to tide-dependent schedules, particularly for large vessels that can only transit at certain water levels.

*Speaking of pilots: What role do they play when ships call at Hamburg?*

Navigation on the Elbe is a coordinated effort between different pilots. While river pilots accompany the vessel along the federal waterway, harbour pilots take over in the port. Given the long river passage – which can take eight hours or more for bulkers and six to six-and-a-half hours for container ships – the Elbe is divided into two sections. One pilot accompanies the vessel from the Outer Elbe to Brunsbüttel, where a handover occurs. The next pilot takes over up until the Port of Hamburg. There, a further handover occurs: a harbour pilot advises the shipmaster on the approach to the berth. For especially large vessels, a minimum of two pilots are on board, and sometimes a third or fourth pilot advises the crew from shore via radar.

*When are special requirements imposed, such as mandatory tug assistance?*

Firstly, inland vessels are not subject to mandatory tug assistance. In principle, ship's captains can determine the number of tugs required for manoeuvres in the Port of Hamburg themselves – even if the authorities consider additional assistance unnecessary. However, this freedom has limits: as soon as the experience of Elbe and harbour pilots or simulations indicate that a manoeuvre would not be safe without tugs, the Nautical Control Centre will mandate that they be used.

*What determines the number of tugs?*

It all depends on a combination of vessel size, weather – in particular the wind – and the target berth. For example, a vessel of a certain size normally requires two tugs, with more needed in stronger winds. Particularly large vessels also require a special authorisation which sets out a list of specific requirements to be fulfilled: it caps movements in the port at a defined wind threshold and specifies the exact number of tugs required. Instructions for storm mooring are also provided.

*Which regulations and safety measures must be observed during a river passage?*

Navigation on the Elbe is governed by strict passing restrictions: starting from a certain width, vessels may only pass each other at designated points or within designated passing boxes. There are also wind restrictions, as sudden changes in weather can make it impossible to safely manoeuvre large ships

or those with a large wind profile, which is why these measures are defined with appropriate safety allowances. Close cooperation with pilots and other river control centres is essential in such situations. Although the entire river is monitored by radar, radio and transponders, pilots remain essential. They are the only ones physically on site, using their eyes and ears to accurately assess the situation, making them the most important partners for safe traffic management on the Elbe.

*And what happens if things get tricky?*

Although navigation on the Elbe can always present with unexpected situations, these can almost always be resolved effectively. The key lies in the robust design of the three river control centres, which rely on extensive experience and mutual trust. They can draw on sophisticated emergency plans and fallback procedures. In addition to fixed rules like tidal windows, wind restrictions or no-passing zones, the common sense of experienced mariners plays a crucial role. This includes strategically separating vessels to buffer unexpected delays, for example if a ship takes longer to turn than anticipated – all part of good seamanship, rather than written rules.

*Sounds like a coordinated display of expertise keeping the Elbe safe...*

Indeed it is. The Hamburg Nautical Control Centre is the heart of the port. Harbour pilots and centre personnel work closely together in one place, which significantly improves safety. We communicate continuously. If a vessel cannot proceed as planned, we can call on emergency tugs along the Elbe and temporary berths, such as the Finkenwerder bollards near Airbus, to manage critical situations. Since all Nautical Control Centre staff are former ship officers, many of whom hold a shipmaster's licence, they understand the shipboard perspective and can assess risks accurately.

*How do infrastructure measures like the deepening of the navigation channel, designated passing boxes, and the planned expansion of the Waltershofer turning circle improve efficiency and help optimise modern traffic management?*

Deepening the fairway has already brought us significant operational relief. Although the discovery of unexploded ordnance in the Elbe has delayed full implementation of the measures, the larger tidal windows already allow more flexible scheduling and higher cargo throughput. The real game changer,

## Profile

David Gnutzmann has worked for the Hamburg Port Authority (HPA) for ten years. His passion for shipping was sparked in childhood in Dithmarschen, where he was fascinated by the sight of vessels passing through the Kiel Canal. After studying nautical science, the now 40-year-old served at sea and obtained his shipmaster's licence with a Hamburg shipping company. He then spent 18 months as a nautical inspector in fleet management onshore. Subsequently, he joined the Hamburg Port Authority (HPA), where he worked in the Nautical Control Centre for six years, controlling and monitoring ship traffic. He has been Deputy Harbour Master for three years.



however, is the designated passing box. Previously, giant ships on the Elbe could only pass at the Stör estuary. Now there is a second location – a huge improvement for planning, control and safety. Tests are underway to allow the passing box to gradually accommodate wider encounters, so that even the largest vessels today – 61.5 metres wide and 400 metres long – can pass by each other safely in the future. By the mid-2030s, the turning circle at the Waltershofer Hafen, Hamburg's main container terminal, will be expanded from 480 to 600 metres. Turning will become safer and faster, resources such as tugs can be deployed more quickly, and navigation on the Elbe will be more resilient overall.

*Which technical systems help you monitor and manage shipping traffic today?*

On the technical side, we utilise a unified real-time operational overview to guide our decisions. It is displayed on the large electronic port map in the Nautical Control Centre. Previously, we spent a lot of time on the phone; today most coordination occurs through integrated systems. Eventually, all involved parties should be able to access all data in real time from a single network of networks. At the moment, everyone has to open different applications, and not

everyone has information that is updated simultaneously.

*What excites you most about your job as Deputy Harbour Master?*

I'm fascinated by the complexity of the work. The port is an integral part of a much larger global logistics chain, and it's simply amazing to see how all the components interlock, and how people need to keep coordinating to keep this enormous mechanism running smoothly. It's a daily experience that never fails to captivate me. You never stop learning, gain new insights every day, and get to play an active part in making things happen. No two days are the same – and that's exactly why I love the job so much. ■

## Shipping statistics

In 2024, the Nautical Control Centre issued a total of 34,000 permits, including special permits for tows. It coordinated 21,226 ship movements on the Elbe and in the port – from small barges to large container vessels. Of these, 18,176 passages were carried out with pilots on board. Among the vessels handled were 850 of the world's largest container ships.



# Elbe Region – Between the German Bight and Hamburg

The Elbe is one of Europe's major arteries. Between the open North Sea and Hamburg, it forms an axis where shipping, logistics, and port operations intersect seamlessly. Following its course, one encounters a river that simultaneously serves as a transport route, industrial site, and energy corridor.

BY HOLGER GRABSCH

Ships arriving from the German Bight first pass Cuxhaven. Once a port for emigrants and a fishing town, today it is a centre of the offshore wind industry – a place where the Elbe's transformation into an energy corridor is vividly visible. Further upstream, the engineering firm Ingenion is already developing strategies for decarbonisation, under-

lining the Elbe's importance for Northern Germany and beyond.

Back at the river's mouth, Cuxhaven is also home to the Maritime Emergency Response Command, responsible for maritime emergency preparedness in the North and Baltic Seas. It steps in when rou-

tine operations suddenly turn into emergencies. Since 2003, it has coordinated responses to accidents, fires, and groundings – always with an eye on people, the environment, and shipping traffic.

Next comes Brunsbüttel, a heavyweight of infrastructure. The local ports act as hubs for goods and energy, while the adjacent locks provide access to the Kiel Canal.

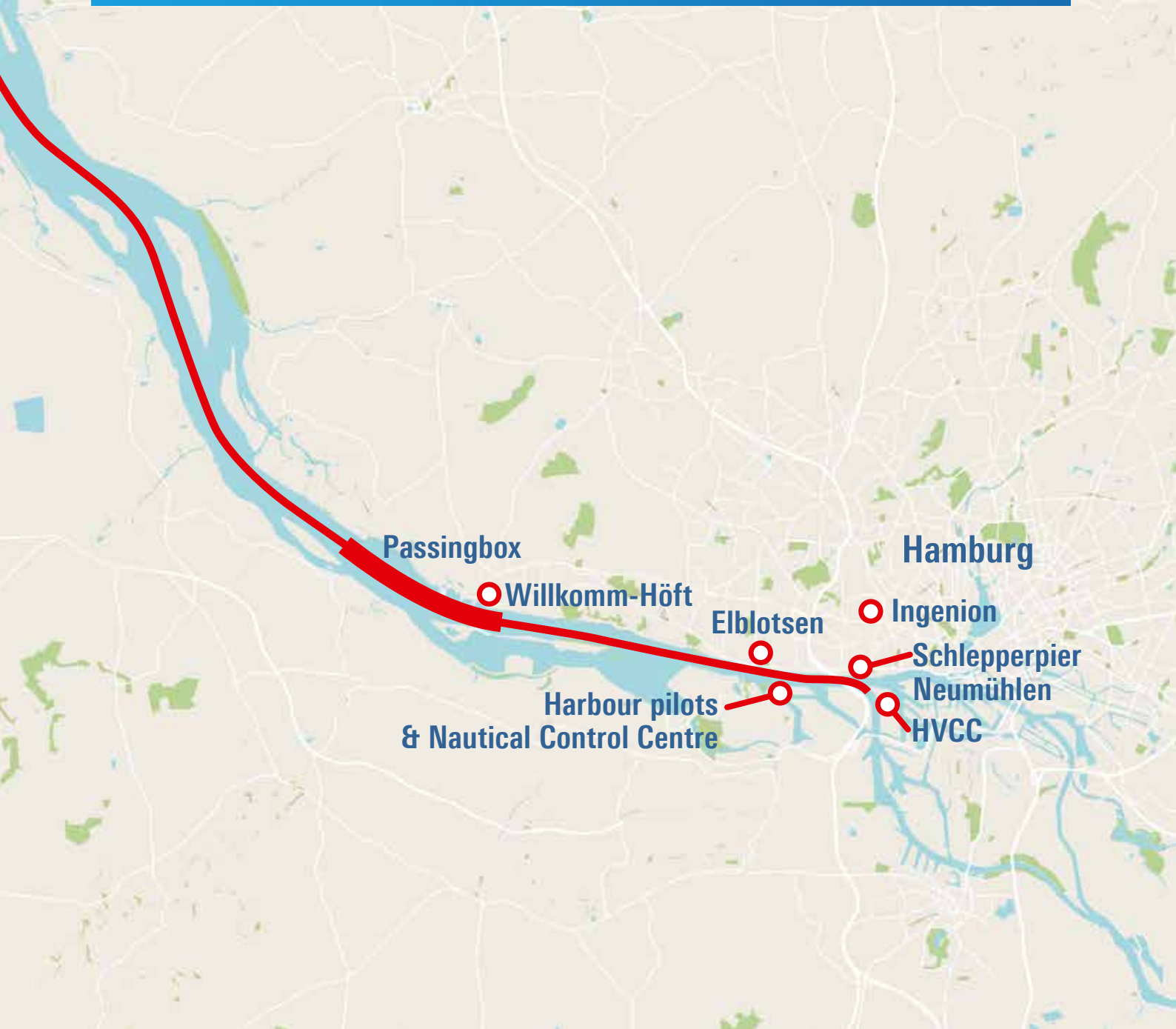
At Wedel, the focus turns to technology. Here, the tunnel-boring machine 'Elsa' drills beneath the Elbe – the Sued-Link crossing, a tunnel project connecting marshlands and wind farms, is regarded as a key component of Germany's energy transition.

A few nautical miles further, to port, lies Willkomm-Höft in Wedel, where ships have been welcomed for more than seventy years with a melody, the na-

tional anthem of their home country, and the words: "Welcome to our port."

Shortly afterwards, the river reaches the boundary of Hamburg. Vessel traffic on the approach to Hamburg and within the port itself is coordinated by the Hamburg Vessel Coordination Center (HVCC), which provides advisory support. It works hand in hand with the Nautical Control Centre, which oversees all navigational matters and ship movements on the river around the clock.

Finally, in the Port of Hamburg, one may encounter the 'Halunder Jet', departing from the St. Pauli Landungsbrücken bound for Helgoland. Here, the Elbe is traversed in the opposite direction: first Hamburg, then Wedel, Brunsbüttel, and eventually the expanse of the North Sea. In this way, the Elbe is not only a waterway for ships and goods, but Hamburg's gateway to the world. ■



At the Schulauer Fährhaus, visitors receive useful information about the incoming ships.

# 'Welcome to Hamburg'

For more than seventy years, ships have been greeted at the Welcome Point in Wedel with the words: 'We are pleased to welcome you to the Port of Hamburg.'

BY NICOLE DE JONG

'When is the next ship due?' That is the question Captain Wolfgang Adler probably hears most often at the Willkomm-Höft, the Welcome Point that greets ships on the River Elbe in Wedel. He answers patiently – again and again, every day. And he is glad to do so. For guests of the Schulauer Fährhaus restaurant, which houses the Welcome Point, he also provides interesting facts about the vessel in question. Adler has spent the last 13 years greeting or seeing off every ship with a gross tonnage (GT) of 1,000 and above, each time accompanied by its national anthem and a message in their native tongue.

Adler's ties to the tradition began in primary school, when he assisted the greeting captains. Back then, he was only allowed to dip the Hamburg flag – a brief lowering in salute. That moment left a lasting impression. He trained as a port forwarding agent, worked in the Port of Hamburg, and has stayed connected to shipping ever since – today as a volunteer greeting captain at the Welcome Point. Together with six fellow captains, he devotes five days a month to keeping this unique custom alive.



'We continue the founder Otto Friedrich Behnke's idea: to greet seafarers, and in doing so foster international understanding,' says Adler. He and his colleagues can play the 154 national anthems of all seafaring nations – recordings made specially for the Welcome Point in the NDR Hamburg studios.

Originally issued as vinyl singles with the welcome on the A-side and the farewell on the B-side, the anthems were later transferred to cassette tapes – red for greetings, black for farewells. Today, the original recordings are played digitally. In a single shift, the captains welcome and bid up to 25 ships farewell.

At the heart of the Welcome Point is a wooden desk holding some 17,000 index cards, neatly arranged with all the relevant data on each ship. Adler and his colleagues keep the files up to date and share details with visitors: ship's name, flag, size, draught, shipping line, origin, route, cargo, and special characteristics. The information comes from a range of sources, such as the port information service or the operators themselves. 'Sometimes it's not at all easy to find out the details of a ship,' the 76-year-old

**Wolfgang Adler has been working for many years as a volunteer welcoming captain at Willkomm Höft.**



© Elbklame / Nicole de Jong

admits. But he's not one to give up quickly. Once, he became so engrossed in research that he missed a vessel passing – it sailed by unacknowledged.

The Welcome Point is unique. 'Our station is known among seafarers all over the world,' says Adler. 'They look forward to the greeting when their voyage brings them to Hamburg.' One anecdote demonstrates the tradition's reach: a visitor once told of meeting a former seaman in the Andes. The Peruvian instantly recalled the ships' greeting on the Elbe – and spoke of it with great enthusiasm. To ensure no ship is missed, the captains monitor the Elbe with two fixed cameras: one facing west, one east, so that they can spot both incoming and outgoing vessels before they come within sight of the Welcome Point itself.

And when is the next ship? A visitor asks whether it's worth waiting a little longer on the terrace of the Schulauer Fährhaus. 'Yes,' Adler replies, 'the Danish San Raphael Maersk is just about to depart – 333 metres long, with space for up to 11,503 containers.' He glances at the screen in front of him. 'And I can already see Kugelbake – she'll be here in about twenty minutes.' The RoRo vessel exclusively carries components for Airbus, from Nordenham to Hamburg. As she sails under the German flag, the German anthem will play. To track ships in real time, Adler uses the online application Vesselfinder, which shows vessel positions worldwide. The index cards with the ship's technical data lie ready on the desk.

Adler shares the visitors' enthusiasm – especially when it comes to children, who are particularly close to his heart. For them, he has prepared a treasure

chest of small surprises, which never fails to light up young faces. Only recently, a grandmother visited with her grandson from California. 'Even that boy had already heard about our treasure chest,' Adler recalls with a smile. Such moments move him – as do the amusing ones everyday life at the Welcome Point brings. 'We recently had a strong easterly wind and a falling tide,' he remembers. 'An elderly lady called out in alarm: "Captain Adler, the pontoon has been stolen!"' Indeed, the water level was so low that it was almost invisible. A charming misunderstanding – and a welcome change from the most common question: 'When is the next ship due?' ■

### History of the ships' greeting

Otto Friedrich Behnke, tenant of the Schulauer Fährhaus from 1949 to 1964, wanted to offer his guests more than good food and a view of the Elbe. Born out of business acumen, local pride and the desire to create something unique, the Willkomm-Höft (Welcome Point) ship greeting station in Wedel was born. On 12 June 1952, the first vessel received the honour of an official welcome: Akagi Maru from Japan. Her captain was so delighted that he visited the Welcome Point personally to give thanks. The greetings were recorded by NDR radio announcer Hermann Rockmann, whose distinctive voice can still be heard at the station today saying: 'Welcome to Hamburg. We are pleased to welcome you to the Port of Hamburg.' Only the Japanese and Chinese announcements were spoken by native speakers: a member of staff at the Japanese consulate and a kitchen hand from the Schulauer Fährhaus who spoke Mandarin. The Welcome Point is manned Monday to Friday from 12 noon until no later than 8 pm, and on weekends and public holidays the captains begin an hour earlier.

Three operations commanders from the Maritime Emergency Response Command are training with a Federal Police helicopter for a real-life emergency at sea.

# Protecting the waterway: Cuxhaven Station

© Fabian Lührs

**Whether it's a grounding in the Elbe or a ship fire in the Kiel Canal – the Central Command for Maritime Emergencies takes charge when routine maritime operations go wrong. It has been coordinating complex missions to protect people, the environment and shipping traffic since 2003.**

BY MALIN STUTE

Elbe estuary near Cuxhaven, 4 February 2016, just before 20:00 hrs: The 'INDIAN OCEAN' passes the Kugelbake off Cuxhaven – heading for the Port of Hamburg as its destination. The vessel is among the world's largest container ships. A massive ship, 400 metres long, carrying thousands of containers. But still an everyday sight at the Kugelbake, the sea mark indicating where the Elbe ends and the North Sea begins. Hundreds of vessels pass the Elbe estuary every day, heading into or out of Hamburg – nothing unusual at all. But two hours later, at around 22:00 hrs, the sense of routine comes to an abrupt end near Lühesand, just behind Stade: the 'INDIAN OCEAN' runs aground. The Leviathan is stuck in the Elbe. Ground to a halt.

Brunsbüttel lock, 9 November 2023, 19:20 hrs: The general alarm sounds on the tanker 'THUN GOTHEN-

BURG' in the Large North Basin of the lock connecting the Elbe with the Kiel Canal. Smoke ascends: a funnel fire. Things need to move quickly now. The Brunsbüttel fire brigade arrives within minutes. But soon realises: reinforcements will be urgently needed if the fire spreads. Two distress scenarios on the water – completely different – but the Central Command for Maritime Emergencies is alerted in both cases.

## **BETWEEN ROUTINE OPERATIONS AND A STATE OF EMERGENCY**

The Central Command for Maritime Emergencies is tasked with coordinating the necessary operations in the event of shipping accidents and environmental disasters at sea and on the coast. Its operational remit includes North Sea and Baltic Sea, as well as the estuaries of the Elbe, Ems, Trave, Warnow and Weser rivers

and the Kiel Canal. The priority is to rescue people and protect the environment. Since its inception in 2003, the Central Command for Maritime Emergencies has coordinated ninety-eight serious accidents, thirteen of them in the Elbe.

### WHEN THE STATE OF EMERGENCY BEGINS

No two accidents are ever the same. The 50 women and men of the Central Command have to be prepared for anything. Every decision counts.

The Central Command must be ready to go within 45 minutes and is on call 365 days a year. This is why the majority of team members live in Cuxhaven or the region, close to the Maritime Safety and Security Centre on the banks of the Elbe, where the Central Command for Maritime Emergencies is based. It is also the location of the control room and stores – the modern nerve centre for all operations.

The safety of the crew on board the 'INDIAN OCEAN' is the top priority here: when a container ship of this size runs aground, there is a risk of technical failures, fuel leaks and shifting cargo, while the crew must remain on board – always uncertain of whether the ship might start to list. But the risk of serious environmental damage still persists, as the ship is also carrying large volumes of heavy fuel oil, which would wreak havoc on the sensitive ecosystem of the Elbe in the event of a leak. Compounding this predicament is the danger to shipping traffic, as a giant container vessel stuck in the ground is blocking one of the world's busiest waterways.

Fire on board is the principal risk for the 'THUN GOTHENBURG'. This could quickly become life-threatening for the crew due to heat, smoke development and restricted escape routes. What's more, the combination of fire and hazardous goods heightens the danger of serious environmental damage. This would have a massive impact on shipping, as an accident in the lock or in the Kiel Canal would block the important transport route between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea – with considerable knock-on effects for international trade.

The Central Command for Maritime Emergencies cooperates with numerous partner organisations. If an emergency occurs, it can call on all available resources and forces of the federal government and the five coastal states – from state-owned oil

spill response vessels and the federal government's multi-purpose ships to helicopters from the federal police and navy. Emergency services run by the Federal Agency for Technical Relief are also deployed on behalf of the Central Command. The private sector is another important part of the maritime safety network: tugboats, salvage companies, port operators. Permanent communication is the basis of every successful operation.

**HAVARIEKOMMANDO**  
CENTRAL COMMAND FOR MARITIME EMERGENCIES



Experienced pilots, muscular tugs and rigorous coordination prevented any escalation after the 'INDIAN OCEAN' ran aground. In the case of the 'THUN

GOTHENBURG', the Central Command for Maritime Emergencies dispatched a helicopter with Cuxhaven firefighters to support their colleagues from Brunsbüttel – and the fire was quickly extinguished on board. Nobody came to any harm.

### PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

The Central Command for Maritime Emergencies – an institution of the federal government and the coastal states – sees itself as a maritime competence centre. Everyday operations include regular exercises with partner organisations, the ongoing development of technical concepts and deployment scenarios and the testing of new equipment – with the aim of achieving permanent readiness for any emergency.

"Not only are the women and men from the Central Command for Maritime Emergencies highly competent, they also share a sense of motivation to take responsibility and help. Their commitment and team spirit make the difference in an emergency", says Director Dr Robby Renner. Aside from navigators, engineers, biologists, chemists and firefighters, the team includes communication scientists and administrative staff. ■

Damage report: The 'INDIAN OCEAN' has run aground and must be freed quickly.





# Change at the Elbe estuary

**From a town for emigrants and a fishing hub to a cornerstone of the offshore wind industry: Cuxhaven is a striking example of change along the Elbe. Today, the town is a lynchpin of Germany's energy transition, and where tradition meets the future.**

BY HOLGER GRABSCH

The Elbe has always been more than just a river. For centuries it has carried goods and people, serving as both trade route and lifeline. For numerous generations, it was also a point of departure: via Cuxhaven, hundreds of thousands left their home to start a new life in America. Later on, fishing, the navy and tourism shaped the town – but for a long time without much promise for the future. That has changed dramatically. Situated where the Elbe flows into the North Sea, Cuxhaven is now Germany's leading port for wind turbines. Where stagnation once reigned, momentum has returned.

## A HUB FOR ENERGY LOGISTICS

The estuary has always been of major strategic importance. It is the route through which goods reach

the ports of Stade and Hamburg. Cuxhaven benefits from a rare combination of extensive land reserves, a high-performance seaport, industrial facilities and direct connections to the autobahn and federal highway. It takes less than five minutes to get from the heavy-lift terminals to the A 27 or B 73 – a decisive logistical advantage when hauling rotor blades ranging from 80 to 100 metres long. 'Cuxhaven has secured its place as a cornerstone of Europe's energy logistics – with reach on a global scale,' says Captain Arne Ehlers, managing partner of terminal operator Blue Water BREB. The port has become a key hub for the offshore wind sector.

Few German ports have reinvented themselves as often as Cuxhaven. At the turn of the 20th century, ex-

press steamships connected it with Britain and New York. The Hamburg-America Quarter in the city centre still bears impressive testimony to that era in brick and stone. Later, the fish trade underpinned prosperity, and by the 1930s Cuxhaven boasted Europe's largest fish dispatch rail station. When that industry declined, the town slipped into the shadow of larger competitors. Population forecasts pointed downwards. But offshore wind energy reversed the trend.

### A BILLION-EURO OFFSHORE MARKET

The German Government aims to have installed 30 gigawatts of offshore capacity by 2030, increasing to more than 70 gigawatts by 2045. Even today, the market value of turbine components shipped via Cuxhaven runs into the high hundreds of millions of euros. Wind power – both onshore and offshore – has long become a globally relevant business. Production facilities and project sites are located not only in industrialised countries, but also in emerging economies, and the sector's international network makes it a textbook example of effective globalisation.

Yet this international scope brings both opportunities and risks. 'The energy industry remains deeply intertwined with the global economy,' says Ehlers. 'What matters is that processes on site are reliably managed – from sea transport and the unloading of goods to onward distribution into the hinterland.' Cuxhaven stands for the transformation of an entire region. Where once ships full of emigrants set out for distant shores and fishing boats returned home, heavy-lift trucks now roll past carrying giant rotor blades. The Elbe, a symbol of centuries-long trade and migration, has become a strategic site for the energy economy. More than just a port, Cuxhaven is increasingly seen as a gateway to a new energy age. As the North Sea grows to become Europe's largest power plant, the town is cementing its role as logistics hub of the energy transition. ■

Captain  
**Arne Ehlers**  
CEO  
Blue Water BREB



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Elbehafen in Brunsbüttel:  
driving trade, the energy transition,  
and the future.

# The Elbe connection

The ports of Brunsbüttel: driving trade, the energy transition, and innovation

BY KIM CHRISTIN AHRENS

At the junction of the Elbe and the Kiel Canal lie Brunsbüttel's three ports: Elbehafen, Ölhafen, and Ostermoor. Together, they form the supply backbone of ChemCoast Park Brunsbüttel, Schleswig-Holstein's largest industrial zone, and play a key role within the wider Hamburg metropolitan region. They are owned and operated by Brunsbüttel Ports GmbH.

With its trio of ports, Brunsbüttel serves as an energy and industrial hub, and is a vital pillar in safeguarding the energy supply for Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, and Germany as a whole. In particular, the Elbehafen has become a national supply hub for liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports, thanks to the infrastructure it provides for operating a floating LNG terminal – all while continuing to function as a versatile all-purpose port.

Looking to the future, Brunsbüttel is set to develop a central CO<sub>2</sub> hub. The site will serve as a logistics node for temporary storage, subsequent utilisation (Carbon Capture and Utilisation, CCU), and the onward transport of CO<sub>2</sub> to secure storage sites (Carbon Capture and Storage, CCS). In doing so, the Elbehafen will expand its role beyond goods and energy to become a major export hub for CO<sub>2</sub>.

The ports of Brunsbüttel and Hamburg are closely connected and enjoy a long-standing and trusted

partnership. Jointly, they serve as crucial nodes for the supply of energy, raw materials, and consumer goods. Brunsbüttel's port network is also a strong logistics partner for the Hamburg region, providing industrial services at four locations for clients across multiple sectors.

Beyond this close collaboration, the Elbe itself – as a federal waterway of national significance for the transport of goods and the maritime economy – serves as a vital link between Brunsbüttel and Hamburg. Inland shipping, in particular, plays a central role for both ports: it is an indispensable part of climate-friendly transport chains, not only along the Elbe. With low energy consumption and minimal emissions, it offers a greener alternative to road and rail, easing the strain on transport infrastructure while strengthening the security of supply.

For many years, Brunsbüttel and Hamburg have worked hand in hand to expand inland shipping – notably through a regular inland vessel shuttle on the Elbe and by raising public awareness of this sustainable mode of transport. As a central lifeline of northern Germany, inland shipping on the Elbe links sustainable transport routes with innovative logistics, driving a climate-friendly future. ■

# On Course for Helgoland

**Operated by the FRS shipping company, the Halunder Jet runs a fast, comfortable connection from Hamburg through the Elbe region to the North Sea island, passing pretty maritime scenery along the way.**

BY NICOLE DE JONG

As the 'Halunder Jet' slowly lets loose of the jetties at 8.30 in the morning, the sun sparkles on the gentle waves and seagulls accompany the ship with their calls. Its destination is Helgoland, 186 km away and Germany's only high seas island, which the catamaran will reach at an impressive speed.

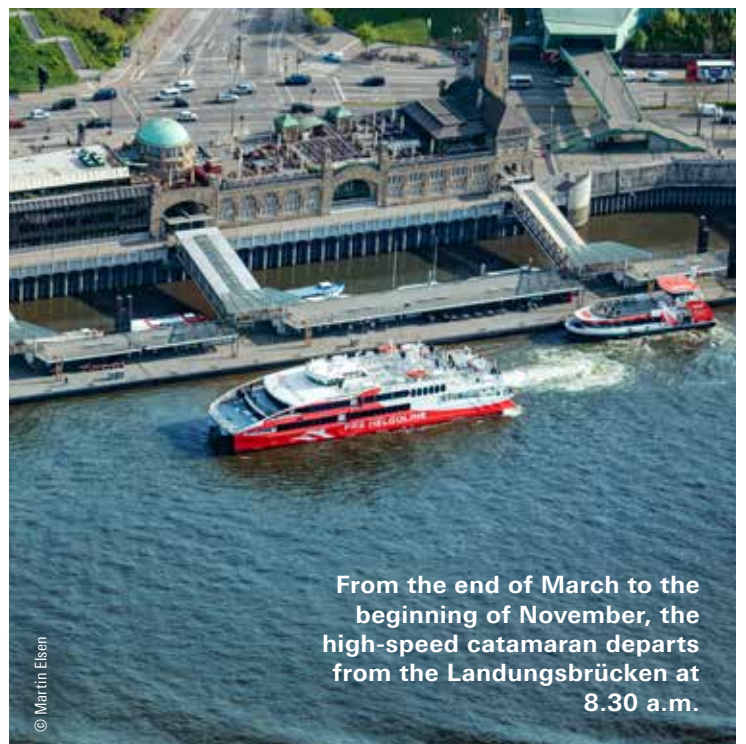
The trip from Hamburg to the North Sea is an experience in itself. As the catamaran glides down the Elbe, it offers views of a fascinating backdrop of maritime and urban life. On the port side, the boat dances past the huge container terminals of the port. The striking theatre auditorium for The Lion King musical rises up in the background, while the modern Hafencity with the Elbphilharmonie concert hall are absolute eye-catchers, and even the historic brick buildings of the Speicherstadt are poking out from behind.

The first few nautical miles lead down the Elbe, past the Airbus factory, as the picturesque Elbe suburbs such as Blankenese with its magnificent villas and the famous staircase district stand out on the starboard side. Further downstream, imposing green dyke landscapes line both sides of the river, protecting the Elbe marshes. After around two hours, the catamaran makes its first short stop in Brunsbüttel and docks 45 minutes later at the mouth of the Elbe in Cuxhaven.

The mood on board is relaxed thanks to a modern stabilisation system, so the journey remains pleasant even when the 'Halunder Jet' reaches the open North Sea and the swell increases. "The boat rests calmly in the water even in strong gusts – that's real comfort", says Captain Boris Dahlke, who has been steering the catamaran safely across the Elbe, through the challenging Elbe estuary and across the North Sea for 18 years.

After about three and a half hours, the catamaran approaches its destination and the impressive red rocky coast of Helgoland appears on the horizon. The 'Halunder Jet' finally moors in the inland harbour. The island is an enticing spot for visitors.

When the afternoon arrives, the lines are let loose once again and the 'Halunder Jet' sets course back to Hamburg. The catamaran cuts easily through water and begins to approach the mouth of the Elbe. Then this latest jaunt through the region takes the boat safely back to the Port of Hamburg. When the 'Halunder Jet' docks at the jetties in the evening, it brings an outing to an end that will remain indelibly memorable – a charming experience that passengers are almost certain to repeat. ■



From the end of March to the beginning of November, the high-speed catamaran departs from the Landungsbrücken at 8.30 a.m.

# Efficiently coordinating incoming traffic and the Port of Hamburg

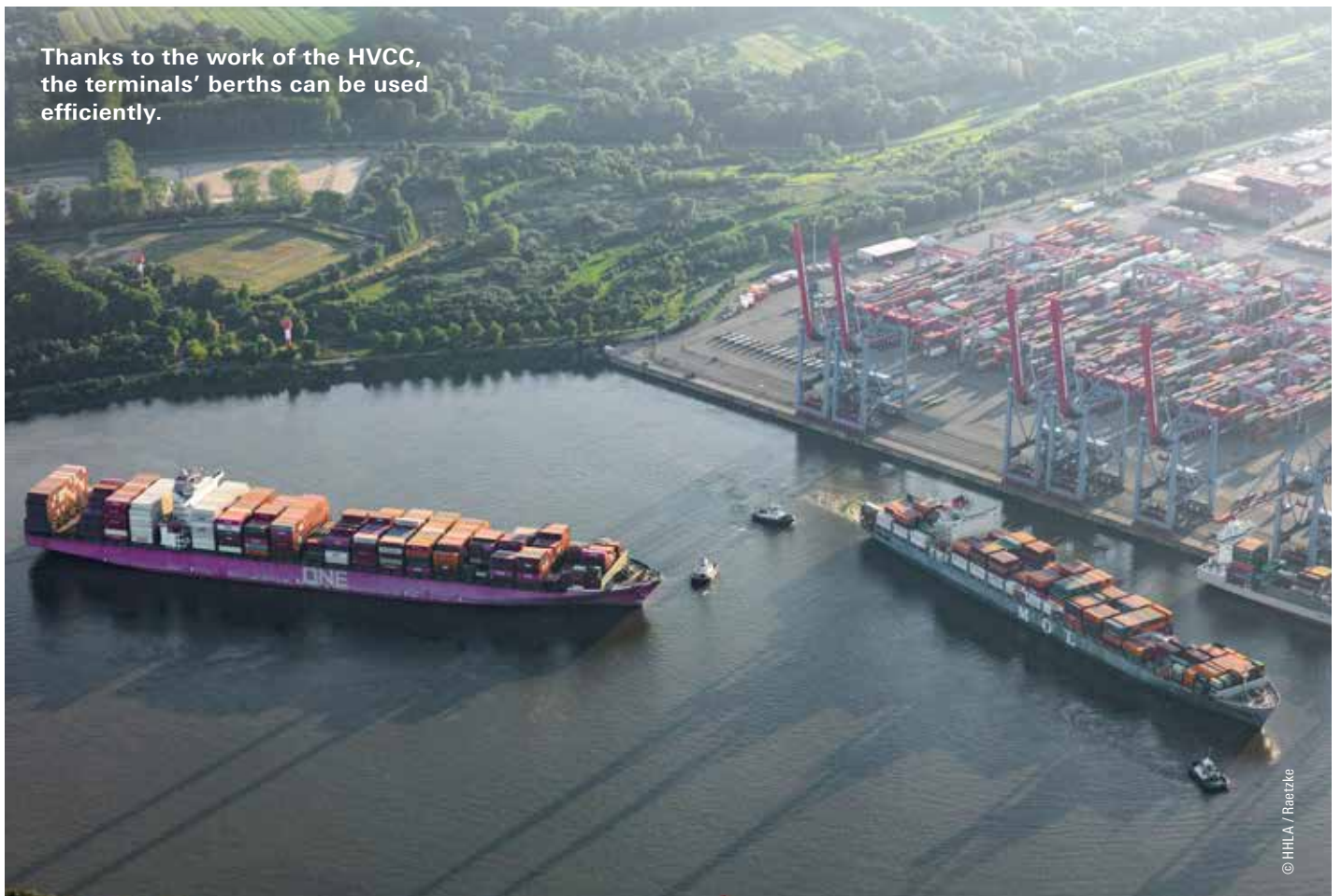
**As the central hub for maritime logistics, the Hamburg Vessel Coordination Center (HVCC) ensures optimal, round-the-clock cross-operator coordination of vessel arrivals and departures by working closely with the Nautical Control Centre of the HPA.**

BY THERESA LINDER

Since commencing activities in 2009, the Hamburg Vessel Coordination Center (HVCC) has established itself as a central, cross-company hub for the nautical and operational fine-tuning of terminals and shipping customers in the Port of Hamburg. A joint venture between the Hamburg Hafen und Logistik AG (HHLA) and EUROGATE Container Terminal Hamburg, the HVCC coordinates vessel arrivals, port rotations, and departures around the clock. It serves as a central interface for shipping companies, terminals, and nautical service providers, ensuring seamless coordination among all operational stakeholders, particularly in cooperation with the HPA.

The organisation consists of two specialised divisions: Nautical Terminal Coordination (NTC) and the Feeder Logistics Centre (FLC). The NTC plans the arrival and departure of large container ships, bulk carriers, ConRo, and cruise ships several days in advance. Due to the unique geographical location of the Port of Hamburg – with a waterway over 100 kilometres long leading to the open sea – numerous factors must be considered, including tidal windows, regulations for ships meeting on the Lower Elbe, clearance under the Köhlbrand Bridge, wind conditions, as well as changing berth schedules at terminals and shipping line timetables.

Thanks to the work of the HVCC, the terminals' berths can be used efficiently.



The FLC, in contrast, optimises the rotation of feeder and inland vessels between the Hamburg terminals and handles stowage planning for feeder operators in the Port of Hamburg.

The HVCC team benefits from proprietary software that compares tens of thousands of ship positions across Northern Europe with up-to-date planning data on an hourly basis. 'Arrivals, departures, and port rotations are monitored in real time. We help our customers respond flexibly when necessary and coordinate vessel movements across different terminals in Hamburg,' explains HVCC Managing Director Gerald Hirt.

Last year, the team, currently twenty strong, worked round the clock to coordinate around 4,000 terminal calls from feeder vessels and pre-arrival planning for approximately 2,500 large ships, which face particular restrictions on the Lower Elbe due to their size. In doing so, the HVCC optimises the use of port infrastructure and contributes to stable traffic flows.

Furthermore, the HVCC reduces vessels' fuel consumption and emissions by providing precise time windows for just-in-time arrivals. This not only lowers costs but also reduces energy consumption in the port and on ap-

proach to the German Bight, improving the port environmental footprint. 'As an international hub for the flow of goods, the port has

a special responsibility to implement sustainable solutions – both to meet climate targets and to strengthen competitiveness,' emphasises Axel Mattern, CEO of Port of Hamburg Marketing.

Today, HVCC data is used not only by shipping companies and terminals but also by shippers, rail operators, and nautical service providers. 'This digital data exchange is continuously being fine-tuned to prevent system disruptions, reduce manual processes, and increase planning reliability,' stresses Gerald Hirt.

The HVCC dashboard has around 750 users, with additional service providers—such as bunker companies, waste disposal firms, and ship outfitters—recently integrated. Ongoing refinements continue to improve collaboration, creating an increasingly connected digital ecosystem that contributes to the stability, efficiency, and sustainability of the maritime transport chain. ■

**Gerald Hirt**  
CEO HVCC



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# Between marshes and wind farms – engineering beneath the Elbe

**Left, Wewelsfleth; right, Wischhafen: As 'Elsa' bores tirelessly beneath the surface, the launch and reception shafts take shape on both banks of the Elbe. The SuedLink Elb crossing is a key element of Germany's energy transition – and sets the stage for an engineering voyage from north to south.**

BY NICOLE DE JONG

The energy transition is forging its path beneath the Elbe. With a 5.2-kilometre tunnel, the SuedLink megaproject will transport wind power from northern Germany to Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg. What might at first glance seem to be a mere technical detail is in reality a pivotal bottleneck of the energy transition – and an engineering feat of the highest order.

Since December 2024, the tunnel boring machine (TBM) 'Elsa' has been carving its way underground. It has already covered 2.2 kilometres, advancing around ten metres each day. 'We are on schedule and delighted with the steady progress,' says Lars Bayer, Project Manager for Tunnel Construction at the ARGE Tunnel ElbX joint venture. 'Elsa' is 190 metres long, designed by Herrenknecht AG and specially adapted to the geological challenges beneath the Elbe: the nearly five-metre-wide cutterhead has to penetrate clay, silt, peat, sand, and even large boulders.

Work is proceeding simultaneously from both sides of the Elbe. In Wewelsfleth (Schleswig-Holstein), the launch shaft for the tunnel is already complete. It is 25

metres deep and sealed with an underwater concrete base slab to keep out groundwater. 'We are working with specialist divers who supervise the concreting and meticulously inspect every surface before we move on to the next construction phase,' explains Damian Pikos, Team Leader for Heavy Special Deep Construction in the joint venture. Over on the Lower Saxony side, at Wischhafen, PORR Spezialtiefbau has just completed the diaphragm walls for the reception shaft – up to 60 metres deep and more than a metre thick. A construction challenge that demands both structural precision and logistical excellence. 'Cutting at these depths requires absolute accuracy, as every joint must be completely watertight,' he adds.

For the tunnel builders, 4 December is a special day. In honour of Saint Barbara, patron saint of miners, underground sites around the world celebrate St. Barbara's Festival – Wewelsfleth is no exception. At the SuedLink Elb crossing site, PORR and the client TenneT, together with political representatives, marked the centuries-old tradition by christening both the tunnel and the tunnel boring machine 'Elsa'. The celebra-

tion, which blends tradition and modern engineering, is seen by workers to offer symbolic protection for the hazardous work underground.

SuedLink, operated by the grid operators TenneT and TransnetBW, is hailed as the 'electric highway of the energy transition'. Over more than 700 kilometres, high-voltage DC cables will carry wind energy from northern Germany to the main load centres in the south. The Elb crossing, ElbX, is one of the most demanding sections. The tunnel under the Elbe forms a key part of the entire SuedLink project. Without it, a continuous route from the North Sea to Bavaria would be impossible.

The ARGE Tunnel ElbX joint venture – comprising PORR and Wayss & Freytag – has pooled its extensive expertise in tunnel and specialist deep construction. Massive steel structures secure the shafts, underwater concrete slabs prevent groundwater intrusion, and micropiles stabilise the structure against buoyancy. An additional excavation, just five metres deep, is being prepared for the cable jointing facility, which will later house the cable connections.

In the coming months, the team will install the head beams, construct the wells, and carry out the prelimi-

nary excavation. The reception shaft is expected to be ready this summer, in time to receive 'Elsa' on the Lower Saxony side. The tunnel is scheduled for completion by 2027. It is only then that the cables, which will literally carry the energy transition under the Elbe, will be laid.

This progress is as much symbolic as it is technical. The project demonstrates that complex megaprojects can be successfully executed under strict environmental regulations. Construction is already on schedule. 'This is truly a once-in-a-century project,' emphasises Bayer. 'Seeing the cutterhead advance little by little at the end of the day feels like a small triumph, both for us and for the energy transition.' ■

### 'Elsa'

The tunnel boring machine 'Elsa' is 190 metres long and weighs around 700 tonnes. The TBM manufacturer Herrenknecht designed 'Elsa' specifically for the geological conditions beneath the Elbe. Since December 2024, its 4.9-metre-diameter cutterhead has advanced underground at a rate of roughly ten meters per day to excavate the 5.2-kilometre tunnel between Wewelsfleth in Schleswig-Holstein and Wischhafen in Lower Saxony. Completion is scheduled for 2027.

The foundation pit in Wewelsfleth, Schleswig-Holstein, is 25 metres deep and has been secured with massive steel structures.



# From Brunsbüttel to Kiel

**The Kiel Canal is a driving engine of German maritime trade – but without immediate repairs and expansion, Jens B. Knudsen of Initiative Kiel Canal e.V. warns, its vital role could be at risk.**

BY JENS B. KNUDSEN

The Kiel Canal is the world's busiest artificial sea waterway. Each year, around 30,000 vessels traverse its 98 kilometres which link the North Sea at Brunsbüttel to the Baltic Sea at Kiel – a significant number of which are cargo vessels that would otherwise have to navigate the far more hazardous and much lengthier Skagerrak route. For Germany and northern Europe alike, the Kiel Canal is not just a vital logistical artery, but the backbone of German sea trade with the Baltic region.

Back in 2021, the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW Kiel) quantified the canal's economic value: a fully operational Kiel Canal contributes roughly €570 million a year to the German economy, thanks to rapid transit times, low shipping costs, and thus efficient cargo flows. A functional canal, therefore, is a pivotal piece of national infrastructure, with far-reaching implications for industry, commerce, and employment.

Hamburg, Germany's largest seaport, stands to benefit most. With 114,000 jobs on the ground, the port depends on an efficient and operational canal to maintain reliable, economically viable connections to the Baltic. Any delays or disruptions to the canal's operation or expansion ripple immediately through the ports of northern Germany, threatening economic output.

Yet this vital backbone is showing serious signs of wear and tear: ageing locks, deferred renovation projects, and delays in construction are creating bottlenecks. Progress on the full upgrading and expansion of the eastern section remains frustratingly slow. The result: longer transit times, unpredictable scheduling, and higher costs for shipowners and logistics operators.

Since mid-2023, a slow-speed regulation has also been in place due to unavoidable maintenance measures. This has led to significant cost increases, in particular for customers using pilots and canal transit services. To safeguard the Kiel Canal's competi-

tiveness in the medium and long term, it is vital that smaller vessels be allowed to resume travelling at higher speeds once construction work is complete. Only then can the canal regain its appeal and cut costs perceptibly for its users.

A landmark moment is expected in October 2025: the maritime sector eagerly awaits the opening of the first construction phase for the expansion of the eastern section. However, there is great concern that the start of the second construction phase will be delayed indefinitely by politicians. Signs are mounting that financing issues will remain unresolved or deliberately deferred. In times of tight budgets, this critical measure risks being sidelined due to misguided priorities – risking this vital capacity expansion being left stuck in limbo. For the Kiel Canal's competitiveness, such a scenario would send a disastrous signal.

Meanwhile, the federal budget for 2025 reveals a glaring contradiction: the transport sector is slated to receive around €12 billion from the special fund, yet maritime infrastructure is effectively excluded. Neither the second phase of the eastern section expansion, the vital deepening of the canal, nor the upgrading of seaward access and hinterland connections for ports appears on the list of priorities. Policymakers are sidelining the entire maritime sector, even though it undoubtedly plays a vital, system-critical role in commerce, the security of supply, and industrial output. Billions flow into roads and rail, while the waterways risk becoming the structural losers when it comes to investments – with catastrophic consequences for Germany's export economy.

The federal government's personnel policy is to be equally criticised. The latest reports indicate that the Federal Waterways and Shipping Administration (WSV) will continue to see annual staff reductions. Particularly in operational areas – especially Waterways and Shipping Offices (WSA) – further cuts would be disastrous. Even today, there is a shortage of qualified nautical personnel, such as lockmasters.

**Jens B. Knudsen**  
Chairman of the  
Initiative Kiel Canal



© Jens B. Knudsen

As a result, the small locks at Brunsbüttel can no longer be staffed continuously. How cutting personnel

here is meant to improve efficiency remains questionable. Rather, the real concern is that an increasingly thin staffing level – particularly in the Waterways and Shipping Offices – will further undermine the canal's vital capabilities, directly affecting reliability and operational safety.

Only through consistent and targeted investment in the canal's infrastructure – including the urgently needed deepening by an extra metre and the second phase of the eastern section expansion – can the Kiel Canal remain efficient and fit for future use. Customers need smooth, predictable transit in terms of both time and cost. Yet this predictability is under threat, with longer transit times, rising fees, and a noticeable drop in service quality. If canal transits continue to be plagued by delays and steep extra costs, shippers may permanently seek alternative routes, threat-

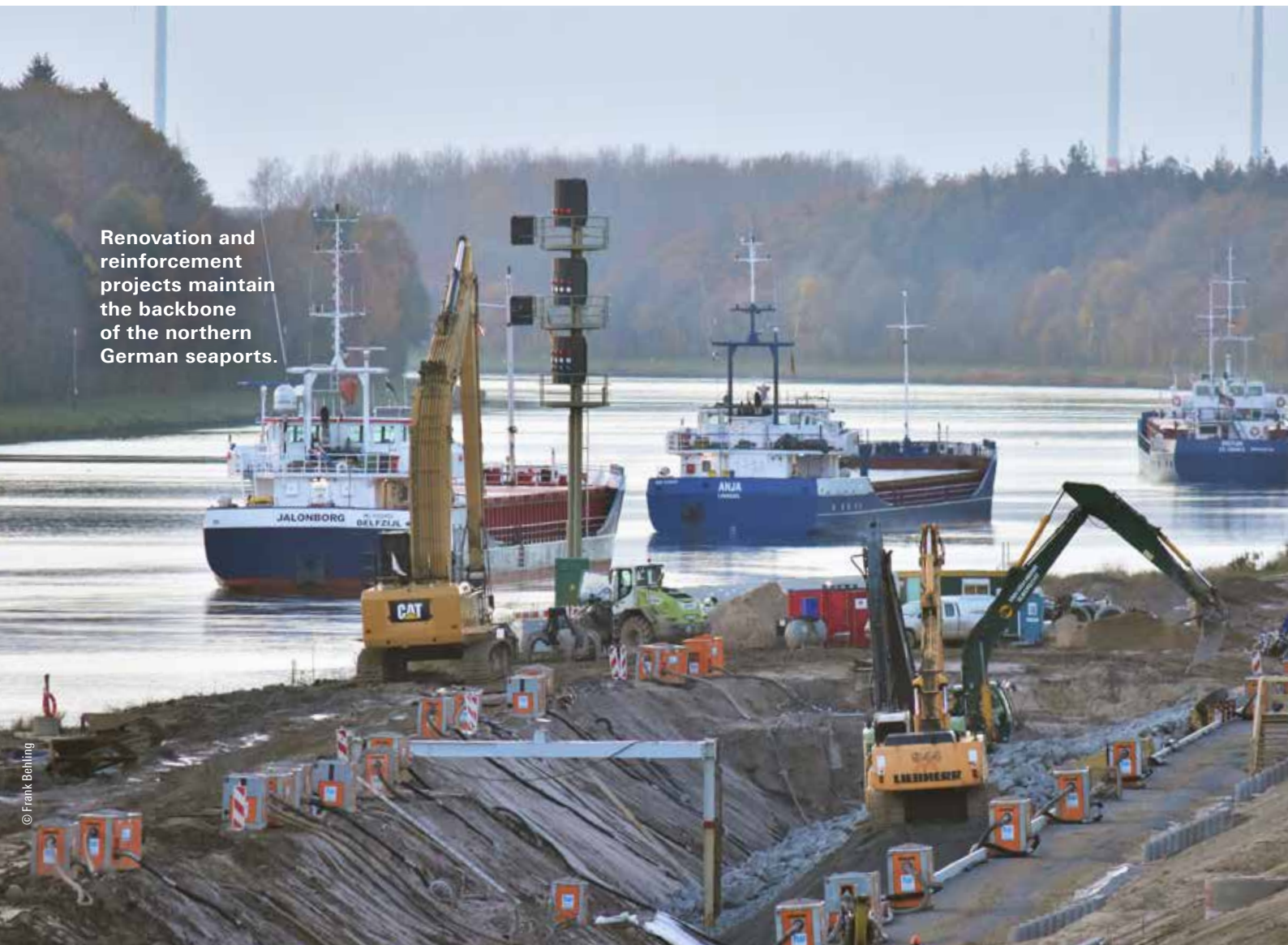
ening Germany's position as a trade hub. Targeted investments in capacity and reliability are essential to maintaining the Kiel Canal's advantage over the Skagerrak alternative.

A modern, efficiently run, and high-performance Kiel Canal is not a luxury – it is a necessity. It safeguards supply, exports, tens of thousands of jobs, and the expansion of climate-friendly European freight transport. Any savings at the canal's expense jeopardise one of Germany's most critical economic engines. ■

### About Initiative Kiel Canal

Formed in 2012, the Initiative Kiel Canal is a network of businesses, associations, industry groups, local authorities, and concerned citizens that advocate for the upkeep, operational efficiency, and continued advancement of the Kiel Canal with decision-makers, the authorities, and the public alike. The initiative aims to secure a resilient and reliable transit route, including lock overhauls, expansion of the eastern section, canal deepening, and curve optimisation, alongside commitments to adequate staffing and sustainable financing. Jens B. Knudsen heads Initiative Kiel Canal e.V.

Renovation and reinforcement projects maintain the backbone of the northern German seaports.



# The energy transition in the port and the region

**The Hamburg engineering firm Ingenion is working on decarbonisation strategies in the maritime sector and aims to advance the energy transition in both port operations and the surrounding region.**

BY NICOLE DE JONG

Decarbonising the maritime sector is seen as one of the major challenges in the coming years. Policymakers and industry associations have set ambitious climate targets. But how can these be achieved without compromising the stability of the energy supply? This is where Ingenion comes in. With practical concepts, technical expertise, and a strong network of partners, the Hamburg-based engineering firm pursues an approach based on a decentralised and independent energy supply.

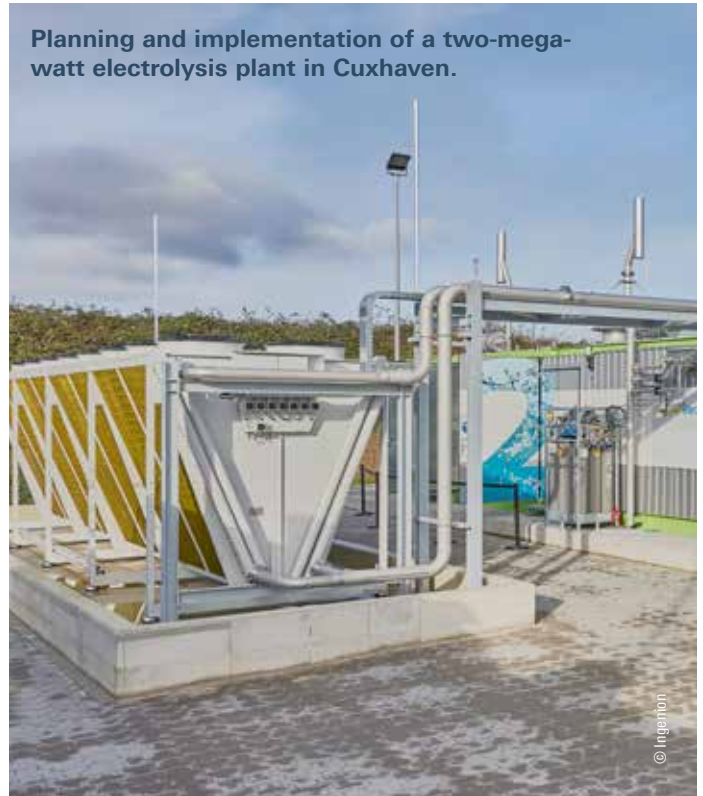
It is designed to be both economically viable and environmentally sustainable. The company, which has its roots in the oil and gas industry, has been involved in infrastructure projects for more than twenty years and develops, among other things, concepts for the use of hydrogen in the logistics sector. Ingenion positions itself as a practical solutions provider, supporting projects from the initial idea through to commissioning.

## ENERGY SUPPLY VIA DECENTRALISED GRIDS

One focus at present is the concept of a 'green port'. According to Ingenion, there is no standard recipe here – every solution must be tailored to the specific operator and their infrastructure. Possible options range from electric solutions for harbour launches to hydrogen or hybrid solutions for tugs, as well as flexible shore power connections and alternative fuels such as methanol.

One forward-thinking component is the microgrids – decentralised networks that can supply energy independently of public grids. This form of energy supply not only allows costs to be better calculated, but also

**Planning and implementation of a two-megawatt electrolysis plant in Cuxhaven.**



ensures the provision of critical infrastructure – a decisive advantage for the smooth operation of terminals and ships. Microgrids can also enable new business areas to be established that would otherwise be impossible or delayed by years due to insufficient grid connection capacity.

## PIONEERING WORK IN CUXHAVEN

Hydrogen projects in Cuxhaven, for example, demonstrate how innovative technologies can be successfully implemented in maritime operations as well. A two-megawatt electrolysis plant has been established there to produce green hydrogen, which is now being used to power the transport vessel 'Coastal Liberty'. Seen as a trailblazing project, the propulsion operates quieter, produces no emissions, and is more eco-friendly than conventional alternatives. The Ingenion group was involved not only in the planning, but also as an investor and operator.

'The experience gained in Cuxhaven can, in principle, also be applied to the Port of Hamburg and adapted to the specific local circumstances,' says Ulf Lemke, Head of Hydrogen at Ingenion. However, the Port of Hamburg presents challenges: there are long-established structures, a mix of different developments, and, at its heart, maritime operations. Nevertheless, solutions exist to allow each area to achieve carbon neutrality without compromising on the security of the energy supply. Contrary to conservative short-term political assessments, the market, according to Lemke, already offers numerous emissions-free options that are commercially viable and ready for deployment today. ■

# Port News

## Flotte Hamburg tests alternative fuel HVO 100

Flotte Hamburg has tested a new fuel to remain on course for climate neutrality: besides switching the municipal vessels to electrical propulsion, it is now examining the use of HVO 100 (Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil). Obtained produced from food waste, this completely palm oil-free fuel by Shell is undergoing trials on three ships in collaboration with Friedrich G. Frommann GmbH & Co KG. HVO 100 meets the sustainability requirements of the EU RED II directive and promises to reduce greenhouse gases by at least 80 percent.

The 'Hafenkapitän' is the first ship without an electric drive to become virtually carbon neutral. Also included in the test are the Deepenschriewer III sounding and surveying vessel and the Neßsand transport and inspection vessel. The alternative fuel could conceivably be used across the entire fleet if it proves effective.

"Although our primary focus is on electrification and innovative drive systems, supplementary fuels such as HVO 100 are still vital elements in achieving our climate targets", emphasises Karsten Schönwald, CEO of Flotte Hamburg. "We are proud to play a pioneering role in introducing this fuel at the Port of Hamburg."

## UNIKAI and AKQUINET digitise cargo handling at O'Swaldkai

Funded by the Federal Ministry of Transport, UNIKAI, a subsidiary of HHLA, and the IT service provider AKQUINET, completion of the AKIDU project marks an important step towards digitisation of the multi-purpose terminal at O'Swaldkai. The aim was to make complex general cargo and RoRo handling processes more plannable and efficient.

Results include software for predictive space planning, an intelligent system for automated yard allocation and a 3D visualisation of terminal operations in real time. UNIKAI also collaborated with the Hamburg IT Technology Centre (HITeC) to develop a process for the automated measurement of project cargoes such as cranes or special vehicles.

"AKIDU has given us the IT tools we need to future-proof our processes", says UNIKAI Managing Di-

## Waltershof Port enables bunkering of methanol and LNG

The Port of Waltershof has gained approval for the bunkering of methanol and liquefied natural gas (LNG) using the ship-to-ship process. This means that vessels at the Burchardkai and Predöhlkai container terminals can be supplied directly with alternative fuels. The Hamburg Port Authority (HPA) is therefore taking another important step towards greener shipping and bolstering implementation of energy and climate targets at the port.

The first methanol-powered ships are already in operation worldwide, as are "ammonia-ready" vessels. Suitable supply infrastructure is required so that these new types of ship can call reliably at the port. A thorough risk analysis and detailed safety concept were prepared for this purpose in cooperation with RWE Supply & Trading and other local partners. Authorisations for safe bunkering have now been granted.

"By expanding the bunkering options to include LNG and methanol, we have our sights set on sustainable energy supply for shipping", says Jens Meier, CEO of the HPA. "It ensures that the Port of Hamburg remains competitive and will continue to take responsibility for global climate protection."



# Port News

## New target depths in the Elbe fairway

Container ships with a greater draught will again be able to call at the Port of Hamburg from 23 September.



After a little less than three years of restrictions, the Directorate-General of the Federal Waterways and Shipping Administration has increased the navigable depth in the tidal Elbe by up to 50 centimetres. For incoming container ships, the draught will initially rise by up to 40 centimetres, and by up to 50 centimetres for outgoing tide-dependent vessels. Large bulk carriers with a length exceeding 330 metres also benefit from an added 30 to 50 centimetres in draught, depending on the direction of travel and the size of the ship.

What is more, the maximum Elbe draughts will continue to be adjusted to the already approved levels.

## Pronounced increase in container throughput

The Port of Hamburg recorded strong growth in the first half of 2025: Container throughput rose by 9.3 percent to 4.2 million TEU and contributed significantly to the increase in seaborne cargo throughput to 57.8 million tonnes (+3.6 percent). The markets in the Far East and the Baltic Sea region experienced particularly vigorous growth, while the uptick in transshipment traffic was almost 24 percent.

Container hinterland transport also continued its positive trend (+2.2 percent to 2.6 million TEU). By contrast, there was a slight dip in bulk and general cargo throughput. With more calls by large container ships and new liner services, the port continued to strengthen its position as an international hub.

“Hamburg has carved back its market share in competition and is sending important signals for the port’s viability going forward”, emphasised Axel Mattern, CEO of Port of Hamburg Marketing.



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