



*By David Fickling (February 2020)*

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The Kiel Canal runs between Brunsbüttel at the mouth of the Elbe to Kiel-Holtenau on the Baltic. It is a freshwater canal, stretching for 98km and capable of carrying very large vessels up to 9.5m draft and 32.5m breadth. The air draft is limited to 40m. There are sea locks at each end of the canal. In addition to its entrances at Brunsbüttel and Kiel, the canal is also linked via the Gieselau Kanal to the river Eider, which enters the North Sea at Tönning. The canal is a very important commercial waterway, having around 30,000 ship transits per year with 80 to 100 million tonnes of cargo transported. There are also some 12,000 pleasure craft transits each year.

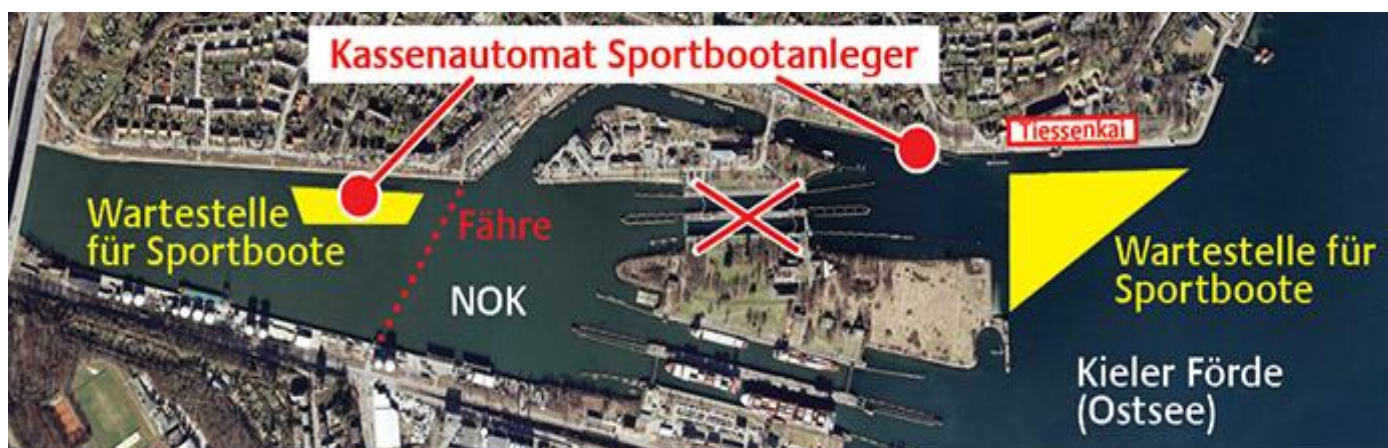
## Fees

Pleasure craft must pay a fee to use the Kiel Canal. In 2025 the cost was about €1.50 per metre of boat length for a single transit. The fee is best paid online (see below). Note that fees cannot be paid inside the locks and it is in fact forbidden to climb the ladders out of the lock chamber except in an emergency.

A vessel entering the canal at Brunsbüttel may make the transit west-east and only pay just before leaving at Kiel-Holtenau. Fees can be paid in the following ways:

1. Online at the WSV webshop: [https://www.wsv-webshop.de/en/? from store=de](https://www.wsv-webshop.de/en/?from_store=de)
2. In Kiel at the Port Warden's office at the Tiessenkai Kiel-Holtenau
3. At two automatic pay stations near the locks in Kiel-Holtenau:
  - i. at the recreational craft berth west of Tiessenkai
  - ii. near the inner waiting area at Kiel-Holtenau on the north side of the canal (at the floating landing stages)
4. At the Gieselau lock at the lock master's office during locking hours
5. Occasionally, in Brunsbüttel at the sports boat berth inside the canal, at the inspector's office (if he is on site)

The position of the automatic pay stations at Kiel-Holtenau is shown below:



The machines have a menu which guides you through the payment process in German or English. If necessary, you can reach the lock control centre via an intercom system. Payment is accepted with coins and banknotes (Euro) as well as with EC and credit cards. The machine will issue a receipt, which serves as proof of payment and acts as your transit document – don't lose it.

## Waiting places

### Brunsbüttel

There are designated waiting areas for pleasure boats at Brunsbüttel (both inside and outside the locks) as shown in the image below. These are found within the canal on the south side, between the ferry and small locks. On the outside, boats must wait in the River Elbe off mole 1 on the south side before the locks. Do not wait in the entrance areas or entrance basins. The waiting places are under video surveillance so the lock operator will see that vessels are waiting.



### Kiel

Recreational craft waiting areas exist at Kiel Lock. Within Kiel Canal on the north side (recreational craft landing stages) before the ferry, is a pontoon with space for perhaps 2 or 3 boats. Another lies on the outside in Kieler Förde, near Tiessenkai (see picture in previous section).

## Entering the locks

Do not linger in front of the locks – use the waiting places provided. Commercial vessels will always go in first; however pleasure craft may be required to exit first. Entry of pleasure boats into the locks is permitted only when a single, occulting white light is displayed on the signal mast at the lock island or central wall of the lock (no red or green); any other signal means keep out.

Listen carefully to the working VHF channel for the lock. The lock operator will explain the lock situation and provide information about the next lockage. Note that if you wait in the approved area you will almost certainly have been seen on video and calling the busy lock operators on VHF is not just unnecessary but may well annoy them. If you need to speak to the lock keeper, always indicate your position ('in' or 'outside' the canal).

### Brunsbüttel

Pleasure craft will almost always be directed to the smaller, easterly lock chambers. A single, occulting white light on the lock signal mast will indicate which chamber to enter.

Brunsbüttel lock tel: +49 (0)4852 885 252

VHF Channel 13 –“Kiel Canal Eins”

### Kiel

Only the large lock is operating at time of writing.

Lock keepers may operate the lock for pleasure boats only if there are a number of boats waiting.

Kiel lock tel: +49 (0)431 3603 152

VHF Channel 12 – “Kiel Canal Vier”

## In the locks

Pleasure craft tie to floating pontoons inside the lock marked by ‘Sportboot’ signs on the lock walls. The mooring points are rings only, no bollards. **Take great care when stepping onto the pontoons – they can be extremely slippery.** The pontoons are very low, probably no more than 20 cm above the water, and fenders must be positioned accordingly.

It is forbidden to climb the ladders out of the lock chambers except in an emergency.

Smoking and naked flames are prohibited inside the lock chambers.

Unusually, pleasure craft normally leave the locks before commercial vessels and are expected to prepare themselves to make a prompt exit.

## Navigating in the canal

Vessels are expected to keep to the right. However, in certain sections a minimum distance from the side must be maintained (there are safe distance signs on the relevant sections of the waterway). The speed limit is 12.0 kms/hr (speed over ground!) and the use of self-steering devices is prohibited in the canal.

## Passing places (sidings)

At times the canal may not be wide enough for two large ships to pass each other, in which case one of them will pull into a passing place or ‘siding’. Recreational craft travelling behind the waiting ship may then also have to wait until the parked vessel is able to proceed before following. Keep a lookout for signals from the stopped commercial indicating they wish waiting pleasure craft to carry on ahead.

## Operating at night and in restricted visibility

Pleasure craft may only navigate within the canal during daylight hours. In practice, during the summer months, this may mean as early as 03.30 and as late as 22.00. Additionally, pleasure boats may not travel through the canal in restricted visibility. If restricted visibility is suddenly encountered, pleasure craft may moor at a suitable site on the stretch of canal if they would endanger the safety of traffic by continuing to the next siding (passing bay). In the sidings, vessels must moor behind the dolphins on the dolphins’ mooring rings. If in doubt, call the canal control for advice.

## Sailing in the canal

Sailing is forbidden; however yachts may raise their sails provided that the engine is running at all times. Yachts which are travelling in this manner should display a black cone, point downwards, in the forward part of the ship.

## Towing in the canal

One pleasure craft may tow another which has a maximum length of 15m and provided that the speed of the convoy is at least 9 kms/hr.

## Ferries

There are numerous ferry crossings. The typical ferry is powered by a Voith-Schneider thruster and they are quick and highly manoeuvrable. Pleasure craft should keep a good lookout and avoid impeding them.

## VHF Channels

Brunsbüttel lock – Ch 13 – callsign “Kiel Canal Eins”

Brunsbüttel to Breiholz – Ch 2 – callsign “Kiel Canal Zwei “

Breiholz to Kiel-Holtenau – Ch 3 - callsign “Kiel Canal Drei“

Kiel-Holtenau Lock – Ch 12 - callsign “Kiel Canal Vier“

## AIS

AIS is mandatory for pleasure boats over 20m in length. It is possible to rent an AIS unit at the locks if necessary.

## Mooring Places in the Canal

Recreational craft may only moor at the following places:

1. **Brunsbüttel recreation craft berth – north side (Km 1.8), behind the fender piles**
2. **Berth in the turning area of Dückerwisch siding – north side (Km 20.7), max. draft 2.40m**
3. **Berth before Gieselau lock – (entrance Km 40.5), max. draft 2.4m**
4. **Berths in Lake Obereider with narrows (entrance at Km 6)**
5. **Berth in Lake Borgstedt (entrance at Km 67.5)**
6. **Berths in Lake Borgstedt (entrance at Km 70)**
7. **Recreation craft roadstead in Lake Flemhude (entrance at Km 85.4)**
8. **Kiel-Holtenau (Km 98.5), east of the lock**

**Note: numbers 2, 3 and 7 berths may be used for one night only.**

## Signals in the canal

SIGNAL	MEANING	WHERE DISPLAYED
One quick flashing red light	No entry into the siding area	On the signal masts at the entrances to the sidings
Three occulting red lights positioned above each other	No exit from the sidings for all vessels	On the signal masts in the sidings
Two isophase white lights	No exit from the sidings for category 1 and 2 vessels with a speed of less than 15 kms/hr	On the last (in the direction of travel) signal mast in the siding
Two fixed red lights positioned side by side	All vessels are prohibited from proceeding in Brunsbüttel inland port	On the signal masts of the oil terminal located on the north side

**Of the above, the three reds are the signal which is of most significance to pleasure craft.**



## Pilotage

Recreational craft will not normally be required to take a pilot. However, vessels with a draft exceeding 3.1m are subject to mandatory pilotage. Multi-hulled vessels used for recreational purposes are exempt from the mandatory pilotage requirement up to a total width of 12.0m and a total length of 20.0m.

## Further Information

If in doubt or in difficulties, use the VHF and call canal control. They speak English and will do their best to help.

### Guidance for Operators of Recreational Craft in Kiel Canal:

[https://www.gdws.wsv.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/NOK\\_Befahrungsabgaben/Flyer/PDF\\_Merkbl\\_Spobo\\_eng.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=12](https://www.gdws.wsv.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/NOK_Befahrungsabgaben/Flyer/PDF_Merkbl_Spobo_eng.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=12)

### Notes on payment of fees:

[https://www.wsa-nord-ostsee-kanal.wsv.de/Webs/WSA/WSA-Nord-Ostsee-Kanal/DE/6\\_Presse/3\\_Publikationen/040\\_Sportboot-Inkasso/Flyer\\_PDF\\_Spbo\\_eng.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=10](https://www.wsa-nord-ostsee-kanal.wsv.de/Webs/WSA/WSA-Nord-Ostsee-Kanal/DE/6_Presse/3_Publikationen/040_Sportboot-Inkasso/Flyer_PDF_Spbo_eng.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=10)

### CA Guide to Cruising in Baltic Germany:

Available as a free download to CA members at <https://www.theca.org.uk/system/files/Cruising%20in%20Baltic%20Germany%202025.pdf>. See pages 45 - 48 for guidance on moorings and facilities in the canal.

### Video presentation on the Kiel Canal:

A presentation by CA member Nicholas Hill on using the Kiel Canal to reach the Baltic. See [https://www.theca.org.uk/cruising\\_info/videos](https://www.theca.org.uk/cruising_info/videos).

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