

5th Report: Natal

Part B $05^{\circ}46'S$ $35^{\circ}12'W$

Algeciras

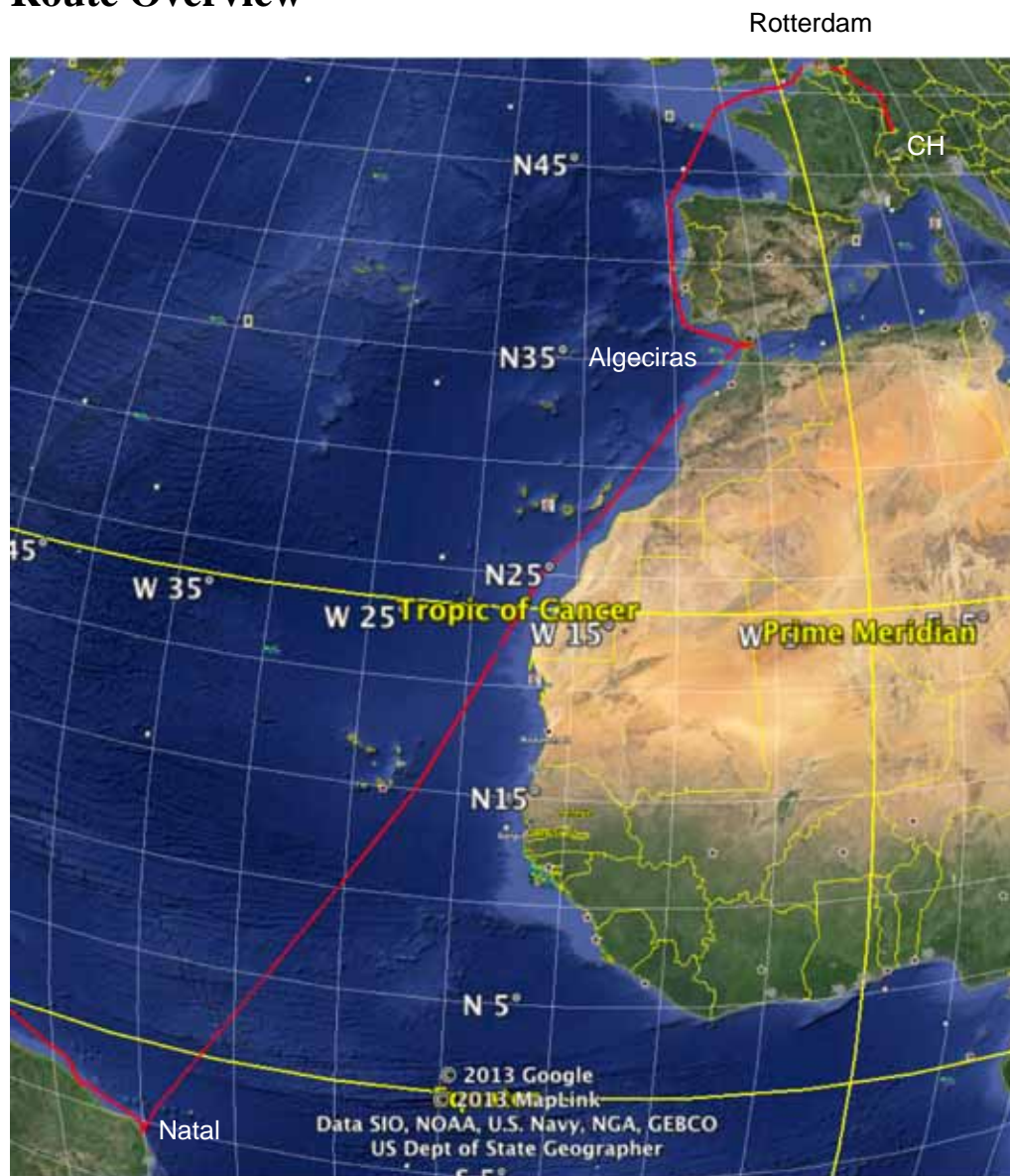
$36^{\circ}7'N$ $05^{\circ}25'W$

Rotterdam and Untersiggenthal

$51^{\circ}53'N$ $04^{\circ}23'W$

Oktober 29 to November 10, 2013

Route Overview



The bridge is where we stay for hours every day.



We enjoy the view, look for ships, discuss with the crew on duty the instruments, navigational methods and weather reports, we inquire about their background and their families, exchange our own sailing experiences, spoil them with chocolate and receive their thanks in the form of ready information and good coffee.

The crew are Rumanians and Filipinos. Both groups eat together, the Rumanians in the officers' mess, where we join them for meals, the Filipinos in the crew's mess, although the second and the two third officers are Filipinos. This arrangement makes sense, especially for

the young crew - the youngest is only eighteen years old - they may talk with each other unceremoniously and that way feel less lonely. All of them are away from home for nine months; many have a wife and children.

Three men are on watch duty for four hours, an officer, an able seaman and a cadet. First watch begins at midnight.

When we climb the stairs to the bridge at night and open the door, the light in the staircase goes out automatically, so that the darkness in the wheelhouse remains intact. It takes some time until our eyes get used to it and we can make out shapes and spaces. Slowly the faint lights of the instruments become clear and we move about in the dark as easily as the crew.



The room where light is necessary to mark the position on the paper charts and to read the weather fax and safety reports is closed off by heavy curtains during the night. Life on board has become routine. We are used to the whirring of the air conditioning, the subtle vibration of the ship and the far-away drone of the engines. Even the occasional faint whiffs of diesel do no longer bother us.



Three times a day we descend the four stairs down to the B-deck to eat and back, each stair has thirteen steps.

Once in a while we skip a meal; we eat far too much and hardly exercise.

Climbing those stairs is in no way enough to burn the accumulated calories effectively.

The steward serves fish or meat with vegetables, rice, pasta or potatoes twice a day. The mid-day meal includes soup and both main meals are followed by a dessert. Salad, cheese and an additional side dish are always on the table.

Wine has been served for the last few days.

We have no idea who initiated the new habit.

The steward is very attentive. He pours our water and wine and serves us promptly. He also cleans our cabin every day, he vacuums, dusts and cleans the toilet and shower, the full monty. He provides orange juice for our Campari in the small glasses and the milk for my Kefir production. We feel totally spoiled. So far the weather has been nice, sunshine and calm sea; there was a little rain once or twice.

We take the small deck chairs now and then and read in the sun.



Alex also goes for a swim. The pool is filled with sea water when the swell is light. The chief engineer occasionally passes our cabin window in bathing trunks on his way to the pool.

On **Wednesday, October 30** we observe gannets again. With attentiveness and practice one could probably recognize individuals. The shape of their wings and bodies are quite different.



Later on we believe to see boobies, another kind of gannet, but there are no good pictures of them.



One of the crew takes our picture exactly over the equator.



The camera's GPS confirms the position: at 7:35 P.M. UTC we are at 0°0.1'S 41°32.4'W.

The sunsets are very different every evening and the sky is covered with the most magnificent cloud pictures.



Friday, November 1. Important announcement: tonight barbecue party on the upper deck astern at 6 P.M. We are excited.

Cook and steward (from right to left) have prepared a vast amount of dishes, fish, meat, mussels and shrimp for the grill and various side dishes, even a very small pig in sauce.



The grill and two tables stand between the huge capstans and the massive coils of cables at the very stern of the ship. The rush of the water and the drone of the engines are quite deafening. But all the noise cannot dampen the high spirits. Everybody delights in the abundant food, the beer we offered and our effort to catch each and everyone with the camera.



The captain is younger than our sons, wonderfully down-to-earth, yet most conscientious. We are impressed with the way he presides over crew and ship. Without conceit about his rank he is firm, discreet but friendly with every crew member. If he is not wearing a white shirt or a dark blue sweater with the epaulettes of his rank and long trousers when the pilot is on board, his appearance makes us smile.

That's the way we usually see him, straddle-legged, with long baggy pants and a long t-shirt; the beer bottle is only at the party in his hand.

He is talking to an able seaman.

The man was our table mate in the officers' mess. He is a captain, but is now working on various ships as safety instructor. He is Croatian.



The two officers, the 2nd and one of the third (from left to right) answered our many questions patiently on the bridge.



the first officer speaks excellent French. He is responsible for the cargo, the safety on board and the general administration of the ship. We enjoy talking to him. He lives in St. Malo with his wife if he is not at sea. The crew is eager to take group pictures with us among them. We take

part in the hustle and bustle with lots of fun.

Although we only see the deckhands in the harbor or during our occasional walks on the upper deck, they are eager to have us in their pictures and giggle over us abundantly.



The bulkiest of the crew is the chief engineer. We see him at meals or when he goes for a swim. We hardly ever talk to him. His English is probably limited and so he keeps apart.



The reefer engineer (he is in charge of the refrigerated containers on board) is usually very quiet, almost shy, but at the party he talks about his country with enthusiasm and I decide to read about Rumania. We know very little of it.

On our way to Turkey (honeymoon 1966!) we visited a few towns and only remember some places, that's all. What he tells us about his language is new to me and I am not sure whether his knowledge is accurate. I will read about it and look forward to fast internet links and access to relevant authorities back in Switzerland.

The atmosphere on the ship is reflected in all the pictures we have of the crew. They are a funny team, amiable and attentive, they laugh a lot and when we bring chocolate they are careful that everyone gets his share.

We will remember this evening for a long time. We learned so much about the seamen's life at sea and exchanged our own experiences on the water.



Since we are cruising in the vicinity of the Canary Islands - Fuerteventura and the African coast are visible on the chart - we see a freighter or tanker once in a while.



Before there was only water and sky for day on end. Although we enjoy both, wide expanses of water and sky and we were never bored, we feel closer to civilization.

The crane on this cargo almost looks like a small jet plane!



We were told that the Maersk Line is the largest shipping company. They have their own facilities in a number of ports.

Enlightening discussions arise on the bridge time and again.

We wonder what this cargo has on board.



The freight is in the hold and completely covered.

This is another monster we pass. It is part of an oil platform on its way to Nigeria, according to the AIS information. There is no information about where it comes from.



A tugger has it in tow on a cable of an estimated 200m to 300m.



We even came across a few sailboats. Our helmsman gave way to one of them without even inquiring about its intention, simply to be on the safe side. We were impressed. Alex marks down a few MMSI numbers. We will find out who they are when back in our little apartment in the Aargau.

On **Tuesday, November 5**, we visit the engine room. The engineer hands us ear protectors; the noise down there is deafening to the point of painful without those mufflers. I have to sitffle a laugh when Alex aims at me with the camera and look a bit funny.



We climb down into the depth of the ship. What a place! On four levels the collected intestines of the monster are roaring and vibrating:
The golden engine with its seven cylinders . . .

. . . the three blue generators . . .



. . . and the hydraulic pistons of the head of the rudder.

When the engineer explains something, we have to watch his lips with concentrated attention to be able to understand. Thanks goodness he gave us a first introduction in the control room. So, we know pretty well what he is showing us.



The control room is highly insulated and the silence inside is quite spooky with all the racket outside. We marvel at the complexity of the installations. Nobody keeps watch during the night. The cabins of the engineers are equipped with an elaborate alarm system. And one of them is on call duty.

Alex asks about the size of the cylinders. The engineer takes him down two more stories and shows him the spare cylinder. They have a diameter of 60cm! I must remain behind, because I wear sandals without socks and hot oil might drip on my feet and burn them; imperative safety measures.



We miss the sunset in the evening. The sky consoles us with a quirky cloud picture. The narrow crescent of the waxing moon and venus are already high up in the darkening blue of the evening sky. The quick eye can just make them out in the picture.

The foamy wake flow marks our passage with a white trail on the water.



After seven days and eight nights of water, sky and the lonely *Platon* we reach the strait of Gibraltar.

We cannot go to bed, the approach to the bay of Gibraltar at night is far too exciting. A series of ships are around us going in both directions. The ship's position on the chart entered every hour by the third officer allow us to recognize the Moroccan cities on the coast in their blazing lights. We visited a number of them in 2011 on our round trip through a part of Morocco by car, leaving *Silmaril* in the marina of Salé. They remind us of past joyful experiences and with pleasure we recall special events.

On **Wednesday, November 6** we are moored on the pier in the harbor of Algeciras around 3 a.m. The pilot has given his advice to the captain to maneuver the *Platon* into a gap between two ships that looked far too narrow to our eyes.



In the morning we realize that the distance between our stern and the bow of the ship behind measures indeed only a few meters.

The day shift takes over the stowage aboard the *Platon*. The men look like ants that climb the slender ladder from our vantage point in front of our cabin.



The loading cranes run along the edge of the pier on rails. Two of them are at the *Platon's* disposal and work simultaneously, one in front of the bridge and one behind. The blue construction in the picture is the "foot" of one of them.

We observe the labor of unloading and loading with amazement.

Special vehicles, container transporters move the containers to and from the ship. What is unloaded is deposited in a kind of forecourt in front of the extensive storage space, where the containers are stacked in rows.



There the storage cranes pick them up and bring them to their designated places to be available for further transport by ship or truck.

The container transporters get the containers to be loaded in the forecourt and deposit them in front of the loading cranes. They work with different frames, yellow in the picture below.



There are frames for the large and the small containers, both of standard size, and there are frames for the cylindrical containers for liquids and those for special freight like cars or large spare parts of all kinds.

The crane operator sits in a small cabin directly above the frame and below the crane trolley, so he can see exactly where the load has to be set down.

A siren is sounded whenever a crane is moving. There are dozens at work and the entire harbor is blaring continuously. Our cabin is well insulated thank goodness and we sleep despite the racket for a few hours.

At 8 a.m. next morning we are up; we would like to go to town. But the first officer cannot allow us shore leave. The *Platon* is supposed to leave around 11 a.m.

However, the pilot comes aboard only by 3 p.m. Nobody can accurately predict when a ship is actually going to leave. Passengers and crew must be on board two hours before departure according to regulations. So, we continue to watch the activities around us.

The ship in front of the *Platon* is leaving with the help of two tuggers; the next ship for the space is already close.

The tugger is ready to assist.



Maybe this ship does not have bow and stern thrusters. The *Platon* did not need any help for the maneuver; she is equipped with them.



This monster owned by Maersk Line is the largest container ship. It has a capacity of over 18000 containers!! The crew discuss its size and compare it to the largest ship of CMA CGM, the *Marco Polo*, which is slightly smaller!

Across the bay "The Rock" rises out of the water. We think of the hike with Jacqueline and Godi while we were in La Linea in June 2011. Where are they now? We keep in touch with many of our sailing friends by e-mail. Their number has become quite large during our trips.



Time and energy are not sufficient to always know of all of them where they are. But we enjoy recalling mutual experiences and taking the opportunity to renew the contact.

We finally leave around 3 p.m.



As the ship moves away from the pier, dozens of fish gather in the gap and swim circles in great agitation. What could be the reason?

The pilot leaves shortly after our departure. There is no wind and only few ships are anchored in the bay; the pilot trusts the captain to find his path safely.

We are on the last leg of our trip to Rotterdam.

The light house of Tarifa is abeam soon. We have fond memories of this place. A Swiss lady runs a business here for the protection of whales and dolphins that abound in these waters between April and August. We saw a great number of dolphins from aboard one of her boats in June 2011 and learned a lot about the danger the many passing freighters cause for the animals.



In the night to **Thursday, November 7** we pass the southwest tip of Portugal, the cape of São Vicente, and take a northward course along the Portuguese coast. the weather is still unbelievably calm. Since we came on board there was only little wind, almost no waves.



Now it is perceptibly cooler, but still no wind.

Tonight the weather is supposed to change; strong winds and tall swell are predicted. We are curious how the *Platon* will react. So far she moved but gently. The sky is a bit cloudy at the moment, but the water very calm. Holes in the cloud cover reveal a wonderful scale of shades of blue.

A few sailboats are in sight, all of them heading south. They might be on their way to the Canary Islands where the ARC rallye will start at the end of November from Las Palmas.



Slowly the weather is changing. The clouds sail faster in the sky, the horizon is shrouded in the hazy nightfall, the ships pass disappearing into dense fog.

Friday, November 8. During the night we notice that the ship is rolling considerably. Time and again a bang shakes the hull. At midnight we pass Finisterre at the northwestern tip of Spain, the Bay of Biscay lies ahead of us.

In the morning the crew on watch inquires about our stomachs. Any problem? No, we have no problem. One of the crew looks a bit shaken. Despite his many years at sea he fights seasickness in such weather. We stay on the bridge and watch the spectacle. Squalls create gusts of high wind with abundant rainfall. Visibility is drastically reduced. Heavy swell adds to the raging of the dismal weather around us.



The *Platon* rolls and pitches with a vengeance.

Close to us on our starboard side there are two ships. We overtake them slowly. Suddenly one of them veers to port and heads directly into our route. He is still about six miles ahead of us, but in front of our bow. The second officer calls him on the radio and asks about his intention. It takes time for the Russian to answer: he has problems with the cargo, the ship rolls alarmingly, it probably ships water on deck. The captain is called and decides in a twinkling a generous change of tack to starboard in order to give the Russian ample leeway for his maneuver.

It is curious that the Russian never called us and warned the bridge about his radical change of course. He indeed had the right of way, but a call from him would have been in order for security's sake. The watch really has to be attentive non-stop and constantly observe the vicinity of the ship with the binoculars and the radar screen. Are we ever bored on the water? People ask us often what we are doing when nothing but water and sky is around us. On the *Platon* now there is so much to learn, to observe, to exchange and to look up. The library on the bridge is well stocked with highly interesting books. Especially the ones on the weather contain wonderful pictures and explanations to various appearances of the sky and the water. We are keen on comparing our own experiences with these informations. That helps us to translate what we see in the sky and on the water into weather conditions, wind speed and wave height.

When we are not involved in discussions, writing, reading, eating or sleeping we watch the scene outside.

Sunsets are always fascinating. Not one is the same as the next. Each one is unique.



In few moments tableau follows tableau in the most intense forms and colors.



Soon the spooky view disappears, night falls. On *Silmaril* the daily routine on the water is a bit different of course. We keep watch and do household chores ourselves. But nature fascinates us just the same. On land there is always something to repair, to polish, to clean, to replace, to renew.

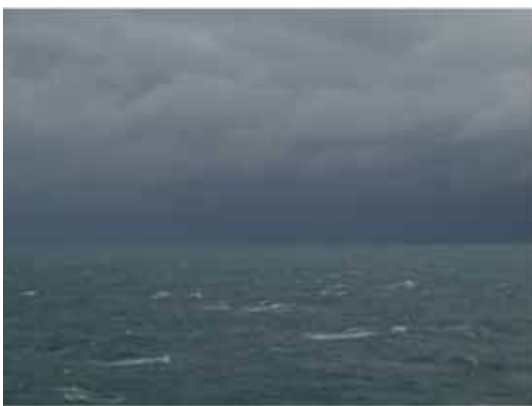
And we socialize, of course. We meet interesting people wherever we are and spend time with them. No, we are never bored.

Saturday, November 9. This is our last day on board the *Platon*.



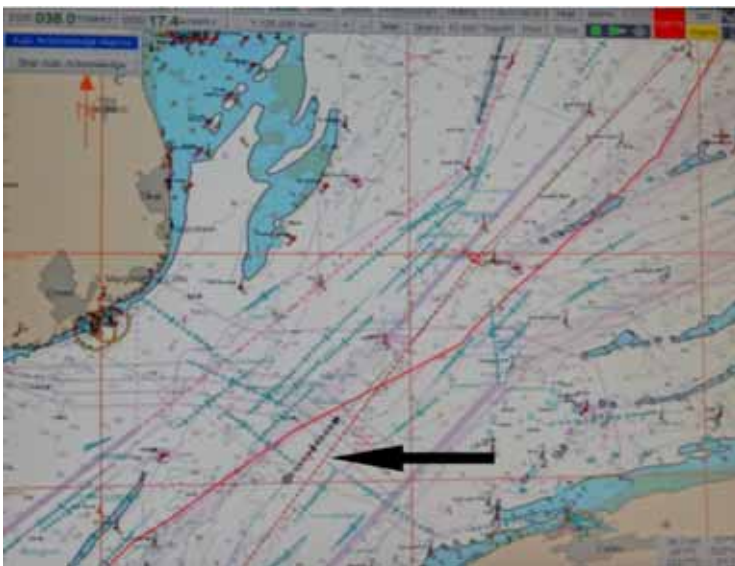
Shortly before breakfast the sun gets up. We simply cannot forego this performance. The sky is aglow. We navigate approximately between Le Havre and Brighton in the English Channel. The weather is still clement, but clouds are gathering in the East, forerunners of stronger wind.

The sun is up, but soon disappears in the dark clouds.



The day is grey and wet and *Platon*, gently rocking at her average of 17kts to 20kts its, moves toward Rotterdam.

The wind has increased, "white horses" appear fast and everything disappears in torrential sheets rain as we pass the strait of Dover. There is lots of traffic. Ships and ferries cross the Channel between Dover and Calais, others veer to port on their way to England's east coast.



The crew on the bridge observe the radar screen and the water with the binoculars with great attention. The turquoise lines are all ships, the black one is us.

We pack our stuff in order to be able to experience the approach to the harbor of Rotterdam on the bridge.

The pilot comes on board far outside the harbor and

remains on the bridge for over three hours before the *Platon* reaches the pier. We pass innumerable buoys, quadrants, leading lights, and light houses on our way into the river Maas, each flashing its particular code among the myriad lights of the harbor facilities stretching out around us for dozens of kilometers.

And the traffic on the waterway is heavy. Ships of all sizes cross us or follow closely behind us. The deep silence on the bridge is interrupted only by the brief instructions of the pilot and the acknowledgment of the helmsman, an awe-inspiring atmosphere. Alex and I follow our course on the iPad and try to identify every buoy and interpret its message. We spend very little time outside, it is very cold and rain is falling time and again.

Around 9:30 p.m. we enter a narrow waterway. At an intersection, the *Platon* must be turned 100° in order to back into its assigned space on the pier. The available space is extremely tight. Captain and pilot are outside and maneuver the ship from the controls on the flying bridge. The captain operates the thrusters with small joysticks. Once in a while the engine is engaged, when backward movement is called for or too much speed must be checked.

For great tension and admiration I almost forget how miserably cold I am.

Shortly after 10 p.m. we are securely moored and I crawl into bed, half frozen.

Alex serves a drink, we watch a movie on the MacBook and finally fall asleep for the last time on the *Platon*. The night is very quiet, no vibration or movement, only the distant swoosh of the generators and the ventilation.

Sunday, November 10. We get up at 6:30 a.m. and pack the rest of our stuff.

Breakfast at 7 a.m. The kitchen is out of eggs! Well, we hardly ever had a cooked meal for breakfast. The captain appears, sleepy-faced and awkwardly clothed, to say goodbye. We are touched by so much attention. He usually sleeps until 9 a.m. after a late night on the bridge.

The steward and the cook help with the terribly heavy luggage. The gangway ends far above the pier; the tide has raised the ship. However, with a mutual effort we manage the descent. The taxi is already waiting. The driver knows his way around. He takes us around mountains of containers,, along huge buildings and miles of fences to the exit of the harbor.

Suddenly I remember that Alex put the tracker behind the curtain in our cabin for better reception. Yes, we left it there. The driver turns about and are allowed to reenter the harbor area without any fuss. Alex climbs the gangway and returns shortly. The steward had already found the little thing and handed it over grinning.

We are on our way again to the customs office where we receive the clearance stamp and continue to the railway station.

Here ends the cargo adventure. We enjoyed every minute of the trip and would travel like that any time again.

We have enough time to reach the train leaving at 9:04 a.m., but the lady at the Counter is complicated, ill- disposed and nervous. She cannot find the train we propose on her computer. She finally is convinced that the train exists and disdainfully offers a route with three changes of train from Rotterdam to Basel!

Just in time we receive the tickets and can even get to the platform without running. The trainride is delightful. The rain has stopped, but its traces are omnipresent. The blue sky is reflected in canals, puddles and flooded fields. Swans, herons, seagulls, coots and ducks swim on the water everywhere. Vast arrows of geese fly far overhead. Sheep, cows and horses graze in the pastures. There are almost no fences, a network of dikes resembling an irregular checkerboard encloses the pastures. Small bridges with gates allow access, but keep the animals in.

We change train in Amersfoort, Frankfurt and Basel, where we arrive in time to eat a "rösti" in the brasserie before we board the train to Frick. The bus is waiting and sure enough, our old acquaintance, Franz Leuppi, is driving and gives us a warm welcome home.

Our car in the rented garage of the Rebstock in Effingen starts without trouble and in a short time we reach the Zelglistrasse in Untersiggenthal and hug Edith with great pleasure.

She has decorated "our" door with a lovely wreath.

Nino, Connie and Lynn pay a short visit. They bring six eggs that Sperber and Tüpfli, Lynn's hens, have laid. We already feel totally at home.

