

Fluid logistics for non-hazardous liquids

Maaskade Bevrachters



Photo courtesy of Jean-Louis Vandevoorde.

For the transport of non-hazardous liquids by inland navigation, Maaskade Bevrachters has established itself as a major player on the European scene. The Dutch group now offers more than sixty years of experience in this field and continues to grow its business by pursuing a step-by-step diversification, without losing sight of its main focus area. The branch office in Ghent plays an important role in this story.



The fleet of Maaskade consists of close to seventy double-hulled barges that ply the European waterways.

Maaskade Bevrachters is a key operator in the specialised markets in which it is active. These markets range from vegetable and edible oils and fats to liquid feeds for cattle and molasses as an ingredient for foodstuffs or a raw material for the fermentation industry, but also encompass very specific flows like chalk or kaolin slurry for paper manufacturing, water solutions, and even glues and silicones. "If it is liquid and non-hazardous or has been dissolved in water, we can carry it", Maaskade says about itself.

The group caters to these niche markets by offering its more than 250 customers – globally operating traders, producers, and end-users of the goods carried by the ships – storage, handling, transport, and supporting services that can be combined into integrated and, if need be, dedicated logistic

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solutions that fit their supply chain. The standards that Maaskade has to meet as a link in that chain, e.g. to avoid contamination between cargoes, can be very high. Especially for everything which has to do with human consumption, certified quality management and traceability 'from farm to fork' has become very demanding.



Photo courtesy of Maaskant Bevrachters.

Maaskade barges regularly call at North Sea Port.

Dedicated barges

Maaskade runs a fleet of close to seventy inland vessels. “We do not own the barges, though we occasionally participate as a minority partner in the investment for the building of new vessels. At least one or two newbuilds enter our fleet each year. Last year we even had four new tankers constructed for the transportation of edible oils. The aim then is always to sell our share in that new tonnage after a while. Even when we took over barge operators, we always ‘privatised’ the vessels by selling them to individual captains. But the skippers usually work for us on a dedicated basis and we guarantee them an employment that ensures they can make a proper living and run their ships profitably”, explains Managing Partner Gino Verhoene. All barges, many of which bear the name of a Rotterdam neighbourhood, are double-hulled and equipped with stainless steel or coated tanks that very often can be heated if their cargo requires this. Their loading capacity varies between 400 and 3,200t, with an average of about 1,500t. All together, they transport about 4t million of cargo each year. Edible products make out about three quarters of the total volume shipped by the company, but some of the barges engage in traffics that can be very peculiar. One of the smallest vessels in the fleet, the IJsselmonde (430t), is active in the port of Amsterdam for the evacuation of the human refuse generated by the passengers of the many sea cruises that call at the port in normal times. A very dedicated trade indeed. The barges ply the waters ‘from Amsterdam to Basel, and from



Photo courtesy of Jean-Louis Vandevoorde.

Filip Poppe, Commercial Manager, Gino Verhoene, Managing Partner, and Bruno Vanlooy, Manager, with the skyline of North Sea Port in the background.

Hamburg to Budapest’, Maaskade states on its website. For a company that has Rotterdam as its home port, the Rhine is understandably the dominant axis, with the Netherlands and Germany as main sailing areas. Belgium comes in third, with a share of about 8%.

Ghent

Maaskade Bevrachters Belgium opened its offices in Ghent in 1999. “The presence of important customers in and around

“ Not all clients make use of all the services we offer. But we are able to deliver the full package.

the port area was an important factor in this decision. Back then, our fleet was still relatively small, but we could offer them modern tonnage and a competitive service. It helped us to gain a strong foothold in this sector”, Mr Verhoene recalls. He was present at the start of the Belgian branch and still is the managing director of Maaskade Bevrachters Belgium, but he will retire at the end of this year.

The Ghent office soon became one of the engines in the group’s growth. The reach of Ghent now extends to the Dutch part of North Sea Port to important centres like Antwerp and to the North of France. The Ghent branch also ventured into new markets with the incorporation of Mariliq for the transport of special products in 2006 and Navonus Agency and Cargo Survey in 2011, and with the takeover of Agrominne, a vested player in dry cargo, in 2008. “Dry cargo is not our main line of business, but it demonstrates the operational and commercial flexibility of Maaskade”, Bruno Vanlooy, who is in charge of this department, underlines. “We have clients who take in dry bulk like linseed to produce oil that we take out with our tankers. AgroMinne can deliver the raw material with dry cargo vessels. And the volumes are far from negligible: with Agrominne, we are talking about some 2t million per year.”

“The same goes for Navonus, which performs agency services for seagoing ships and cargo surveys”, adds Filip Poppe, Commercial Manager at Maaskade Bevrachters Belgium. “Not all clients make use of these services, but some do. We are able to deliver the full package. Having separate subsidiaries for each specific business clarifies things, if only because not everything can be done under the same licences and certificates.”

Partners in business

Helped by its external expansion (see box) and ‘the most modern fleet in Europe’, Maaskade saw its approach rewarded with strong growth. “Over the past twenty years we grew by 10% a year on average”, Mr Verhoene claims. The COVID-19 pandemic did not halt the surge. “Even in corona times we kept climbing higher. Products like AdBlue, which is used in new generations of diesel engines to achieve emission standards but is basically a fertiliser, have been in high demand, for instance.” Part of the success of Maaskade lies with its human touch, Mr Verhoene underlines. “In every unit we have managers that also are partners in the business. It provides us with stability, while motivating our people who have their say in how the company is run and what course it sets out. Furthermore, many of our collaborators once were engaged in inland navigation themselves or are the sons and daughters of skippers.”

Mr Verhoene and Mr Vanlooy are no exception to the rule. In earlier days, Mr Verhoene shuttled with a small tanker to and from Dunkirk. Mr Vanlooy used to be at the helm of a pushing convoy with which he operated on the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal and on the Meuse to bring cokes to steel plants. But in some way, they never stopped steering barges.



Photo courtesy of Jean-Louis Vandevoorde.

Step by step diversification

The story of Maaskade Bevrachters is one of a steady diversification into new – but connected – fields of activity, both in terms of products and services, while remaining faithful to a specialisation in very specific trades.

Maaskade started out in 1961 with a focus on the transportation of molasses and vinasse. Sixty years later, the group describes itself as ‘a leading transport partner in the vegetable and edible oil market, fermentation and livestock feed industries, the paper industry, and dedicated products’. As Mr Verhoene puts it, “we started out small, but we are now big in our niches”.

In the early 1990s, when Maaskade Bevrachters was coined as the new name, the managed fleet was still limited to seven molasses barges, but the very first newly constructed barge was ordered. In 1996, the takeover of operator Kruysifix marked the entry into the vegetable and edible oil market. Apart from the expansion in Belgium (see main story), other acquisitions and incorporations would follow, with further expansions of the fleet: Tankes (molasses tanker barges) in 2002, WAV (Water Afval Verwerking) in 2014 for the collection, transport, and delivery of grey waste water, and the transport division of Schutter in 2015 in the edible oils segment. They were combined with cooperations like the ones with Trendco (for the loading of mineral oils) in 2009 and Lanfer Logistics/Combiship (for dedicated intermodal transport) in 2011. Maaskade France, a joint venture with the French barging group CFT, was up and running in 2013 for tanker operations in the Seine basin.

The most recent development was a major one: Maaskade in 2018 bought the former fruit juices terminal of Votorantim, in the Left Bank port area in Antwerp, and changed its name into Pantank Terminals. Pantank brought to Maaskade’s portfolio 26,500m³ of storage capacity in 42 stainless steel tanks and added value services like blending and filtering and the loading/unloading of sea vessels for vegetable oils and fats, biodiesel feedstocks and biodiesel in bulk, flexibags or IBCs, plus warehousing, handling and stuffing & stripping of dry bulk, breakbulk, and containers.