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Amsterdam’s canals form symmetrical rings that “open like a fan,” revealing this beautiful city.

What would a story about Holland be without tulips?

It was a beautiful, sunny morning when we got on our bicycles and joined the myriad cyclists weaving through Amsterdam’s narrow streets. The historic center of the city is shaped by the symmetrical rings of canals that open like a fan, displaying gracefully arched bridges and gabled houses. Cycling is an excellent way to see the city. Clearly delineated cycle paths and traffic signals for cyclists ensure a smooth flow of traffic and safe access to every part of the city. Bicycles are used for all manner of transport in Amsterdam; from doing the grocery shopping to moving households. Busy CEO’s with chic leather briefcases balanced behind their backs, elderly ladies with their poodles tucked into pink silk-lined baskets, and mothers with infants all share the road.

The Dutch, like the land itself, have always been full of surprises. In the 16th and 17th centuries, they fought an 80-year war with the Spanish to gain their independence and declare the Republic of the Netherlands, and then in 1813, in a complete reversal, they chose to live under a monarchy. To appreciate the Netherlands you have to look beyond the stale cliches of windmills, tulips and wooden shoes.

We took the ferry across the River IJsselmeer and began our journey of discovery. A mere half-hour from the center of Amsterdam, Durgerdam’s tranquility stands in stark contrast to Amsterdam’s bustle. We stopped for a cool drink and took in the charm of this tiny hamlet, the fishing nets hanging in the sun, the boats tucked in the reeds. We followed the dike in the direction of Marken, stopping often to take in the beauty of surroundings.

Marken is firmly rooted in the past in part because of its isolation from the mainland. Once an island in the Zuiderzee, it is now connected to the mainland by a three-mile causeway. Marken’s seafaring tradition is evidenced in the tightly packed green-and-white houses, built on poles to keep them above water level. Tidy, colorful interiors mirror the order of ships’ quarters, and the local church boasts a marvellous collection of ship models.

Just down the road, Monnickendam, which translates literally as “dam built by monks,” was established in the 9th century by a group of Frisian monks. At the height of its prosperity in the 16th century, Marken successfully competed with its great trading rival, Amsterdam. Only when the Zuider Zee began to silt up, did it relinquish its position and become a quiet town, well respected for its delicious smoked eel.

We rode quickly through the masses of red-faced sunbathers in Volendam, eager to be out of the noise and chaos and on to quieter Edam. Although now more famous for its

Nuts and Bolts

LOCATION: The Netherlands, half the size of Indiana, is comprised of 11 provinces. The country is often referred to as Holland, mainly because of the historical importance of the provinces of North and South Holland.

TRANSPORTATION: A superb transportation network links the country. For an additional fee, bikes can accompany rail passengers on most routes. Good-quality sturdy bicycles are also available for long- or short-term rent from all railway stations, and at numerous locations in cities and towns throughout the Netherlands.

By Lorraine Weber
cheese, in the 16th century, shipbuilding was Edam's main source of revenue. More than 33 shipyards provided the vessels that contributed to the trading boom of Holland's Golden Age. Finding a campground on the shoreline, we watched the sun set over the Ijsselmeer, imagining what it must have looked like when the horizon was silhouetted by impressive frigates. The next morning, as the sun began to rise, we headed to Hoorn.

To see Hoorn is to understand the importance of trade in the creation of Holland's Golden Age. Hoorn was the major trading port and headquarters of the Dutch East Indies Company. The harbor harkens back to the seafaring glory of this period, when Dutch explorers gave their names to many parts of the world: Spitsbergen, Tasmania and Cape Horn and, closer to home, Staten Island.

The ride to Alkmaar took us over the polders; a landscape of dead-straight lines, revealing an almost obsessive concern with order. We took our time, riding with the wind at our backs, delighting in the beauty and peacefulness of the intricately patterned fields, stopping occasionally in small villages and, once, to go inside a windmill which was open to the public. We arrived late in Alkmaar and decided to stay at a campground just outside the town. In the morning we settled into our saddles and headed for the dunes.

A natural sand barrier against the North Sea, the dunes are an excellent filtering system for the area's drinking water. Years of experimentation produced the grass that locks the sand in place, preventing erosion. For two days, we followed a series of meandering cycle paths, watching the play of light and shadow and the changing colors of dawn and dusk in the dunes.

Holland's bulb fields skirt the edge of the dunes, but there is little to see unless you come in May, at the height of the color explosion. Instead we went on to Leiden, the center of Holland's 15th-century textile industry. Leiden also had the country's first university, and set the standard for its renowned educational system.

The ride from Leiden to Gouda was not particularly interesting, but that was more because of bad planning, than lack of a better route. I redeemed myself when we arrived in Gouda, catching the end of the market that takes place in the shadow of Holland's most spectacular Town Hall, dating to the 1400s. We liked the square so much, we decided to find a campground and come back for dinner.

The next day, we took the route along the Vlist canal and found it to be one of the loveliest on our trip. In the past, barges were pulled by horses (and sometimes by hand) and carried produce and passengers along the many waterways that linked the nation. In 1839, the first steam locomotive line opened between Amsterdam and Haarlem, and the character of transport changed dramatically.

We followed a series of canals into Utrecht, a city whose name fully signifies its importance, past and present. In Roman times it was called Trajectum, or crossing point, and functioned as a border settlement for foot soldiers. Corrupted through time and laziness, the name was shortened to Trecht. Though little remains of its Roman past, Utrecht's function as a hub has changed little over time. Nowadays, as the focal point for the Dutch transport network, most train lines pass through Utrecht.

We continued along the Vecht River, one of the most beautiful rivers in the Netherlands. Zuylen Castle soon appeared on our right. Its foundations date back to the 1300s, when it was one of a ribbon of 20 fortifications running through the province. Money was plentiful in Holland's Golden Age, and many of the estates and gardens that line the Vecht reflect that abundance. Merchants built gazebos at particularly scenic points, overlooking luxurious gardens and the canals that ringed their estates.

In the past, the Vecht was a major waterway and peat barges plied the rivers. These days, the queues at the locks are for pleasure craft. At some point around Loenen, the money or initiative gave out and affluence fades away as the river winds its way through the polders, with only an occasional farmhouse or windmill in sight.

It was getting dark and we had obviously missed the camping site marked on our map. We were tired, and the sky looked threatening; we debated only a few minutes before deciding to go back to Amsterdam. Riding hard to beat the showers, in Hilversum we ran for the last train and, once inside, sighed with relief as it began raining buckets.

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