

I had heard how amazing the Netherlands is for cycling but I needed to see for myself if this was truth or hype. There is no doubt that the geography is promising; the highest point is an underwhelming 322m (1,058ft), and much of the country lies below sea level. My fact-finding trip began in Lelystad, a town built on land that was once under the sea and is flat as a pancake. Beyond the dykes there was no hint of a hill.

We meet the Dutch often when we travel in our campervan; they are enthusiastic campers and often speak excellent English. Nevertheless, I was determined to learn a few Dutch words and, by the time we had reached our Lelystad campsite from Germany, I had mastered some pleasantries. Even so, I think the receptionist could see relief written all over my face when they answered yes to my question, 'Spreekt u Engels?'

The waters of the Markermeer gently lap along Lelystad's long shoreline and, relaxing on our pitch watching the greylag geese pottering on the grassy dyke, we perused the campsite's cycling map. A grid of lines joined by numbered points (*knooppunten*) at junctions indicated cycle routes. This is ingenious! Each *knooppunten* corresponds with a signpost on the path, making route-finding easy; we just cycled by numbers.

I'd rather be cycling

We wheeled out of the campsite to explore via points 27, 26, 25 and 30. There was a vigorous headwind, but cycling was clearly a popular way to get around. We were in the minority wearing helmets, step-through bikes with an upright riding position were the norm and young people casually cycled one-handed while checking their phones in the other!

Lelystad's harbour was packed with all sorts of boats, including elegant tall ships. These historic sailing ships, or clippers, have romantic associations of climbing the rigging and legendary pirates. Many are over 100 years old and, in the Netherlands, working holidays on clippers are popular. As we toured around the Markermeer we regularly saw these graceful craft in full sail on the horizon.

Across the vast blue water of the Markermeer we could see Antony Gormley's webbed-steel sculpture of a crouching human. The scale is impressive, but once Anthony had pointed out that it looked like someone using a French squatting toilet it seemed less classy! The statue is called *Exposure* and I can only guess how much giggling there was at the meeting that decided that name! Light-hearted public art popped up again when we found the striking sculpture of a large, partially submerged head with a figure



Bird and boat watching



Going **flat out**

Carol and Anthony are swept off their wheels
by the **Dutch** and their cycle paths

WORDS & PHOTOS: Carol Kubicki



Everyone cycles to the beach



standing on the top. In a country with so much land below sea level, displaying a literal representation of keeping your head above water is gutsy.

Wheely great

I really grasped how fantastic the Netherlands is for cyclists the next day, when we biked around the Oostvaardersplassen nature reserve to Almere. The reserve boasts plenty of birdlife, including magnificent sea eagles and marsh harriers. We began along the dyke, next to the shimmering blue Markermeer and, stopping at pontoons, we could see Amsterdam across the water. Tree-lined cycle paths followed canals and crossed pretty wooden bridges, taking us through the suburbs of Almere and we returned on effortless traffic-free woodland paths.

Driving over the 17 mile-long dam across the Markermeer was a thrilling and unique experience, with water either side of us (and of course a cycle lane). We stopped at the service area at the halfway point. The blue water stretched to the horizon where it met the equally blue sky; we could have been in the Mediterranean!

Our rural North Holland campsite near Alkmaar was idyllic. Campsite cats pattered over to say hello, hares lolloped around the fields, eggs and honey could be bought from farm gates and wealth oozed from the villages and towns. Again we were given cycling maps with *knooppunten* and a short orientation ride took us to the nearby village café where we sampled some excellent ice cream.

One pedal stroke at a time

A hot and sunny day was promised and we set out on a 25 mile-ride to the coast and back. We followed the numbers by canals and pretty windmills and reached the path to Schoorl aan Zee, joining the crowds heading for the sea. Being with so many other cyclists was exhilarating and I was energised to be a part of this cycle-loving nation. Pedestrians, cyclists and cars coexisted happily. There's no doubt the Dutch have created cycling heaven!

In woodland I was surprised to find I was pedalling uphill and, looking around, I realised we were among pine-covered dunes. The trees thinned out into breathtaking sandy heath, with shallow pools in the hollows, and we paused at a flight of steps that climbed one of the tall dunes to a viewpoint, propping the bikes against cycle stands. Dutch bikes come with a kickstand and we watched enviously as they casually left their bikes without having to find something to lean them against. A path along the coast wound through white

dunes and woodland to Bergen aan Zee. The warm air released the scent of the pine trees and I was feeling heady with happiness as we rolled into the bustling seaside resort.

Turning inland onto a shady lane lined with mature trees and smart houses, Anthony came to a halt when the freehub on his bike failed. Further progress seemed impossible, but he grabbed our heavyweight D-lock and repeatedly struck the rear cassette. Alarmed, I thought I was witnessing frustrated anger, but apparently it was a little-known bike mechanic trick that allowed him to limp the remaining miles.

We hadn't packed a spare freehub, so, with only a few days left of our holiday, Anthony improvised a temporary fix, removing and cleaning the freehub so that, while not perfect, his bike was usable.

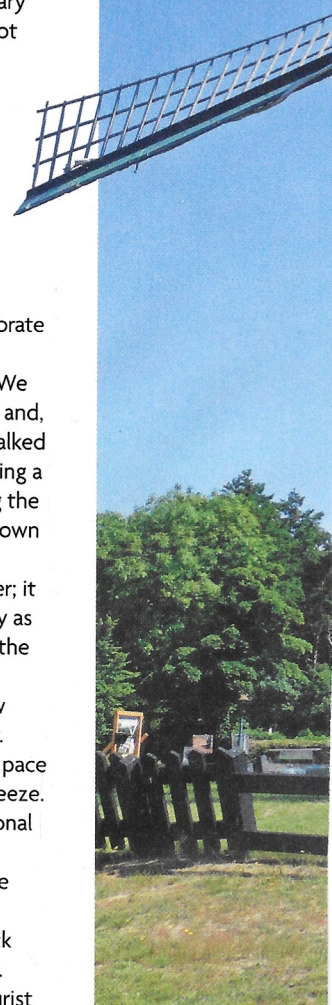
Cheesed off!

There was a carnival atmosphere on the sunny day we visited Alkmaar. It was Friday cheese market day and stalls selling clogs, wooden tulips and miniature windmills lined the pretty streets. Large round cheeses loaded on low barges were punted along the canals; cheeses were weighed on old scales, carried on sledges and tossed into carts. The Dutch certainly celebrate their cheese.

Our next stop, Edam, also has a cheese connection. We were pitched on the western shore of the Markermeer and, after meeting two cyclists from Nottinghamshire, we talked about freehubs and other cycling incidents, before having a beer in the campsite restaurant. Later we strolled along the shore, enjoying the warm evening air as the sun went down and the sky turned a deep orange.

We had cycled, walked and driven by the Markermeer; it was time to sail on it! Anthony's bike creaked alarmingly as we cycled to Volendam, but we were there in time for the first ferry and rolled the bikes on board for the trip to Marken. Marken is an island in the Markermeer but now has a road joining it to the mainland as well as the ferry. The ferry is badged as an express but it took a leisurely pace across the water and on the deck there was hardly a breeze.

The approach to Marken's harbour, lined with traditional green-painted wooden buildings, is picturesque. After disembarking, we had coffee and cake before taking the blissful cycle route around the lush island and to the lighthouse at its most westerly point. Our boat trip back to Volendam was breezier and clouds had filled the sky. Hoping we would stay dry, we explored Volendam's tourist





LEFT Dutch souvenirs in Alkmaar; Sunset on the Markermeer at Edam

MAIN A pretty windmill near Schoorl

RIGHT Getting the bikes ready for a day out; Antony Gormley's sculpture, *Exposure*; The warmth released the heady smell of pine



Carol Kubicki and her husband, Anthony, explore beautiful places in their Blue Bus whatever the season. Carol is a keen walker, fair-weather cyclist and improving birdwatcher. You can follow their travels at backontheroadagainblog.com



2015 Renault Master medium-wheelbase

CONVERSION TYPE Devon Tempest by devonconversions.co.uk

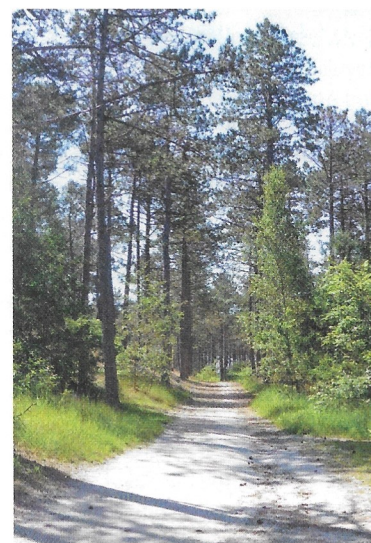
OWNED SINCE 2015

LAYOUT Rear kitchen/washroom with twin sofas in the front lounge that convert to single beds

TRAVEL SEATS/BERTHS 3/2

WHAT I LOVE ABOUT IT

It's great just being able to pull over, any place, any time, throw the side door open and enjoy the vistas with a cup of tea in hand. That's the beauty of touring in a campervan, isn't it?





CAMPING 'T OPPERTJE, Lelystad [oppertje.nl](https://www.oppertje.nl)
LANDSCHAPSCAMPING DE KOLIBRIE near Warmenhuizen [dekolibrie.eu](https://www.dekolibrie.eu)
CAMPING STRANDBAD-EDAM [campingstrandbad.nl](https://www.campingstrandbad.nl)



This handy free travel guide has maps, walking tours and cycle routes across the Netherlands m.en.freebeemap.nl

A useful and comprehensive travel blog visitingthedutchcountryside.com

This blog post takes a road trip around the Markermeer and explains the history of the area in an accessible way velvetescape.com/amsterdam-road-trip-markermeer



attractions and souvenir shops around the harbour and the quieter back streets where quaint houses crowd together. We cycled back to Edam and, with an eye on the weather, looked around the chic and charming town, finding cheese shops on the cobbled streets and canals crossed with lifting wooden bridges.

Fortunately, we had returned to the 'van when the weather changed dramatically and strong winds whipped up the Markermeer into a storm-tossed stretch of water. Thunder rolled around the Blue Bus and flashes of lightning momentarily lit up the inside. The next morning we sat out in the rain reading, catching up on social media and watching the ducks. A brighter afternoon gave us the chance to explore more of Edam's pretty streets and, in a sheltered canalside spot, we enjoyed a beer in a café and agreed that we really liked Edam (the place and the cheese).

Grabbing life by the handlebars

Regular buses make the half-hour journey between Edam and Amsterdam and we set off to the big city with nothing planned. More earnest tourists might be disappointed that our day was spent mostly wandering along canals, punctuated by rest stops in a variety of eating and drinking establishments! We had coffee in a cowboy-themed café, lunch in a charming rustic bar and afternoon drinks and snacks in the upmarket Café de Jaren overlooking the River Amstel. We pottered through the flower market, admired houseboats, visited the colourful botanical gardens and saw lots of bicycles.

The Dutch will start a conversation with strangers. Leaning over one of the many Amsterdam bridges, a Dutch man stood alongside.

ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT We bought our last Dutch souvenirs at Zaanse Schans; A pretty canal in Amsterdam

BELOW Edam is famous for its cheese

"Those large black birds are cormorants," he told us in English, with no preamble. He launched into a description of their habits and food, but, when Anthony asked if he was an expert, he shrugged, "Just an interested amateur."

Stumbling upon the Waterlooplein Flea Market, Amsterdam's oldest flea market was a treat. Formerly a Jewish market, after the Second World War it became a hub for young people. Stalls were piled high with vintage and secondhand clothing, old books and Dutch bric-a-brac and, if we had been looking for a hippy-era throw or a retro rusty tin, this was the place to come. It was a fascinating glimpse into what the Dutch throw away and value.

We spent the last day before our ferry from IJmuiden at Zaanse Schans, which has an attractively laid out, open air museum. The sunshine had returned and it was busy. We were waved into the campervan parking area that had views across the nature reserve to the windmills.

Chatting to the couple on the next parking space, they made it clear they were keen to see inside a British 'van and, always happy to give guided tours, we proudly showed them around our home from home before having a nosey in their 'van, too.

Zaanse is an exceptional museum, as people live and work in the old windmills and pretty wooden houses that visitors wander around. There is the inevitable cheese-making display and I took umpteen photographs of the line of gorgeous windmills along the river. Buying some Dutch souvenirs to take home, the cashier asked us which country we were from. She beamed when we told her, pleased to hear that overseas visitors were returning. We beamed back, telling her how much we had enjoyed the Netherlands, particularly the truly heavenly cycling.

