

New to the Netherlands

There is so much more to this beautiful country than windmills and tulips, as our intrepid motorhomers discover...

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki

US AND OUR 'VAN



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



2015 Devon Tempest on a MWB 2.3-litre Renault Master. This is our third blue campervan and we have called them all the 'Blue Bus'

"All I really know about the Netherlands is that it is a cyclist's heaven," I said to Anthony while we were planning our spring European trip. It was a winter evening and I was trying to persuade him to spend just one week of our seven-week tour in the Netherlands.

He frowned and began listing on his fingers, "Tulips, windmills, dykes (and plugging them with fingers), canals and cheese!" Laughing, we both recognised there was more to the country than those stereotypes; we just needed to do a little more research.

Fortunately, fate intervened in an odd way during our winter trip to northern Scotland. Browsing the shelves of a well-stocked charity shop, I pulled out a copy of Ben Coates' book, *Why The Dutch Are Different*. This was exactly what we needed to be better prepared.

It was almost the summer solstice as we drove from Germany into the Netherlands through countryside with abundant birds and (of course) windmills and canals. I was relieved that I had no need to grapple with our Dutch phrasebook at the first campsite near the town of Lelystad and, beyond learning a few basic pleasantries, we never opened it again.

Along with the usual campsite information, we were handed a local cycling map. After pitching up and enjoying a brew, watching the antics of the local sparrows, we set off to explore Lelystad.

Lelystad sits on land that used to be the seabed under the Zuiderzee, an inlet of the

North Sea. I tried to picture the roads we cycled along and houses we passed as part of a marine environment, with boats sailing above me. I was already finding the scale of land reclamation in the Netherlands mind-blowing.

Reaching the shore, I looked across the breathtaking expanse of water now called the Markermeer and knew we had chosen the perfect place to begin our relationship with the low-lying Netherlands. Where I stood was under saltwater 100 years ago and today it is a vast freshwater lake.

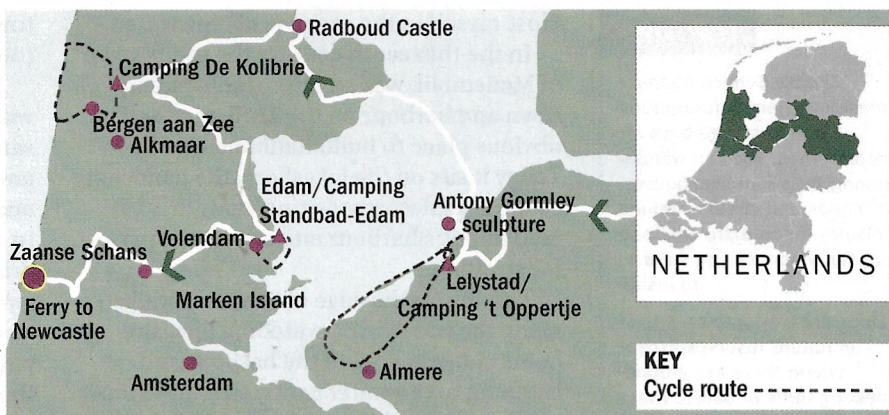
We cycled around the harbour packed with boats and tall ships and could see working barges beyond as they navigated shipping lanes; in the Netherlands' watery landscape there was always someone messing about in a boat. Along with the water, our other constant companion was the wind and into Lelystad I struggled against a headwind while Dutch cyclists looked relaxed.

By 1932, the Dutch had dammed the Zuiderzee, creating the massive lake and the next stage was to reclaim some of the land in this lake for Lelystad. We cycled to the Werkeiland (Work Island), the birthplace of the area, and followed a walking guide that revealed the scale of the project.

In 1949, using boats and pontoons, reclamation work began from a marker in the lake. After two years, the dyke engineers had built sufficient land on the Werkeiland for barracks to accommodate the workers. Food and building materials continued to arrive by boat until the road was ►


RIGHT Some of the working windmills at Zaanse Schans





TOP TIPS

Why The Dutch Are Different: A Journey into the Hidden Heart of the Netherlands by Ben Coates is a good introduction to the Dutch way of life. Available on Amazon

The Alkmaar Cheese Market is every Friday from April to September from 10am and there are also evening markets on summer Tuesdays. The most convenient motorhome parking is on Pettemerstraat; around 15 minutes' walk from the cheese market  kaasmarkt.nl

ABOVE Handsome houses in the chic town of Edam

BELOW INSET One of the many attractive corners of Edam

completed in 1955 and I imagined the hard-working crews marooned here for their two-week-long shifts as dykes and a pumping station were constructed.

In a thankfully lighter breeze the next day, we enjoyed a longer ride around the neighbouring Oostvaardersplassen, a large nature reserve, beginning with 12km (7½ miles) following the dyke along the Markermeer. On our right, Amsterdam shimmered in the distance across the water and terns flew overhead. On our left were pools surrounded by reeds and we stopped to watch a marsh harrier and listen to a cuckoo calling.

From *Why the Dutch are Different*, we had understood how the vulnerability of living at or below sea level can result in a need to control the natural world. Following reclamation, Oostvaardersplassen was left to rewild and birds quickly moved in, but by the 1980s it was decided to intervene and introduce cattle, horses and deer to curb woodland regeneration.

Tree-lined paths following wide drainage channels took us to a cafe on the edge of Almere before continuing through the reserve. A grass snake slithered off the path into giant hogweed plants just missing my wheels and I breathed deeply to savour the sweet smell of elderflowers.

We pulled into the visitor centre and sat on a bench watching a stunning pair of sea eagles circling overhead, catching the sun as they tilted their wings. Returning to our bikes, we spotted a pair of swallows flying acrobatically through the window of a bird hide to their nest of chicks.

In our Blue Bus we crossed the Markermeer into Noord-Holland (North Holland) over the 17-mile-long dam constructed in the 1970s. We paused to admire Antony Gormley's statue of a crouching figure that towers over the water. Made of steel, it dwarfs visitors and yet, looking up from the feet, I felt a connection.

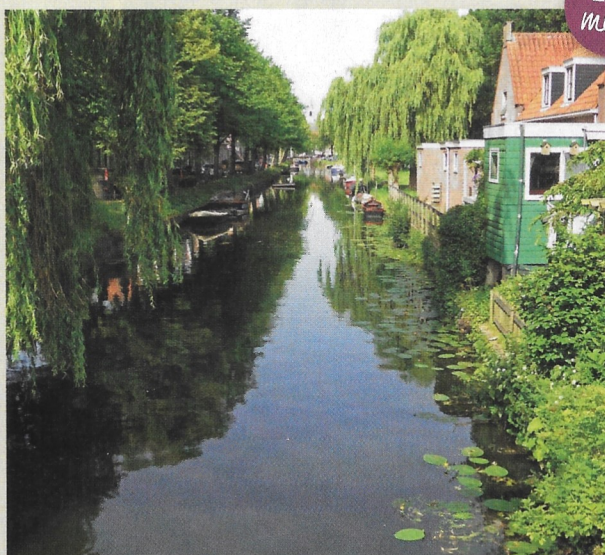
At the dam's halfway point we stopped and brewed up. Taking my mug to the shore, >

THE JOURNEY

We travelled from home in Morecambe to the Elbe via the DFDS Newcastle to IJmuiden ferry, which is near to all the places we visited. Our total trip was a return distance of 1,931 miles of which this part was 185 miles. On this segment of our trip, we spent nine days touring in the Netherlands with eight nights on sites in June. Our total trip was 50 nights in May and June

THE COSTS

Fuel Average 37mpg.....	£77.10
Ferry costs DFDS Newcastle to IJmuiden return with outside cabin and all meals.....	£705
Site fees.....	£158.02
Attractions Two adults: Radboud Castle and Amsterdam botanical garden.....	£35.26
Parking Alkmaar and Zaanse Schans, where there is no entrance fee for the site, just parking charges.....	£12.04
Bus and train fares Return ferry from Volendam to Marken and return bus from Edam to Amsterdam.....	£57.50
Total costs.....	£1,044.92



185 miles

TOP TIPS

Zaanse Schans open-air museum charges for parking and has large bays for motorhomes. You can wander among the windmills, houses, shops and cheese-making display for no extra cost and pay for windmills you want to go inside

Dogs are welcome on a lead in nature reserves except where there are ground-nesting birds or cattle. There are often restrictions on dogs on the beaches. The Edam campsite we stayed at doesn't allow dogs

British credit and debit cards are not accepted everywhere in the Netherlands so make sure you have some cash

BELOW CLOCKWISE The Dutch are always messing about on the water; *Exposure*, the giant Antony Gormley metal sculpture near Lelystad; Cheese bearers carry heavy wheels of cheese and sledges at the Alkmaar cheese market

I lost myself in the expanse of blue water.

In the thirteenth century the pretty town of Medemblik was an important trading town and harbour on the Zuiderzee and an obvious place to build Radboud Castle. Today it sits on the lakeshore; the handsome castle is well worth visiting, and Medemblik's harbour and streets are perfect for strolling.

Parking on the edge of town, we walked along the waterfront, watching pleasure boats chugging out of the harbour and listening to the water gently lapping against sandy bays. At the castle we were given audio guides in English and these helped us understand the history of the town and the Netherlands. Winding staircases took us to the top of the round tower where we could look across the battlements and turrets and down on the moat.

Noord-Holland has a long coastline with golden sandy beaches, acres of countryside and attractive villages. At our rural campsite I made friends with one of the farm cats and we strolled around the fields in soft evening sunlight watching multitudes of hares while oystercatchers and lapwings called overhead. The Netherlands' abundance of wildlife wasn't something I expected and was a pleasant surprise.

After breakfast with fresh Dutch *pistolets* (torpedo-shaped rolls that literally translates as little pistols) and local honey, we packed a pannier, popped on helmets and set off on our bikes with a map. We followed the cycle route signs through the

town of Schoorl and joined the crowds with towels and swimwear heading for the beach.

The stunning route through dunes and woodland occasionally opened out into sandy heath with shallow pools. A cute café among the trees decorated with bunting and surrounded by comfy chairs tempted us to rest before we continued to the sea. The aroma of pine trees and sea air with a hint of sweet-scented wild roses was invigorating as we followed the coast on an undulating path through eye-catching white dunes to the beach at Bergen aan Zee.

Ben Coates' book had forewarned us that the Dutch were obsessed with cheese. Cheese sandwiches were on every café menu and we quickly became fans of crunchy cheese-filled snacks we bought from the supermarkets.

Even so, we weren't prepared for the carnival atmosphere of Alkmaar's cheese market. Arriving in the town's handsome streets, we found stalls loaded with stacks of cheeses and crowds of people merrymaking around the churchlike *waaggebouw* (weighing building).

A crowd is not unusual in this densely populated country and we hovered on the edge with British reserve. The Dutch pressed happily together in the heat, watching couples being photographed on large scales and taking cheese samples from women in national costume.

In the square, cheese bearers dressed in white with colourful straw hats speedily carried wheels of cheese on heavy wooden





"We *explored* beyond the windmills to the collection of *charming* wooden houses where goats *bounded* around fields"

ABOVE CLOCKWISE One of Amsterdam's typical canal scenes; The enviable view of the Markermeer from our pitch at Edam; Radboud Castle in the pretty town of Medemblik

INFORMATION

If, like me, you are fascinated with the scale of land reclamation in the Netherlands, Brilliant Maps has one that shows the land reclaimed since 1300

brilliantmaps.com/?s=netherlands

General tourist information about the Netherlands

holland.com

A useful and comprehensive travel blog

visitingthedutchcountryside.com

For more on the Dutch and water

hollandlandofwater.com

sledges while the carillon chimed the quarter hours overhead. Commentary in Dutch, German and English explained the proceedings as cheeses were thrown deftly from person to person and loaded in a cart and low wooden boats piled high with cheeses slid along the canals. What a fantastic spectacle.

Our next stop also has a strong cheese connection. Wedges of Edam are familiar to most of us, but I certainly knew less about the town. On the western shore of the Markermeer, an online walking guide led us along cobbled streets into enchanting corners of Edam. With rows of steep-roofed old-brick houses, cheese shops and a network of canals crossed by white-painted wooden bridges, it was delightful.

From our Edam pitch we had an enviable view of the Markermeer. When we arrived the water gently lapped the shore; that evening, strong winds transformed it into a choppy and menacing lake that became a playground for windsurfers.

After a wild night, the sunshine returned and we cycled along the shoreline to Volendam. This lively fishing village and resort has immaculate streets and a harbour lined with bars, cafés and souvenir shops.

The 30-minute ferry journey to Marken, once an island in the Markermeer and now joined to Noord-Holland by a road, was a treat. Characteristic wooden buildings line Marken's sheltered harbour and, after coffee, we cycled to the working lighthouse. Across the Markermeer, a superhighway of boats of every shape and size, we could just see Lelystad. We cycled back along the dyke dotted cheerfully with wild flowers while lapwings soared over the fields.


A trip to Amsterdam wasn't planned, but it was only half an hour on frequent buses from Edam, so we decided to leave rural Netherlands for a day in the city. Ben Coates had mentioned some of Amsterdam's popular sights, but we had left it too late to book the Rijksmuseum or Anne Frank House, so we both agreed we were happy to spend the day getting a feel for this new-to-us city.

After cheese sandwiches and a glass of Amstel beer overlooking the Amstel River, we headed to De Plantage, a green Amsterdam neighbourhood. Drained in the seventeenth century to make room for the growing population, insufficient residents chose to build here and many plots became gardens, including the botanical garden. ➤



INFORMATION

This useful free travel guide has maps, walking tours and cycle routes across the Netherlands. We used this for the Edam walk

 m.en.freebeemap.nl

Amsterdam tourist information

 amsterdamtourist.info

If you want to visit the Waterlooplein Flea Market

 waterlooplein.amsterdam/en

Zaanse Schans open-air museum

 dezaanseschans.nl/en

One of the world's oldest botanical gardens, it began as an area cultivating medicinal herbs to treat plagues and today it is a refuge from the city bustle.

It was stuffy in the greenhouses, but the colourful flowers around the beehives were enchanting and the insect-eating plants fascinating. By far the biggest thrill for me was the butterfly house where hundreds of orange Flying Dutchman (of course) fluttered among the plants.


There was more pleasure when we stumbled upon the Waterlooplein Flea Market, a large bazaar of stalls, from vintage clothing to Dutch bric-a-brac.

Amazingly, we managed to browse without purchasing anything! With the money we had saved, we treated ourselves to afternoon drinks and cheesy snacks on the lovely waterside terrace of the elegant Café de Jaren.

Our ferry back to Newcastle didn't leave until late afternoon, giving us plenty of time to visit Zaanse Schans. This popular open-air museum has windmills galore, but the unique twist is that they are still working and lived in.



Ben Coates told us that Rembrandt was thought to have acquired his sensitivity to light and shade after growing up under turning windmill sails and there is no doubt that these amazing buildings must influence the Dutch character. Zaanse Schans has windmills that cut wood, crush spices and grind paint pigments, all lining the River Zaan and offering multiple photograph opportunities. We explored beyond the windmills to the collection of


charming wooden houses where goats bounded around fields and hens with tiny chicks pecked in the shade.


Stashing our last Dutch cheesy souvenir in the 'van, we agreed Zaanse Schans was the perfect way to finish our first Netherlands visit. Watching the fishing boats and beaches of IJmuiden disappear from the deck of our boat with a gin and tonic, we conceded that the Netherlands is fantastic for cycling and has no shortage of windmills, dykes, canals and cheese, but we now know it has so much more. Neither of us would need persuading to explore this wonderful country again. 

WE STAYED AT



Camping 't Oppertje, Uilenweg 11, 8245 AB Lelystad, Flevoland


 0031 320 253693  oppertje.nl


 31 March - 1 October

 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €21 (£19.24) ACSI rate



Landschapscamping de Kolibrie, De Groet 2, 1749 VW Warmenhuizen, Noord-Holland


 0031 226 394539  dekolibrie.eu


 1 April - 1 October

 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €21 (£19.24) ACSI rate

Camping Strandbad-Edam, Zeevangsseedijk 7A, 1135 PZ Edam, Noord-Holland

 0031 299 371994  campingstrandbad.nl

 1 April - 1 October

 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €23 (£21.07) ACSI rate

ABOVE CLOCKWISE The characteristic wooden houses on Marken; Shady tree-lined cycle paths around Lelystad; A heron was almost hidden among the flowers in the botanical gardens