

BURT WOLF TRAVELS & TRADITIONS CRUISING HOLLAND AND BELGIUM

For thousands of years the best way to get around Europe was on a river boat. The rivers were the great highways that moved people and goods. They were also the natural boundaries between cultures. As a result many of the great cities of Europe were built on the banks of rivers.



During the last few years cruising the rivers of Europe has become a major attraction for tourists. And for good reason --- the ship is your hotel and it takes you

peacefully from city to city. Often you'll dock in the oldest and most beautiful parts of a town. And one thing that is particularly dear to my heart --you only unpack once.

This cruise in Holland and Belgium starts in Amsterdam, which is filled with art, architecture, and places to shop. Next, Dordrecht to discover how windmills really work. Then Antwerp, which is the world epicenter for diamonds and Brussels for food, beer, lace, beer, unusual statues and beer. Ghent for its outstanding architecture and Bruges where the city center is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

AMSTERDAM

Towards the end of the 1100s, a group of herring fisherman decided to build a settlement at the mouth of the Amstel River. They drove wooden stakes into the mud, mounded some wet earth and seaweed around the stakes and patched together a few huts on top of the mounds. Nothing to brag about, but still something they could call home. There was, however, one serious



problem -- at high tide, home was about three feet underwater.

So they built a dam to hold back the sea and the people called the place "The Dam on the Amstel". The dam worked and there was much rejoicing.

Today that same spot is Amsterdam's town square and there is still much rejoicing. The best way to get a quick look at why they are rejoicing is to take a canal tour. The canals were built by the city government during the 1600s. Each canal had four lanes of traffic. A ship could tie up in front of a warehouse, unload its cargo and not interfere with the ongoing traffic in the center lanes. Double parking was a capital crime. The three main canals could handle 4,000 ships at a time.

Real estate has always been tight in Amsterdam. As a result some people began living on canal boats. Eventually these floating apartments became some of the most desirable locations in the city. The Houseboat Museum visitors a tour of life on a canal boat.

CAPTAIN VINCENT van LOON

Curator, The Houseboat Museum

As you can see a lot of people think it's quite small in a houseboat but it can be even bigger than some small apartments in Amsterdam. This is a model of ships like these which were converted into houseboats. They were former freighters. This one was built in 1914. They could transport goods by opening these covers, coal and other grain and things like that could come in. This is the sitting room with nice chairs, enough height to stand, some old pictures of Amsterdam. For example this is a nice picture because you can see these ships which were transformed into house boats were freighters, you can see people loading stuff on the ships and transporting all over the Netherlands.



We're connected to electricity, water, telephone, so it's quite comfortable to live on a house boat in Amsterdam.

The net result of all these canals is a city built on 90 islands and connected by 500 bridges. Laws controlled the size of the houses that faced the canals, the bricks that could be used and what architectural embellishments were allowed. These buildings were constructed during the late 1500s and early 1600s. At the time, Amsterdam was the commercial and financial center of Europe and much of its wealth was created by the Dutch East India Company which controlled the spice trade with the islands of the South Pacific.



This was the business that Columbus was looking for when he bumped into the Bahamas. The Dutch East India Company was making big bucks. It was also

one of the first companies to have a public offering of its stock. Investors could buy shares and share in the riches. This was Amsterdam's Golden Age and much of that gold went into buying works of art.

As a result, Amsterdam has a half-dozen of the world's great museums.

The Van Gogh Museum houses more Van Gogh paintings and drawings than any other museum in the world.

The Rijksmuseum is the official state museum and has the greatest collection of Dutch masters. They have Rembrandt's Night Watch and The Jewish Bride. They



have Vermeer's The Milkmaid and The Love Letter and Frans Hals' Portrait of a Young Couple. They also have an awesome collection of Delftware porcelain and one of Europe's largest collections of prints and drawings.

For thousands of years, if you had big money you wanted to use some of that money to commission a work of art. Money could be in the hands of a rich family

like the de Medicis of Italy or a King like Louis XVI of France or the Catholic Church. They liked mythological themes and religious elements. But here in Amsterdam the money was in the middle class.

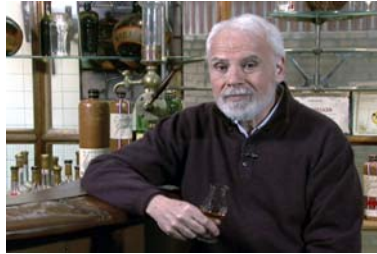
Pictures from everyday life were in and everything had to look real—your uncle Franz --- the guys in your drinking club --- landscapes--- and seascapes.

Unfortunately, Amsterdam's Golden Age was short lived. During the second half of the 1600s everybody ganged up on the Dutch. The English started a series of wars that took away their holdings in the East Indies and the Portuguese attacked and took away most of their holdings in Brazil. Even New Amsterdam became New York.



But much of what was created during Amsterdam's Golden Age is still around and easily available to visitors and that is particularly true when it comes to eating and drinking.

Amsterdam has a unique type of establishment called a "tasting house" where you can taste the different liquors



produced by specific manufacturers. In this case the Van Wees Company's tasting house is called The Admiral. It offers 17 types of Jenever which is a kind of Gin. They also offer an assortment

of special liqueurs with unusual flavors like cinnamon and ginger.

Pancakes are also a tradition in Amsterdam and a shop called Pancakes! is the place to try them. They have pancakes with ham. Pancakes with bacon and cheese and pancakes with raspberry sauce.

You'll also see people eating raw herring. They buy one from a street vendor who serves it on a paper plate with a garnish of chopped onion. Correct form requires that you tilt your head back, hold the herring above you, slowly lower it into your mouth and bite off a piece. This is definitely an acquired taste, and an acquired skill.

If you're interested in the traditional foods of Amsterdam but the sight of the raw herring is not your thing, may I suggest a visit to the restaurant Haesje Claes. You can taste hotchpotch, which is a dish of meats, mashed potatoes, onions and carrots. Another favorite is red beans with

Cruising Holland and Belgium

potatoes and piccalilli. They also have an excellent Dutch pea soup.

SCHOONHOVEN

During our first morning on the river we docked in Schoonhoven. All of Schoonhoven fits into three square miles and has a medieval feeling. Little canals lined with



row houses. Narrow bridges crossing over the canals. And ancient streets lined with jewelry shops and silver galleries.

For the past 700 years, Schoonhoven has been a center for the design and production of silver jewelry. During the 1300s Schoonhoven was the most important royal court in the Netherlands. Silversmiths came to the area to make things for the royal family. When the royal family began losing power and money during the 1400s the silver artists stayed on and sold their work to anyone who could afford it. And the number of people who could afford it was quickly increasing because of international trade.



One of the most interesting workshops is the one in the old water tower which shows works by local and international silversmiths. These are active workshops where

you can watch artisans shape their designs.

Paul de Vries is an artist who works in silver.

PAUL de VRIES

I've been working for 25 years now and I still like it even better than gold. I find it very special. And you can make any shape of it. It's very malleable and still it's very strong.

In addition to silver jewelry, Schoonhoven is famous for Kok's Bakery. And Kok's is famous for its *Fonteyn Koek*, which is made of gingerbread and honey and sugar and dried subtropical fruits. Ah, but I bet you knew that already. They also make waffle-like wafer cookies that are held together by a layer of caramel syrup.



WHERE TO EAT



PANCAKES AMSTERDAM!

BERENSTRAAT 38

1016 GH AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS

TEL: +31 (0)20 5289797

WWW.PANCAKESAMSTERDAM.NL

RESTAURANT HAESJE CLAES

SPIJSTRAAT 273-275

1012 VR AMSTERDAM

TEL. + 31 (0) 20 6249998

WWW.HAESJECLAES.NL

KOK'S BAKERY

BROOD EN BANKETBAKKERIJ KOK

HAVEN 57

2871 CL SCHOONHOVEN, NETHERLANDS

TEL: +31 (0) 182 38 24 96

WWW.BAKKERIJ-KOK.NL

WITTAMER CHOCOLATES

6-12-13 PLACE DU GRAND SABLON

1000 BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

WWW.WITTAMER.COM

DANDROY BISCUITERIE

31, RUE AU BEAUNE

B-1000 BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

TEL: +32 (0) 2 511 0326

WWW.DANDROY.NET

TIERENTEYN MUSTARD SHOP

SPARRESTRAAT, 49

9000 GHENT, BELGIUM

TEL: +32 (0) 92-25.83.36

WWW.TIERENTEYN.BE

DORDRECHT

That afternoon we stopped in Dordrecht where we caught a bus to Kinderdijk and learned about windmills.



Kinderdijk means children’s dike and refers to a great flood on St. Elisabeth’s Day in 1421, when a crib with a crying baby was washed up on this dike. There are nineteen windmills in the area and until 1950 they were used to drain water from the land which is below sea level.

There are two major types of windmills. Polder mills and industrial mills. Polder mills are used to drain the land that was and still is below sea level.

Industrial mills are used for a number of traditional purposes like milling wheat, extracting oil and sawing wood.

The earliest windmills built in the Netherlands date back to the 1200s and may have been inspired by the wind powered grain mills of Persia. The Low Countries of Europe have very few rivers that can power mills so the windmill became the most important source of energy.



They were also used to send messages. When the blades are in one position it means that the miller is on a short break. Another position means

he’s on a longer break. And then there is the mourning position, which indicates something sad has happened, the market has gone down another 200 points. The celebration position means there has been a birth or a wedding in the miller’s family or the government has decided to put a permanent end to earmarked legislation.

During the Second World War, windmills were used to send secret signals to the Allied Forces.

ANTWERP

The next morning we arrived in Antwerp which is the center of the diamond trade.

More than seventy percent of the world’s annual diamond business, worth over 15 billion dollars, takes place in Antwerp. Its home to two-thousand diamond

companies, employing over thirty-thousand people.

Diamonds were first mined in India and until the 1700s India was their only source. They are the hardest naturally occurring substance and when properly cut they have the ability to separate white light into the colors of the spectrum which gives a diamond its extraordinary brilliance.



The weight of a diamond is measured in carats --- a food reference but probably not the one you are thinking about. The word “carat” when it’s used with diamonds is a reference to the carob bean. It’s based on an old Greek word and strangely enough carob beans have a uniform weight so they were used in ancient times to measure the weight of precious stones and diamonds.

BRUSSELS

About mid-day we headed for Brussels. Brussels got started as a fortified castle on a small island in a river. The island was important because it was the crossing



point for two trade routes. The local Dukes saw it as a good spot to make a few bucks and set-up a protected market around the fort. By the 12th century Brussels was a major commercial center producing luxury goods that were exported throughout Europe.

The most famous symbol of Brussels is the Manneken Pis -- a bronze fountain in the form of a naked boy. It was constructed in the early 1600s and there are a number of stories about its meaning. But all the stories make the same point; the people of Brussels are courageous, have stood up to opposition, and the statue expresses their attitude towards anyone who tries to oppress them.



In 1746, during a visit by the King of France to Belgium, a group of French soldiers stole this statue. The King was so annoyed and embarrassed that he had the soldiers thrown in prison and held there until the statue was

Cruising Holland and Belgium

returned. And then he passed a law that said that every French soldier who ever passed this statue had to salute.

The King also gave the statue a uniform of gold brocade. The idea of putting different uniforms on the statue for different occasions caught on. Today there is a museum with over six-hundred costumes. Dracula --- Mozart --- and my personal favorite --- Elvis.



Brussels is a great town for food. Its quintessential dish is steamed mussels in an herb broth with a side of French fried potatoes and a beer. The shell of the first mussel is used to

scoop out the meat on the other side. The French fries, which should really be called Belgian fries, because the Belgians fried them first, are dipped into mayonnaise.

And there's a beer that is called *gueuze*. It's often described as Belgian Champagne. It's made from lambic beer which is itself rather special. Most brewers add commercial yeast to their beer, lambic brewers count on the yeasts that are floating wild in the air around Brussels. The process produces a dry and cider-like drink. Sometimes, one-year-old lambic is mixed with longer aged lambic and bottled for a second fermentation. The result is *Gueuze*.

If you are serious about beer you might want to stop in to one of the many beer shops. Belgium produces 400 artisanal beers and some excellent mass-produced stuff.

And you wouldn't want to forget about Belgian chocolates. Many of the big Belgian chocolate makers have retail outlets around the world and there's little point in tasting what you can get back home.



You want to go where the locals go and for many Belgians

that's Wittamer. In addition to its chocolate counter it has a beautiful café that serves a selection of macaroons, pastries and ice creams. I've been a fan of Wittamer's



work for the last thirty years.

And I've been buying my cookies at a shop called Dandoy for just as long. Every year on December 6th, which is St. Nicholas' Day, children all over Northern Europe receive a cookie called a *speculoos*. It's from a Latin word that means "mirror". It's a reference to the fact that the cookie is made in a hand carved wooden mold that produces a mirror image of St. Nicholas. Their old molds go back for hundreds of years and represent many other images besides St. Nick --- and some of them are over three feet tall.

GHENT

The next morning we arrived in Ghent. Ghent is one of the oldest cities in Belgium and during the 1200s it was second only to



Paris as a focal point for commerce and culture. It had a monopoly on the English wool trade which made it the center for European textiles. It also made it rich and powerful enough to be an almost totally independent city for hundreds of years.

Fortunately, Ghent has been able to maintain much of its architectural and cultural past. It still has its 14th century belfry with a 52-bell carillon which was originally built to show off the town's independence.

The feudal castle of the Counts of Flanders was built to intimidate their rivals. The 7th century Abbey of St. Bavo has a Lapidary Museum. "Lapidary" is a reference to the art of cutting and polishing stones. The museum has a



collection of stone fragments collected from various demolished buildings and monuments. There is also a collection of tombstones that date from the 13th to the 19th century. It appears that from time to time certain abbeys, monasteries and churches decided to sell off their old tombstones to make way for new tombstones.

And there's an unusual type of retreat that was popular in the 1200s, called a *Béguinages*. They were developed for unmarried women and widows who were unable to pay the convent dowry that was required to enter an official nunnery. It was a place where women could live in their own society, insulated from a troubled world, and use their individual skills to develop a collective environment. The *Béguinages* were financed by wealthy patrons and are unique to Belgium and the Netherlands.

Ghent also has a famous shop devoted to Mustard.

CATHERINE CAESENS

Owner, Tierenteyn Shop

The firm was founded in 1790 and has always been in the area. The shop moved into this building in 1860. The mustard is made with mustard seeds, vinegar and very, very little salt. I don't use any preservatives, no additives at all, no starches, no colorings, so it's quite a natural product. I'll give you some of the mustard to try here from the vat. Be careful it's quite hot. And we sell our mustard here as well.

BRUGES

That afternoon we took a tour of Bruges. During the 1200s Bruges was a major port and home to the Dukes of Burgundy. The Dukes were as powerful as the King of France. But by the 1400s, the waterway silted up and Bruges went into an extended period of economic decline.



The fact that Bruges was pretty much broke for 500 years was bad for citizens but good for its architectural heritage. No one had enough money to update their buildings and so they remained pretty much intact. As a result Bruges is one of the most beautiful cities in Northern Europe and the historic center of the town has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The town hall dates to 1376 and it is the oldest town hall in Belgium.

This cruise was a great experience and I hope to tiptoe through the tulips again.

TO LEARN MORE . . .



NETHERLANDS BOARD OF TOURISM & CONVENTIONS

355 LEXINGTON AVENUE, 19TH FLOOR

NEW YORK, NY 10017 USA

TEL.: +1 (212) 370 7360

[HTTP://US.HOLLAND.COM/](http://us.holland.com/)

AMSTERDAM TOURISM & CONVENTION BOARD

DE RUYTERKADE 5

1013 AS AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS

TEL.: (+31)(0) 20 5512512

[WWW.ATCB.NL](http://www.atcb.nl)

TOURIST OFFICE FOR FLANDERS BELGIUM

220 EAST 42ND STREET, SUITE 3402

NEW YORK, NY 10017 USA

TEL: +1 (212) 758-8130

[WWW.VISITFLANDERS.US](http://www.visitflanders.us)

THE VAN GOGH MUSEUM

PAULUS POTTERSTRAAT 7

1070 AJ AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS

TEL: +31 (0)20 570 5200

[WWW3.VANGOGHMUSEUM.NL](http://www3.vangoghmuseum.nl)

THE RIJKSMUSEUM

JAN LUIJKENSTRAAT 1

1070 DN AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS

TEL: +31 (0)20 6747000

[WWW.RIJKSMUSEUM.NL](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl)

VAN WEES DISTILLEERDERIJ DE OOIEVAAR

DRIEHOEKSTRAAT 10

1015 GL AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS

[WWW.DE-OOIEVAAR.NL](http://www.de-ooievaar.nl)

CHEESELAND

TEL: 888-295-7050

[WWW.CHEESELANDINC.COM](http://www.cheeselandinc.com)