



Finding Netherlands

Touring doesn't require special bikes or equipment – or even a map. **Miranda Winram** and friend Sophie spent a serendipitous weekend in Holland on shopping bikes

'Ma'am, I'm afraid your passport is out of date.' I laughed, Sophie cried, and the P&O man could not have been nicer. But he couldn't change facts. Sophie's passport was, undeniably, out of date.

Getting the weekend pass had been tricky for Sophie: she'd never left her three children and husband James to fend for themselves before. It had taken lashings of reassurance ('Darling, how hard can looking after your own children be?'), a freezer filled with ready to re-heat meals, and a host of printed out 'how to' instructions pinned to the fridge. It now emerged that Sophie's meticulous planning for everyone else had precluded a great deal of thought on her own account.

Our plan, until this unexpected hitch, had been to hop on an overnight ferry to Zeebrugge, cycle to Bruges, spend a night there and then cycle back for the ferry home. Three nights and two days of fresh air and girlie bonding. The fact that Bruges was billed as a very beautiful 'Venice of the North' was incidental – the highlight of the trip was going to be proving to sceptical spouses that we could pilot ourselves and our bikes there and back without incident.

Stranded at the passport booth I frantically tried to think of an exciting destination near Hull for us to pedal to instead. Instead, the P&O man came to our rescue: 'Why not go to Holland?'

With a fatherly air he assured us that while the Belgians were unaccountably funny about people having valid passports, the Dutch couldn't care less. He looked us over. 'I'm sure the Dutch will have you. They don't mind who they let in.'

Going Dutch

P&O faxed various forms to the Dutch immigration people, reissued us with tickets for our new route, and in a miraculously short space of time we were safely aboard the overnight ferry to the Europort, about 20 miles outside Rotterdam. And heading for the bar. A stiff G&T or two later and we were able to calmly reassess our plans.

A bear-like Dutch man overheard our conversation. One of P&O's head office staff, he heard our story, told us not to worry, fetched a road map from his car and suggested we should head for Sheveningen, the coastal resort just north of The Hague. 'It's a lovely place, and cycling is easy in Holland. You don't even really need a map.'

Giving us his business card, he assured us that there could be no higher priority for P&O than our having a good trip and told us not to hesitate to call him for help if we got stuck.

And he was right. About cycling being easy in Holland. It's utterly brilliant, not to mention effortlessly flat. They even have special cycle traffic lights. From the moment we zoomed down the ramp of the ferry our every two-wheeled whim was catered for. Dedicated cycle signposts ushered us out of the port and onto a cycle lane, and then gave us a choice of destinations and distances. From their helpful information it appeared that Delft was en route to The Hague. There are few places I've heard of in Holland, but Delft, and its crockery, is one of them.



“Our husbands said we needed proper bikes, stretchy clothing, and special luggage systems. Wrong”

I should explain that whilst this was a cycle tour, neither Soph nor I are your typical Lycra-clad cyclists. A large part of husbandly scepticism relating to our trip had been our conviction that since we both had bikes (the shopper type that we use for getting to WI meetings in the village) we could obviously go cycle touring. The husband-down-pub verdict on this was that it was madness. For a cycle tour they reckoned we needed proper bikes, stretchy high tech clothing and specially designed luggage ‘systems’.

And, actually, they’re wrong. I strapped a little picnic hamper above my back wheel, packed light enough to fit clothes and toiletries into my front wicker basket, and wore my normal shorts and t-shirts.

Riding to the beach

We pootled very happily on our way. Soph was slightly embarrassed by my enthusiasm for windmills, but I was charmed by them, they were so, well, Dutch. Our cycle signposts took us along a zig-zaggy route of little canals, through picturesque villages, and pitched us up at about lunchtime in Delft. We wended our way to the main square, parked up by a cafe and drank in the hot chocolate and the scene. Delft is undeniably touristy. We managed to resist the lure of plastic windmills, drifted around the quietly beautiful back streets, bought some light batteries at a market stall (another item that had slipped off Soph’s agenda), and happily popped back astride the bikes.

The Hague was brash and new after the quaintness of medieval streets and picture-postcard windmills, so we decided not to give it the time of day, and cycled straight through the middle of the modern office blocks. We were heading for the coast, and after a good 20-odd miles on the bikes by now our minds had bent towards a reviving cocktail on the beach.

It’s seldom that things are better than you imagine, but Sheveningen was. I’d braced myself for something down at heel, in a Blackpool-on-drugs kind of way, but it was lovely: an enormous pale sandy beach, startlingly sunny and gorgeously warm for May, and welcomingly lined with cafes and bars. A restoring few Mohitos later we checked

into a budget hotel, then wandered along the smart pier, mooched around the town (less nice) and settled into a beachside restaurant for the evening.

Day two was hardly less idyllic. We chose a different route back towards the Europort, primarily because we had no real idea where we’d actually been the day before. We followed random signposts in vaguely the right direction, and enjoyed feeling part of a cycling community. There were so many people on bikes. We waved cheerily at friendly locals, who humoured us and waved back, took the odd wrong turning and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. We picnicked by a canal and found ourselves, feeling like pros, catching a locals’ ferry back across the river estuary. We even had time for an early dinner before making it out to the ferry terminal, so we detoured slightly south of the main route to stop in Den Briel.

Holland: what can I say? Go, take your bike, you’ll love it. If you get the chance, then do a little planning – even at our pace we could have explored further in our two days had we got a decent map and done a bit of research. But if you fancy, just turn up and follow some signposts.

Fact File Dutch weekend

DISTANCE: 50 miles. 25 miles per day over 2 days.

TERRAIN: Easy peasy. Flat, beautifully-maintained cycle paths.

CONDITIONS: Weather is similar to England. We were lucky to be there on such a warm May weekend. Cycle paths or routes had consistent but light cycle traffic.

ACCOMMODATION: The Ibis, Genvers Deynootweg 63, Tel: +31-70-3543300. Room approx 100 Euros.

MAPS: A good range is available from Dutch Tourist Information (‘VVV’s’) e.g. the ANWB/VVV Toeristenkaart 1:100,000 range.

GETTING THERE/BACK: P&O run overnight ferries from Hull to Rotterdam daily, approx £70 per person.

BIKES USED: ladies’ shoppers, with baskets on the front.

JOIN US: Mark Waters is leading a CTC tour to North Holland (ref 0941) from 29 August until 6 September. An ideal tour for novice cycle campers, it costs £110 including your campsites and all planning and admin costs, but not your ferry/train/flight. For details, contact Mark at CTC National Office, tel: 01483 238305, mark.waters@ctc.org.uk.