



Average gradient is about 7%



Texel: seascapes and easy cycling

## The Netherlands Coasting through West Friesland

**Sandy D Franklin** needed a non-strenuous tour. She found one across the North Sea

**STRUGGLING WITH LONG** Covid, I needed a gentle cycling holiday. Where better than the Netherlands? I've frequently cycled there but never on Texel, the largest of the West Friesland islands off the north-west coast. We stayed near Texel's west coast, on the edge of the forest and the Dunes National Park. Our days began with a morning swim in the sea before anyone was about.

We rode to every corner of the island. I cycled south along the coast by heathland that was purple with flowering heather, passing lakes with geese, ducks and egrets, by huge sand dunes to cafés on empty, sandy beaches. To the north-west, we rode beside vast dunes to the lighthouse at the northern tip. On the east coast, mudflats were home to colonies of spoonbill, curlew and eider. Another ride took us south-east to the town of Oudeschild, over the island's 'big hill' (15 metres).

We left Texel to explore some of the other national parks in the Netherlands. We first cycled around Lauwersmeer in the north, a wetland area famed for its marsh harriers. Then we visited Veluwezoom, an area of oak, beech and pine woods, sandy plains and heathland. Wild boar, deer and wolves live here.

Finally, we cycled in Biesbosch National Park, part of the Rhine delta, which is famed for its beaver populations. With extensive waterways and reed beds, it's a stark contrast to the surrounding industrial areas.

After my last morning swim, I headed home with my mind filled with nature's wonders.

## Italy

# The Stelvio Pass

For his 70th birthday, **Ian Smith** wanted a challenge. He picked the second-highest paved mountain pass in the Alps

**T**his might be your last milestone birthday," my wife Dianne said before my 70th. "What have you always wanted to do?"

I thought for a while, then said that I wanted to cycle up the Stelvio, the famous mountain pass in Italy. Within half an hour she'd found a company that would do a bespoke trip.

The Stelvio Pass is a climb that deserves its reputation. It's 21.5km long, rising from 1,225m at Bormio to 2,765m at top. The average gradient is around 7%, the steepest sections 14%. Where I live in the Scottish Borders the climbs are short and not steep. The climb up to Bowden Loch from the Melrose side is just over 7% but is less than a 10th as long as the Stelvio. I'd need to ride it a lot. So I did: 113 times between late January and early June.

By the time I was in Bormio with my hire bike that summer, I felt ready. Setting off from the pretty spa town, it was steady climbing to begin with. The Alps looked spectacular in the morning sunshine. Soon other cyclists starting overtaking me; I was happy plodding away at my own pace.

The tunnels section was next but they all had traffic lights and were all lit. Then there was a long section with a steeper gradient. This part was relatively straight so it was easy to see the next part, a

series of 14 hairpin bends, seemingly climbing into the sky.

The easiest part of the climb was followed by the hardest. But by then I could see the buildings at the top of the pass. The end was in sight. I was going to do it.

At the pass there was a cold wind. I pulled on my rain jacket on and set off downhill. I've never used disc brakes before but, my goodness, they made the descent so easy on the hands.

It took 2 hours 45 minutes to go up and 35 minutes to come down. It would have been quicker but there was much more traffic by then, so I had to limit my speed – the only disappointment of the day. An hour after I arrived back at the hotel, there was a spectacular thunderstorm.



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