

World News

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Holiday in Holland

Jan 5, 2008 7:00 PM EST

Exploring the quaint town of Utrecht

In the past few years, intrepid travel writer Kristin Luna has ping-ponged all over the globe. Here, she rehashes some of her favorite facets of life in Holland:

Eats: The Netherlands isn't known for its gourmet cuisine--the Dutch dining philosophy is to deep-fry everything and serve with fries, hold the salad--but thankfully the country offers every international cuisine under the sun (an ambler might find Ethiopian, Argentinean and Moroccan establishments all within a 100-foot stretch). With an Arabic population of more than 1 million, some of the best fare is North African and Middle Eastern: it's cheap and easy and rarely disappoints. My daily lunch staples were Turkish pizzas or falafel from any of the ubiquitous, colorful dives that dot Utrecht. For one of the tastiest alternatives in town, stop by the Surinamese stand in the middle of Neude Square and order the roti kip, a pita stuffed with chicken, potatoes and green beans (tofu options are available, as well). If you're set on trying the regional fare, grab a cone of thick Flemish fries from any vendor. They're not significantly different from "freedom fries," but served with mayonnaise in lieu of ketchup.

Biking: The Dutch bike everywhere: grocery stores, shopping malls and even the bars. If you're staying in one place for a considerable amount of time, you might consider buying a second-hand set of wheels to help you get around. It's great exercise and more reliable than the country's public transit. The Utrecht police station holds an auction once a month where you can purchase a used bicycle for as little as five or 10 euros (check the tourist office in Neude Square for details upon arrival); at any time, you can find "bicycle black market" vendors near the train stations. Buy the loudest, crummiest one possible, as bike theft is a common occurrence. Or consider renting one for the day at any sporting-good store (watch for signs boasting "fiets," the Dutch word for bike).

Drinks: You needn't look further than Utrecht's main canal, Oudegracht, and its myriad drinking institutions to whet your appetite for quality European brews. Although technically a Belgian pub, Café België--my local haunt--offers the finest Dutch and German ales and lagers. The cavelike Cees Place (Tel: 030-2710153, www.ceesplace.nl), a canalside jazz and blues joint, is the perfect spot to share a bottle of wine while noshing on a fondue platter. For those determined

to stay out until the rooster crows (read: not me), Tivoli (Tel: 0900-2358486, www.tivoli.nl) --a dual-level club located at the end of the hopping expanse of bars--entertains until the wee hours of the morning. A little way from the rest of the pack is Stairway to Heaven (030-2322288, www.stairway.nl), a rock-influenced (obviously) bar known to get a little wild. For more relaxing times, try Theatercafé Springhaver (Tel: 030-2313789, www.springhaver.nl), consistently ranked one of the best pubs in the country by various Dutch publications.

Day Trips: A relatively small country--it's less than twice the size of New Jersey--the majority of the Netherlands' sites can be accessed via a short train ride. Amsterdam, of course, is worth perusing, but there are plenty of other small towns in the vicinity that you can explore in just a day or less. One of my personal favorites, Zaanse Schans (www.zaanseschans.nl), may have that obnoxious touristy element, but with its wooden shoe factory (there's an oversized sabot on display outside for that quintessential Dutch photo op), cheese farm, row of multicolored windmills and quaint air of culture and tradition, it makes for a great family outing. Closer to Utrecht, you'll come across the town of Gouda, home to the world-famous cheese. (It's also known for its smoking pipes, but you didn't hear that from me!) Examine the Netherlands in bite-sized form at Madurodam (www.madurodam.nl), where the country is reproduced in a miniature version, or escape into a fantasy world at the Disneyesque theme park Efteling (www.efteling.nl). Other towns that deserve a gander include Leiden, Amersfoort and Eindhoven; all are within a two-hour journey and worth the travel time.

Festivities: The light-hearted Dutch may not take a whole lot seriously, but Carnival and Queen's Day are two things they certainly get right. Carnival comes first, beginning the Sunday before Ash Wednesday and lasting for a solid three days. Locals adorn intricate costumes and guide elaborate floats through the streets during festive parades. Other traditions vary by the town. Queen's Day, or Koninginnedag, originated as a massive celebration for Queen Wilhelmina's birthday (Aug. 31), but later moved to April 30 in honor of Queen Juliana. Since its inception, the holiday has morphed into an all-day, nationwide party that attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists and an open-air flea market, in which revelers don bright orange (the country's signature color) and set out their wares for the perusal of the masses.

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