

## A Year In Holland – Part II

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My first sabbatical leave from St. Olaf College was 1974-75. In Part I, I wrote mostly about coming to Utrecht, The Netherlands, where we lived, its history and culture, and getting settled in a new place. Here in Part II, I will tell you about everyday life there and some of our adventures during that year.

After getting used to living in Utrecht, our first adventure was a day trip to Amsterdam. It was about a half-hour train trip from the *Utrecht Centraal Station* to the *Amsterdam Centraal Station*. With a map in hand, we planned a sight-seeing trip around the city. The *Amsterdamse Tram* is a network dating back to 1875, the largest in the Netherlands and one of the largest in Europe. We hopped on a tram which was filled to capacity. Getting off at our first stop was difficult with all those people. All of us except Betty managed to depart while we watched her and the tram disappear into the distance. The girls started to cry, thinking they'd never see their mother again but soon we saw her walking back from the next stop, and all was well. We first visited the *Rijksmuseum* with the Dutch and other European masters including Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, the nearby *Van Gogh Museum*, and walked along the canals to the *Anne Frank Huis* on the *Prinsengracht*. A tour through the house and museum was interesting and touching.

We ended up at an Indonesian *Rijstafel* restaurant for a nice dinner. We then got out the map to find the best way back to the *Centraal Station*. The most direct route took us along a canal that just happened to go right through the red light district – “what are those ladies doing sitting in front of their big windows?” An unexpected educational experience for our kids!

Amsterdam is a city for museums, otherwise, it was not our favorite. It was dirty, crowded, and very touristy. The Hague (*Den Haag*), Rotterdam, Leiden, Utrecht, and many small towns are more interesting and typical of Holland.

Utrecht is a walking city, easy to traverse in an hour or two. It had a medieval *centrum* (city center) with tree-lined canals, beautiful old architecture, churches, and small museums. It was an easy walk from our house on a nice day.

In the evenings before the long, dark winter nights set in, we enjoyed taking short bike rides around the surrounding area. One cool Fall evening we biked along a canal with houses along the side of the road. Most houses have large front windows, and most people keep their drapes open – perhaps a reaction from the war years when they had to keep them closed. In one of the houses we passed, a very scantily dressed woman was sitting in front of her window. One of our girls said, “why doesn't she have more clothes on, it's cold?” Then a car pulled up, a man got out, entered the house, and the drapes were suddenly closed. How do you explain that to your young children?

Another favorite bicycle ride was to the outskirts of the city past the Douwe Egberts' coffee-roasting plant – this is a major coffee brand in Northern Europe. We would slow down as we passed the plant to inhale the wonderful aroma of roasting coffee. Outside the city, there were separate *fietspads* (bicycle paths) separate from the roads or highways.

Eykmanlaan, in front of our house, was a busy street with a bus stop and a separate bicycle lane. Lots of bicycles passed by during the day. A bicycle built for four, bicycles carrying freight of every kind, and more. Every Sunday morning a young man cycled by with a bale of hay on his rack; where was he going and why? Nicely dressed couples cycled to church. A nearby bank was robbed and the suspect escaped on a bicycle, pursued by police on bicycles. Only in Holland!

We took day trips outside of Utrecht by train. One of our favorite places to visit was the *Hoge Veluwe National Park* just outside of Arnhem. It is a nature area of approximately 55 square kilometers, consisting of heathlands, sand dunes, and woodlands. The big attraction there for us was the *Kröller-Müller Museum*, which has the second-largest collection of paintings, after the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, by Vincent van Gogh. Surrounding the museum was a sculpture garden with a collection of modern and contemporary sculptures. It was relaxing to walk around and enjoy the park. Our favorite sculpture was a much-larger-than-life spade by Claes Oldenburg, partially stuck in the ground.

Another interesting trip was to Zaandaam, just north of Amsterdam. The Zaanse Schans, a neighborhood of Zaandam, is best known for its collection of well-preserved historic windmills and houses, was picturesque and interesting to visit. Other small towns around the *Ijsselmeer* – formerly the *Zuiderzee* – were also nice to visit.

Our kids' favorite place near The Hague (*Den Haag*) in Scheveningen, was *Madurodam*, a miniature park, and tourist attraction district. It is home to a range of 1:25 scale model replicas of famous Dutch landmarks, historical cities, and large developments. It was fun to walk through this miniature city and look down at the tiny buildings.

The Hague was a beautiful city with many interesting museums. We visited *The Mauritshuis*, which houses works by many Dutch and European masters. Housed in a 17th-century building, which was the residence of count John Maurice of Nassau, it was one of the top Dutch heritage sites. A fun museum to visit there was the *Escher Palace*. Over 120 prints of M.C. Escher (1898-1972), with his imaginative worlds of illusion and amazement, were on display.

Other cities we visited were Aalsmeer, with the world's largest flower auction; Leiden with its centuries-old architecture and Leiden University, the country's oldest, dating from 1575; and Gouda, known for its namesake cheese and seasonal cheese market on the medieval *Markt* square.

The Utrecht University paired us with a host family. On Christmas day they invited us for a traditional dinner. Their Christmas tree was decorated with real candles, which they lit – a bucket of water was nearby if needed. The main dish was roasted hare, a large wild rabbit – to vouch for its authenticity we were warned to look for buckshot.

The Christmas season began on December 5, *Sinterklaas Dag*, when *Sinterklaas* (St. Nicholas) arrived by boat from Spain, bringing presents for children who were good or a lump of coal for those who were not. This is the main gift-giving day. It goes back to when The Netherlands was under Spanish rule. *Sinterklaas* is dressed as a bishop, not the white-haired bearded Santa Claus that we know, and rides through town on a horse, dressed in his bishop's robe. He is aided by his helper, *Zwarte Piet* (Black Peter, an attendant of Moorish descent) – I'm sure that is considered racist today and has certainly been modified – and goes from door to door bringing gifts.

New Year's Eve was a time for big fireworks, as in most other cities, but here there were no restrictions. People were lighting large firecrackers and launching rockets in the street in front of our house. It looked and sounded like World War III had erupted! Fortunately, there were few injuries and no houses burnt down as they were all made of concrete with fire-proof roofs. We spent the evening playing Monopoly with Dutch buildings and streets.

Our year in Holland was one of the wettest on record – we seem to have a knack for bringing wet weather wherever we go. I wore a wet suit – nylon pants and hooded parka – when I cycled to work. That was fine except when I got to the lab, took off my shoes, and emptied them of rainwater – the water flowed down my pant legs right into my shoes. The worst was when I bicycled home during a sleet storm – the sharp pieces of ice hit my face and it hurt! Of course, during the Northern winter days, it was always dark in the morning going to work and dark coming home – bicycle lights were required.

In February we made a trip to Cologne (*Köln*) Germany. The daughter of a friend of ours in Northfield was married to a German and lived there. We stayed with her family, and her mother-in-law – quite a character who spoke English with a strong British accent – drove us around in her small Lada (a Russian excuse for a car). With our whole family crammed inside, it bottomed out over every bump and scraped its side on all turns.

This was just before Lent and the big event was *Carnival*, the Cologne version of Mardi Gras. A big parade featured floats, outrageous costumes, and much merrymaking. Many of the themes had to do with local politics. The slogans were in the local dialect – close to that spoken in Eastern Holland – and had to be translated into standard German for those outside of the region to understand. We also visited the magnificent Cologne Cathedral.

A month or so before we left Holland, we rented a car for a trip to Belgium and a bit of Germany. Our first stop was in Bruges, a beautiful city with canals (if you ignored the smells) and the *Beguinage* – dating back to the 13th century (1245), it was a refuge for single or widowed women who wanted to live in a pious way but outside the walls of a convent or monastery. We spent the night in a youth hostel in Antwerp, a former abbey with antiquated accommodations – no hot water in the morning for showers! This Western part of Belgium is known as Flanders, where the language is a dialect of Dutch – we could understand most of it.

We then headed east to Aachen, Germany. On the way, we stopped at a town (Eupen ?) at the German border. The signs were in German, people spoke German, but it was still inside Belgium, this seemed strange. After World War I, in 1919, the Treaty of Versailles transferred this border area east of Liège, from Germany to Belgium.

Aachen, Germany, was the seat of Charlemagne, head of the Holy Roman Empire in the late eighth century. The cathedral, one of the oldest in Europe, was constructed by Emperor Charlemagne around 796 – he was buried there in 814. We saw the Throne of Charlemagne in the Western Gallery and artifacts of that era in the Cathedral Treasury. It was quite a thrill to see all the history represented there.

We headed back to Utrecht, crossing the border between Germany and The Netherlands. We showed the border agent our passports and he advised us that we needed to renew our Dutch visas. We ignored his advice since we were due to return to the States in just a few weeks.

Leaving Utrecht after a year was hard – at that point it seemed like home. We started to box up our belongings, sell our five bicycles, and say goodbye to friends we made there. On one of our last days, I walked to the Centrum with a camera around my neck to take pictures of common sights we took for granted but had never photographed. Along one street a woman leaned out of her door and said in a beseeching voice, “*kom binnen meneer*” (come in sir). I realized this was the red light district (I never knew that before) and I was mistaken for a tourist with my camera. I was tempted to take her picture, but then had better thoughts about it.

Airline fares from the Netherlands to the States were much higher than those in England due to some obscure international regulations. We decided to fly out of London to Chicago, which was much cheaper. We arranged with the Bolitho's, our English friends in Hatfield, to stay in their house a few days while they were on holiday, and then fly out of Heathrow airport. We traveled from Hoek van Holland by train, across the channel by ferry to Harwich, and then by train to Hatfield (north of London).

Traveling to Hoek van Holland on the train, Krista and Klara began to cry. They did not want to leave, there were friends they would miss, and this was home, a

significant part of their young lives. They had forgotten about our home in Northfield. The ferry crossing was rough during the evening and we stayed on deck most of the time rather than below with the rank smells of everyone throwing up – we were okay.

In Hatfield, we rented a car to drive to the airport. The Bolitho's friends told us their favorite routes to Heathrow airport, some quite convoluted. We made it to the airport but couldn't tell where the rental car drop-off was. I managed to pull up beside a London cabbie to ask, and he said, "follow me" – no problem. When we arrived in Chicago to transfer to a flight to Minneapolis, a NW Airline strike was just beginning. We managed to get the last flight out of Chicago before the strike, and landed safely at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport.

There was culture shock coming to the Netherlands, and a reverse culture shock coming back. American cars seemed huge, and there were wide-open spaces unseen in Europe. One of the advantages of international travel is to realize that other countries do some things better, or at least different, than we do at home – that brings a good sense of humility, we are not always the best. Meeting other people, especially speaking their own language, shows us that most people are the same as us, they just might express themselves differently.

Back in Northfield we re-adjusted to our old ways but had a much different perspective of the world. It was good to be back home again.