

'In Elburg we found pretty alleyways and tempting cafés overlooking the little canals'



Spring in the nether Netherlands

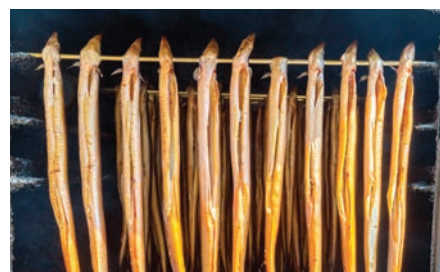
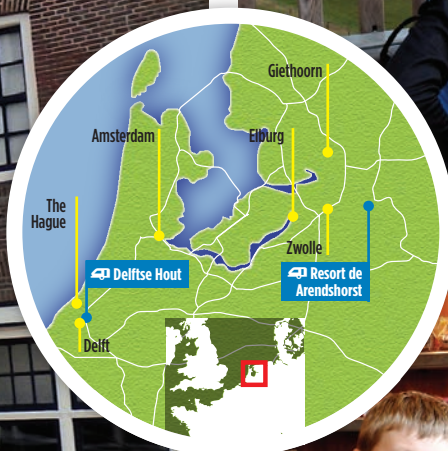


Harvey, Ben and **Anna Lyon** enjoy exploring by bike and boat in this region of picturesque canals, gardens and villages

FINDING A HOLIDAY destination is not a problem when you have a home on wheels; it's more a question of organising where to go in the time you have allocated.

This was to be our last trip in Eddie, our Eriba Troll 530, and we left the decision in the hands of our 10-year-old son, Ben, who suggested a great two-week escape based on "where there's cage football and go-karts". Camping Delftse Hout in the Netherlands it was, then.

On board the overnight Stena Line ferry from Harwich to the Hook of Holland, we ate our way through a selection of nibbles on offer in our deluxe cabin before tucking up in comfortable beds, wondering what experiences lay before us. A trip involving a ferry crossing and the need for passports really fuels the excitement for an adventure.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT A typical canalside street in Elburg. Anna stops to admire the flat landscape on a bike ride to Zwolle. Traditional dress in Staphorst. Smoked eel is a local delicacy in Elburg, but Ben and Harvey preferred to eat cake

We drove across the flatlands, journeying through buzzing cities, medieval towns and fertile countryside, past canals and beaches and under a big open sky, looking forward to our two-week stay in the Netherlands, rather than merely using the roads as a route to other parts of Europe.

We had chosen two campsites for their location and began our tour by driving the remarkably traffic-free A12 (it was a Sunday) to our farthest site, in the Vecht Valley of the Salland region in Eastern Netherlands – Resort de Arendshorst, near Ommen.

Set in a beautiful 500-acre reserve, this is a recognised area of outstanding natural beauty.

Michael, the pleasant and helpful site owner, was opening up the campsite for the new season when we arrived, and we were given free rein to choose wherever we wanted to go.

Delighted, we found a pitch without neighbours and an area the size of a football ground for our front garden, with a wooden bench to sit on while we planned our days and enjoyed views of the River Vecht.

Perfect for cycling

Once Ben had helped feed the sheep, we took the bikes down from the car, pumped up the tyres and were ready to visit the town of Ommen, just six miles away. Undoubtedly the best way to explore Holland is by bike; the flatness of the countryside assures a relaxed cycling tour on the extensive, well-marked, dedicated cycle paths direct from the campsite.

With the day's excitement catching up on us, there was just the matter of Ben putting away all the petting animals for the night and checking up on the

campsite's newest addition, which we named Eddie – we had missed the newborn lamb's birth by minutes.

With some knowledge of the area from Michael, we decided on a touring route the next day, stopping first at Staphorst, a staunchly Protestant farming village of 14,000 inhabitants. Staphorst hit the world's news when it suffered an outbreak of polio in 1971 (apparently 20% of residents remain unvaccinated to this day, for religious reasons). This Dutch Reformed community, with its traditional green buildings, which shuns TV as 'ungodly', had not been mentioned in our *Rough Guide*, but we were intrigued to find a place where people still wear traditional dress.

Not wishing to invade their privacy as residents made their way to church, we carried on to

the small Hanseatic town of Elburg, entering via the Vischpoort (Fish Gate), which was built in 1392.

In Elburg we found pretty alleyways and tempting cafés overlooking the little canals. Passing on the local delicacy of smoked eel, we settled for *Chocomel* (hot chocolate) with our first *stroopwafel* of the trip.

Sugar levels topped up, we made the short journey to Zwolle, where Ben was really fascinated by the inhabited vintage canal barges moored at the harbour.

With the sky getting darker, the eye-catching, ovoid addition to the Museum de Fundatie's neoclassical structure seemed to rise up before us, making us appreciate its nickname, 'Cloud and Egg', as we ran past to reach the car before the rain finally closed in. >>



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT **Zwolle's locals call the Museum de Fundatie 'Cloud and Egg'. Giethoorn is known as the Venice of the North. Ben buys walnuts for the journey. Taking to the water on a whisper boat. Enjoying a ride by the lake at Delftse Hout. The national cycle path network makes it easy to plan traffic-free trips**



The last place on our tour for the day was nearby Deventer, on the River IJssel, which I had read somewhere was used to represent bombed Arnhem in the 1977 film *A Bridge too Far*.

We thought it looked a bit neglected in places, but the highlight was the Brink, a large, cobbled marketplace where we went in search of the famous Deventer honey cake (*Bussink Diventer Koek* – produced locally for over 500 years).

Going Dutch

From four wheels back to two – the map (*Vechtdal en Salland 07*, bought from the site) showed that it was possible to cycle traffic-free on the LF 16 Vecht Valley Route towards Zwolle.

Ben was up for the challenge, so we made an early start with emergency rations, lunch and all types of clothing packed.

Once an important trade route, the river is now lined with picturesque villages, and expanses of flat, watery pasture, with ample opportunities to stop and enjoy the countryside. Ben was delighted to get up close to newborn calves, and to see where his favourite ice cream producer is based (sadly, no samples were to be had).

In the forest, farther along the route and after being chased by some huge nesting cranes, we found an 18-metre tower platform to climb, enabling us to take in the wide views over the Vecht and to see where we could cross the river to find somewhere for lunch.

Much to the amusement of the locals, Ben took the control button of the unstaffed, solar-powered 'bicycle ferry', crossing the River Vecht several times between Ommen and Dalfsen,

before we finally disembarked to have our lunch.

Nothing makes you feel more Dutch than riding a bike and eating *boterhams* (sandwiches) for lunch. A great day out in the fresh air was followed by an unforgettable evening, seeing our first lamb (Snowy) born safely after a tricky start, with lots of reassurance from the vet.

Venice of the north

Italy's Venice holds a special place in the hearts of the Lyon family, so we were all curious to visit Giethoorn (also known as Green Venice or Venice of the North), in the Weerribben-Wieden National Park.

The name Giethoorn comes from the discovery by early inhabitants of hundreds of goat horns in the marshy remnants of a 10th-century flood. A mostly car-free village in the province

of Overijssel, it is known for its boat-filled waterways, with more than 180 bridges, footpaths, cycle trails and centuries-old thatched houses.

We parked on the smaller, northern side of Giethoorn and enjoyed the peaceful canals, admiring a pretty thatched farmhouse as we walked along the footpaths.

Munching our way through a bag of walnuts that Ben had bought outside one of the houses, we were surprised to see locals carrying rubbish and items around in wheelbarrows.

Re-reading our guide book, we discovered another part of Giethoorn, accessible only by boat – tourists are required to leave their cars outside the village, and postal deliveries are made by punt.

In the past, boats were used to transport peat on these



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Ben says hello to a lamb at Arendshorst's petting zoo. Carpets of spring colour at Keukenhof Gardens. Watching waffles being prepared. A typical view of Amsterdam's bikes and canals



canals. Now, the 90km of canals are used to transport reed and cattle to and from the meadows. Leisure use is popular too, with many canoes, sailing punts and whisper boats (dinghies with an electric motor).

We decided to hire a whisper boat, so after securing the best price (€15) and some instruction, we took an hour-long trip, led by captain Ben, around the 'side streets' (small canals), drifting under the bridges, where some skilful navigation was needed.

Delighted that we managed to stay dry and find our way back, we realised how fortunate we had been to visit such a beautiful place in full sunshine, without crowds of people.

We celebrated with *mergpijpes* (soft cake covered in marzipan and dipped in chocolate at both ends) – steering a boat can be such a calorie-burner!

All too soon it was time for the last flat run and cycle before taking down our awning, saying goodbye to the farm animals, and leaving De Hoge Veluwe National Park.

Our next destination was Delftse Hout, just 2.5 hours away – or, in our case, the length of a *Mr Stink* audiobook. The farmland and thatched houses were soon replaced by an altogether different landscape.

City break

Adjacent to the Delftse Hout campsite is a large recreational lake, with a little beach and plenty of cycle paths, and it's just 15 minutes' walk from Delft city centre. Amsterdam, The Hague and Keukenhof Gardens are also within easy reach.

With go-kart hire organised for the next few days, we set up camp and took a stroll into

picturesque, 17th-century Delft. The town is known worldwide for Johannes Vermeer's painting, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and for Royal Delft blue and white china, which is still made and hand-painted in the area.

Delftware is readily available in souvenir shops around the market and you can see it being produced in small factories.

Among ancient red-tiled houses, tree-lined Oude Delft canals and humpbacked bridges, and a large central square, the Markt, we found lots to explore during our stay.

We walked back to basecamp via Ikea for some bed linen shopping and 40-cent ice creams. With new sheets on the beds, we settled down for family film night and to look at ideas for the week ahead.

The Netherlands is world-famous for the cultivation of

flowers, and Keukenhof (open mid-March to mid-May), located on the edge of the little town of Lisse, is one of the largest flower parks in the world, dating back to 1949 and just 40 minutes from the campsite by car.

It is an amazing experience – millions of daffodils, hyacinths, tulips and other spring bulbs form carpets of colour and give off the most amazing aroma.

Sea and sand

A hot, sunny Sunday was clearly destined to be a beach day. A trip to Wassenaar (an affluent suburb of The Hague), with its 8km stretch of sea and sand, made us appreciate just how family- and outdoors-oriented the Dutch are.

I read somewhere that 84% of people in the Netherlands own at least one bike, and the car park confirmed this high >>>

Your trip planner

WHEN TO GO

If you love spring bulbs, then go when the Keukenhof Gardens are open. This year's dates are 22 March-13 May.

WAY TO GO

Visit www.stenaline.co.uk for crossings between Harwich and the Hook of Holland

FIND OUT MORE

■ Delft Tourist Information

Kerkstraat 3 (Marktplaats) 2611 GX Delft

Web www.delft.com

■ Amsterdam Tourist Information

Noord-Zuid Hollandsch Koffiehuis, Stationplein 1

Web www.iamsterdam.com

■ Giethoorn Tourist Information

Web giethoortourism.com

■ Delft Pottery factory tour

Rotterdamsweg 196, 2628 AR Delft

Web www.delftpottery.com

■ Bicycle hire

Hire bikes from Fietsplus, behind Delft railway station.

Web www.fietsplusdelft.nl

OUR OUTFIT

We tow our 2013 Eriba Troll 530 (Eddie) with our 2015 white Škoda Yeti (Snowy)



percentage. It's so refreshing to be among people of all ages enjoying the cycle trails and, like us, ending a long ride with a play on the sand dunes and a paddle in the freezing North Sea!

With an opportunity to see our next Eriba Troll, the 550 GT, we found ourselves at the Hymer dealership in Delft, getting rather excited about the new layout and colour scheme, while Ben amused himself with Lego.

With talk of what we should call our next caravan, we made our way to Leiden.

Leiden, the birthplace of Rembrandt, is home to the country's oldest university (dating from 1575), which today hosts more than 30,000 students and has buildings scattered throughout the city.

Its maze of lanes around a complicated network of canals lined with bars and cafés has a very relaxed atmosphere. After a pleasant stop for drinks and cake, we took the 20-minute train journey to spend the afternoon in Amsterdam.

Amsterdam canals

There's lots to see in Amsterdam, but we focused on the canal district, the Grachtengordel.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2010, this is a beautiful part of the city. We strolled in the sunshine from north to south, enjoying its quiet, hidden courtyards, lattice of olive-green waterways and small humpback bridges overlooked by street upon street of parked bicycles and 17th-century houses.

The train journey to and from Leiden and the whistle-stop tour of Amsterdam will be everlasting memories for Ben – well, that and the Dutch waffle stand.

Back in the saddle

With more than 250km of cycle paths, The Hague (the city by the beach) is a great place to explore by bike.

Escaping the bustling centre, we pointed our bikes towards Scheveningen and Kijkduin, with its 11km of coastline. After a quick visit to the pier and Scheveningen Harbour, we parked the bikes out of the biting wind for a play in the sand and lunch, before heading back for an evening ride into Delft to buy sausages for a lakeside barbecue.

With so many green areas around Delft still to explore,



LEFT-RIGHT **Ben chooses a round of cheese to take home. Visitors to Gouda can watch cheeses being traded every day in summer at De Goudse Waag, in the market**



and not wanting to use the car, the following day we planned a circular 35km bicycle route from our campsite.

Taking the Fietsroute, the national cycle path network, is the easiest way to explore – the signposts also suggest walking or rollerskating.

It was another great family day out, with plenty of water-based play areas along the route, providing entertainment in the form of obstacle courses and rafts with pulley systems.

We stopped half-way, at the village of Schipluiden, for a light lunch of chunky chips and mayonnaise and big pieces of cheesecake, at Café Indigo – fuel for the return journey.

It was hard to believe the time had gone by so quickly, but that evening, we discussed what we wanted to do on our last full day in the Netherlands.

Cheese, please

It was Cheese Market day at Gouda, the perfect place to buy our own round of cheese while watching cheese being traded at De Goudse Waag (the weigh house) in the market. This takes place every Thursday from April to August.

We bought gifts of cheese and Kamphuisen syrup waffles to take home, sampled hot treacle waffles, and bought bread and a Gouda cheese slicer to enjoy our final picnic by the canal.

Back at camp that evening, Ben went off with his new-found friends on an entrepreneurial go-kart recycling job – they were collecting rubbish bags from other caravan owners with their go-karts, for any pocket money that might be offered.

It was just a 40-minute drive to Hook of Holland and the ferry home – the perfect end to this perfect holiday being a chance meeting on board with Ben's friend Astrid.

As the pair excitedly swapped stories and sweets, queuing for cinema tickets, we smiled to one another knowingly, wondering how it was going to be to travel with the puppy we were yet to surprise Ben with. **PC**

Why we stayed at...



Resort de Arendshorst

This riverside site is set in a 500-acre nature reserve. Amenities include a small shop, bar and restaurant, modern washblocks, launderette and play areas.

Address Arendshorsterweg 3a, 7731 RC Ommen
Tel 00 31 (0)52 945 3248 **Web** resort-de-arendshorst.nl **Open** April-October **Pitches** 125 touring **Charges** (2 adults + 1 child) €22 per night (April) plus tourist tax – €1 per person per night



Delftse Hout

In the heart of the countryside, by a lake with a small beach, this site is 15 minutes' walk from Delft. Pitches are grassy and separated by tidy hedges.

Address Korftlaan 5, 2616 LJ Delft
Tel 00 31 (0)15 213 0040 **Web** delftsehout.co.uk
Open March-November **Pitches** 150 touring **Charges** (2 adults + 1 child) €26 per night (April) plus tourist tax – €1 per person per night