



The famous De Adriaan windmill which sits along the banks of the Spaarne in Haarlem

Land of *Tulips*

Text and photos by Dr Jenny Lim

TWO YEARS ago, my husband Ron and I had lunch with a lovely Dutch couple, Ingrid and Remco, in Leon, Nicaragua. It was a convivial affair with two bottles of wine and good food. We promised to keep in touch by Facebook and visit each other. I finally made it to the Netherlands (via Belgium) in April this year. Upon arrival at Brussels Airport, I told the friendly immigration officers that my reason for entering their country was to visit Maastricht, and they laughed and asked why. I realised there is indeed rivalry between neighbouring nations everywhere in the world.

Maastricht, the capital of Limburg province in southeast Netherlands, was easily reached by train. I stayed two nights at Botel Maastricht, a river barge moored along the Maas River. My boat hotel was only a short walk away from the historic cobblestoned city centre, with its monumental churches and two attractive town squares lined by traditional buildings and pollarded plane trees.

Maastricht claims to be the oldest city in the country and boasts five restaurants with Michelin stars. My last memory of riding a bicycle and sharing the road with cars was 20 years ago in rural Japan. Despite that, I rented one and with



Clockwise from top left

A great day on Hoorn's charming quayside

A peaceful bucolic scene in Alkmaar

The magnificent St Bavo church in Haarlem

trepidation, biked to two-starred Chateau Neercanne for an excellent alfresco lunch. It was my first taste of Dutch spring lamb from the island of Texel in the North Sea, and the most succulent and exquisite lamb I have ever had. Another Maastricht specialty is the Limburgse *vlaai*, which is a pie made from bread-like pastry and filled with fruit. I savoured a breakfast of apple with hazelnut *vlaai* and good coffee at Bishopssmolen cafe. Their bakery has a working watermill that dates back to the seventh century and is used to grind spelt grains to make bread the traditional way. I later returned for a satisfying farmer's lunch of local jam, butter, cheese, pate, salami and sausage with a selection of their breads.

From Maastricht, I travelled by rail to Haarlem to stay with my friends for the next nine nights. Haarlem is a charming city and convenient base to explore the Netherlands as it is a major train and bus hub. It was wonderful to be shown around by two locals who love their city. Haarlem was wealthy in bygone days, as evidenced by the massive gothic St Bavo church, appealing 14th-century City Hall, other restored buildings around the large market square and

canals, and charming *hofjes* scattered around the city. (*Hofjes* are almshouses donated by the rich and built around garden courtyards.)

The major reason to visit the Netherlands during this period is the tulips. Haarlem has been the historical centre of the tulip bulb-growing district for centuries. I was fortunate that the flowers had started blooming about a week earlier than usual due to a mild winter and warm March. We drove to nearby fields of tulips, hyacinths and narcissus, which offered a stunning sight to behold. The heady scent of hyacinths, especially when the wind blew, was unforgettable. I revelled in the spectacular tapestry of multicoloured hues, and felt like I was in an outdoor perfumery with freshly scented breezes blowing.

On the first weekday with a sunny forecast, I went to the 32-hectare Keukenhof garden where seven million flower bulbs are planted annually. The place also houses more than 2,650 tulip varieties. I arrived when it opened at 8 am and spent four hours taking in a kaleidoscope of flowers set in an English-style garden landscape. It was packed by 11 am and I left at noon. I would have stayed there all day if not for the crowds. Getting in and out of the carpark looked nightmarish, I thought as I walked to the bus stop, and





Carpets of vividly coloured tulips cover Keukenhof

boarded a bus to Leiden, the birthplace of Rembrandt. It is also home to Leiden University, the oldest in the Netherlands, which has almost 20,000 students in a city of 100,000. I polished off a good lunch in the Golden Tulip hotel (only a three-minute walk from the bus stop by the train station), before having an enjoyable time exploring this attractive university town and people-watching while relaxing in a cafe.

I also visited Hoorn, an incredibly picturesque fishing village with a pleasant town square, quaint buildings along winding canals, and best of all, a delightful harbour (with its own mediaeval watch tower) where an assortment of boats were docked. I bought fried fish takeaway from the ubiquitous *vishandel* (fish shop) to eat by the idyllic quayside. The weather was perfect for lingering on the waterfront to watch boats, birds and amusing groups of young schoolchildren walking to the park. Surprisingly, there were not many seagulls and none attacked my plate of fish. Even Dutch seagulls are polite, unlike their aggressive cousins in Cornwall, UK. I could have spent all day in beguiling Hoorn.

One Friday morning, Ingrid drove me to the city of Alkmaar on her way to work. It was the first day of the cheese market festival held every Friday from April till September. There was a fun two-hour re-enactment of a cheese auction at the Waagplein square circa 1365, when the city had only a single cheese weighing scale. Performers in traditional costumes were obviously having a great time. Alkmaar has a postcard-pretty historic centre with 17th-century canals and narrow cobblestoned streets lined with cheerful Dutch Renaissance step-gabled houses. The Friday cheese market

is a huge tourist draw, but fortunately it was still early in the season and Alkmaar was not crowded that day. From Alkmaar I took a public bus to nearby Schermerhorn to admire pastoral scenery and windmills.

The Netherlands is an easy country to visit independently as most locals speak some English and are extremely helpful. The bus drivers also spoke perfect English and even told me when to get off. There is even Wi-Fi on board most buses and trains. The public transport travel planner website (<http://9292.nl/en>) is invaluable to avoid waiting long for the bus, train, subway or ferry. However, if Ron were travelling with me, we would have indulged in a rental car as the roads are well-maintained and adequately signposted.

I hope this article will spur more travellers to explore the beautiful Netherlands. It is a safe, clean country with efficient public transportation, a wonderful variety of food, and friendly people. This was a wonderful trip made special by my Dutch friends whom I am blessed to have met in Nicaragua. Their hospitality and friendship will be treasured always. ■



Jenny Lim lives in North Florida where she works in the Urgent Care section of the Emergency Room. She is married to a commercial pilot. They have no kids.