

020416 How many times are you guys going to stop?

One thing that I forgot to mention is that if you ever plant to stay in Amsterdam over the Easter holiday week, call ahead for a room. We arrived in Amsterdam to be greeted by dreary skies which is why we decided to spend the first night in the city. Having no reservations (who makes those?), we wound up wandering from hostel to hostel (including one which had double beds in a dorm. Double beds in a dorm? We wanted no part of that scene) until we found a hotel which was really a hostel. Since perhaps you have never stayed in a hostel, let me describe them to you from my experience of European hostels.

Many of the hostels are run by Hostel International (HI) which manages hostels all over the world. However, independent hostels can often be less expensive and nicer than the HI ones. The hostel that we stayed at in Amsterdam offered beds in dorms which accommodated six people. Many hostels will separate men and women by wings of the building or by room. The one in Amsterdam booked women and men in the same room which was apparently a big surprise to our one female roommate. Since you are sharing a room with people you don't know, some hostels offer lockers in the rooms or places at the desk to lock up your valuables. The hostel in Amsterdam had a full bath, but other hostels such as the one near Leiden had only a sink with bathrooms down the hall. Basically the setup depends largely on the hostel and they are all different.

Despite these differences, the one thing that all hostels have in common is that they are generally less expensive than hotels because you share a room with other fun people. Or rather, you run the chance of sharing a room with others. During our stay in Leiden, we had the big rooms to ourselves since there were not many other guests our age there at the time.

The rooms are well kept and usually have bunk beds. Some offer sheets as part of the cost while others require you to rent sheets or to bring your own. I have a sleep sheet which I travel with which is basically like bringing your own sheets. Often the hostel will offer breakfast as part of your stay. I have had amazing breakfasts in some places of bread with cheese and jimmies (not at the same time), coffee and juice. Plus many will have communal rooms and bars to hang out in. The hostel in Amsterdam appeared to have a full bar with dance floor while the hostel in Trondheim, Norway was more subdued with big rooms with a TV or just places to sit. Plus the hostel in Trondheim offered free rolls and coffee in the evening after you were done hiking all day.

In popular places the cost of hostels are not always a great deal less than hotels. The hostels that we stayed in during our travel in Holland were usually around 22 Euros per night and less than the cost of my hotel in the red light district, but lacked the ambiance. The cost of staying in the HI hostels is reduced by a few Euro if you become a member by paying a membership fee. However, HI also offers a card with which you can accumulate 6 stamps in one year after which you are a member and can get the reduced

price. The HI hostels also offer the benefit of being able to reserve rooms at the next HI hostel on your itinerary from any of the other hostels.

Well, on with the travels!

We awoke on Saturday (March 23) morning to find gorgeous weather which would last through the entire trip. We checked out of our hostel and after buying some bike trail maps, set out for Centraal Station. We had decided to rent bikes in Amsterdam and set out from there. Thomas, Micah and I would all need to be back in Amsterdam at different times to catch our trains or planes and so renting the bikes there seemed to make the most sense. We rented these great granny bikes with baskets in the front, curved handlebars and brakes applied by pedaling backwards. Of course the bikes only had one gear since the Netherlands are mostly flat. We had packed very lightly for this trip and so we threw our daypacks on the back of the bike and rode out of Amsterdam.

The ride to Haarlem was not really anything to write home about, so I wont. It was a lot of industrial parks and then housing with a few scattered windmills as we rode a very straight line to Haarlem. However, the monotonous ride was rewarded with the quaintness of Haarlem. We rode to the central trains station because we seem drawn to them like moths to a flame. After a discussion, we decided to press on to Leiden rather than to spend the night exploring Haarlem.

But first, we rode through the town and came upon the city square which was arrayed with rows of tents selling everything from tulips to the wonderful waffle cookies to clothing. The square was set between churches on either end with the beautiful stone and brick buildings standing four stories tall on either side. It must have been one of the first beautiful Saturdays because there was a multitude of people wandering between shops, looking at the items, buying pickled fish from the carts (yes, here too) and eating the delicious waffle cookies. (did I mention that the waffle cookies were really good?) We ate lunch in the square (no, not the pickled fish, but we did buy some of the waffle cookies) and then set out.

The bike trail map that we were using was created by the ANWB (Royal Dutch Touring Club) and promised to take the riders through the most scenic areas. The maps were not really necessary for point to point rides because the Dutch are all about cycling and there were signs specifically for bicycles posted all over the country. The signs pointed in the direction of travel and listed the city names as well as the distance. Bike lanes were generously provided on almost every road except the back roads and so it was very easy to navigate around the country as you nibbled on your waffle cookie.

That all being said, the ANWB route was not as easy to pick up since it meandered through parks and down back roads. We had some trouble getting started on our route, but once Thomas got us on it, we had no problems for the rest of the ride. We rode through beautiful parks, past the cute houses and along the canals. And then we saw them. It was getting late, maybe around 18:00 when we spied our first field of tulips. Actually they were yellow daffodils, but we didn't care. Out came the cameras as Micah

and I began our quest to hunt down the perfect pictures. Thomas showed infinite patience during our trip for our frequent stops during our rides.

The fields of yellow flowers were beautiful against the backdrop of villages or church spires. Here and there we also saw dramatic splashes of deep red or light patches of pink or purple. The fields that we saw on Saturday were small, but empowering as we began to experience our quest for waffle cookies, I mean tulips. OK, I'll stop with the cookies.

The last leg of our ride took us through a large park along the seashore. We rode through the woods, knowing the sea was close as we wound along the paths. We stopped at one point to consult our map when Micah noticed a hostel sign across the street. Like stumbling upon something you have lost, we had ridden up on our hostel without realizing it. We checked in and you know you have had a good ride when you impress the locals with the distance that you have covered in one afternoon.

While the sun still clung to the horizon, we rode our bikes the 2 km to the seashore. Suddenly we began to run into sand and, what, hills? The bike path changed from concrete to dirt to sand and we had to walk our bikes past the random golf course in the park to climb the trail of loose sand up the hills. We abandoned our bikes at the top of the last hill where we were met with an amazing site. The dune plunged down about 30 feet to the beach below us which stretched out another 100 ft until it met the ocean. The dune was like a tall, immovable barrier against the ocean crashing down below. To our left we could see The Hague in the distance and the sun was setting before us. I came to the realization as we walked down the path that descended the dune that it was the first time that I had seen the Atlantic from this side.

The dunes were protected by wire fences so that the scrub grass on them would not be trampled. Otherwise the dunes would probably wear away and the ocean would wash away a city below sea level, oh like Amsterdam. So, we were surprised to see what appeared to be glass littered all over the beach as it glittered in the setting sun. But, upon closer examination it wound up being thousands and thousands of sea shells that had been washed up and worn smooth by the water, sand and wind. The shells were in amazing shape and it was difficult to find one that was not broken. It was certainly not from a lack of people on the beach. It was far from crowded, but there were people here or there walking along and enjoying the end of the day.

After walking for a while and taking our obligatory pictures, we returned to the hostel where we got ready for dinner. We discovered that we were not the only people staying at the hostel. A busload or three of kids had arrived and they were all about the place. At first we could not place their accents, but once we discovered their nationality, it was obvious. They had just arrived after traveling from Ireland that morning. We headed out to the restaurant in hopes that none of the kids would be sharing our otherwise empty room. We went to a restaurant across the street which turned out to serve traditional Dutch food. Actually, the restaurant and the attached pizzeria were the only restaurants around. The hostel itself was on the edge of the park and surrounded by a few houses, the restaurant and fields of tulips. It was nicely located out of the way.

The restaurant was very nice and our mouths were watering as we perused the menu, in Dutch of course. But, as I have mentioned in the earlier email, Danish and French are close to Dutch and so we could figure out most things. And then we asked the waitress what she recommended. Micah and I both had this amazing pancake with curry chicken and vegetables inside. (Micah and I never plan it this way, but we always order the same thing unless we make a concerted effort not to which means that one of us eats his second choice) The dinner was really very good.

We returned to the hostel and decided to get a beer in the hostel bar. It took a while to get our beers as the kids were occupying the bartenders time with orders of cappuccinos and change for the video games. (Video games and caffeine, what a potent mix) The bar had a nice selection of Belgium beers which were amazing. Thomas had just come from Belgium and so he explained to us that each beer has its own glass that it is served in. Sure enough, the beers that arrived each came in a different style glass. A lot of effort goes into the glass design and so the bars are required to have several of each design for every Belgium beer. The bars in Brussels must be a nightmare with dozens upon dozens of glasses and the bartender required to get the correct one each time.

We settled down in our room for the night and had a comfortable sleep after our first day of cycling. The morning would bring jimmies for breakfast and our quest for tulips would continue. The quest would not be entirely in vain.

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