



020418 Flags adorn the busses in Denmark in celebration of the queen's birthday

On the morning of the 24th, we ate our jimmies on bread with much anticipation for what would be a beautiful bike ride. We planned to bike from our hostel in Noordwijk Van Zee to nearby Lisse and the surrounding tulip fields. From Lisse we would continue through areas shown on our maps as huge tulip fields and then down around Kager Plassen which looked like a large lake surrounded by windmills.

We set off from the hostel and made our way past barren fields to a cannal which we would follow up to Lisse. The canals are not just found in Amsterdam. Canals crisscross the entire countryside and so you are never very far from water. We rode along looking for tulips, but only found windmills to appease us as well as the constant rushing of the blue and yellow trains that dash from Amsterdam to The Hague.

Lisse is home to Keukenhof, which is the largest outdoor flower park in the world. In just 8 short weeks from March 21 till May 20, over 800,000 visitors will come to view the gardens. However, during our visit I never felt that the park was crowded.

The Dutch are amazingly meticulous about their home gardens, so you can imagine what they could achieve when they set out to create a masterpiece. The park is laid out with long walkways with beds of flowers surrounded with grass and trees on each side. The trees on each side are thick so as you walk down the pathways, you feel that you are in a small space with the trees on each side and the grass and flowers all around you. The paths wander this way and that through the woods and wind past pools of water with lush banks of grass. In the center of the park is a building displaying hundreds of varieties of tulips each in a small section of the flower beds. There is also a Japanese garden, a windmill and the largest fountain in Europe. We climbed the windmill to look out upon even more tulips growing in the surrounding fields.

Before setting foot in Keukenhof, I never imagined that there were so many different kinds of tulips. I had only thought they came in the simple, yet elegant goblet shape. Different growers have been working on creating different forms and colors for generations through cross breeding and grafting and the results are amazing. There were tulips that were almost like the feathers of a swan as the pedals fell over themselves from the stem to the top. There was one other than had protrusions that spread out from the top of the petals. Think of a tulip crossed with a venus fly trap and you have the idea.

Tulips are not even indigenous to the Netherlands. Tulips were originally discovered in Central Asia and were first cultivated by the Turks. In the mid 1500's, the Habsburg ambassador to Istanbul brought some bulbs to Vienna where Carolus Clusius, the imperial botanist learned how to cultivate them. Clusius brought the tulips with him when he moved to Leiden where he soon discovered that the tulips flourished in the Dutch soil. The rest is history.

At the time that Tulips were introduced to the Netherlands, healthy tulips were the traditional goblet shape with firm, solid color pedals. Surprisingly, the multi colored pedals, such as the red with yellow streaks that attracted the attention of the Dutch were the product of a virus attacking the flower. The mosaic virus was transmitted by a louse that thrived on peaches and potatoes. Early on, the Turks recognized that the most beautiful tulips were those that grew under fruit trees, but the cause was not discovered until the 20th century. Today, the virus has been eradicated and the variety of colors that can be seen are the product of careful cross-breeding.

We planned to stay for no more than 3 hours, thinking it would be more than enough, but it went past so quickly as we wandered along the obscenely beautiful gardens. We lunched in Lisse and then set off for the vast fields of tulips surrounding the city.

We had debated about going into Keukenhof, but we wound up very glad that we had. The vast fields were all bare. Some had scattered flowers still remaining after the fields had been harvested and others lay fallow. We had come at the wrong time to see the massive fields of tulips that we had expected. Since we had seen fields of tulips the day before, we came to the conclusion that those pictures that you see of kilometer after kilometer of tulips are probably taken by photographers who have spoken with the farmers to determine when the blooms will be ready. We would leave the Netherlands thinking that we had missed seeing fields in bloom. But, as Micah has pointed out after looking at his photographs, we definitely did see large fields in bloom. The fields were just not on the giant scale we expected. So, thinking we were disappointed, we turned our bikes south towards the lake.

Our ride as we made a huge loop around the lake was beautiful and took us past windmill after windmill. None of the windmills were still operating and people were now living in them. We spent the next few hours pedaling through the surrounding area as well as Leiden, Sassenheim and Noordwijkerhout before returning worn out to our hostel. In all, we had probably biked another 40 km. We were all looking forward to pancakes, but alas, we waited too long and the restaurant was closed so we had to settle for pizza. The best part was that the pizzeria had chocolate on each table. The Dutch have a very good perspective on eating.

The next morning we checked out of our hostel and called ahead to our next destination for rooms. Micah called the hostel in The Hague and asked if they had two dorm beds for the night. The person on the other end of the phone searched through the rooms to find where he could put two guys. He said, "girls, girls, girls, girls" as he flipped through the pages, meaning that there were women in each room. Micah had to say something to that and said "that's ok with us" which brought laughter on the other end. I called ahead to Amsterdam on what proved to be a laborious and fruitless search for a hotel, which led to my room in the red light district for the night. We called different hotels because we were soon to part company. I would ride up to Amsterdam where I would catch a plane the next morning to Copenhagen to meet my friend Monica. Micah and Thomas would continue on the ride down to The Hague.

We rode together through the park down to Noordwijk. One of the guide books called it a city where the usual Dutch fastidiousness with urban planning had gone terribly awry, so I wanted to see the monstrosity. Indeed, it was a typical shore city, like those you might find on the Jersey Shore with the buildings crowding up to the beach.

The others continued south while I turned north. My plan was to bike from Noordwijk up to Amsterdam by going south of the airport and through Amstelveen and entering Amsterdam from the south. I set off around 10 in hopes of being in the city around 16:00. As soon as I left Noordwijk, I came upon a few beautiful fields of red and pink and purple flowers. They had been almost in our backyard and we had almost missed them. I back tracked up through Lisse, but then found my ride to be nothing extraordinary after that. In fact, the ride was not very nice until I got up into southern Amsterdam.

As I approached the city, I biked along an old rail line that had been converted into a bike trail and into a series of parks. At one point, I was consulting my map when an elderly woman pulled over to ask if I needed directions which I did. However, I still managed to get terribly lost once I entered the city. I kept trying to figure out where I was on the map based on the shape of parks and the canals that I was crossing. I had about given up and was about to turn back to go back to where I had entered the city so at least I would know where I was when I suddenly came upon it. I had done a huge loop without realizing it.

Riding along the streets of Amsterdam was nerve wracking at first, but became a lot of fun. I rode up to the concert hall and managed to purchase the last seat for that night's performance. I was definitely being watched over. I rode up to Centraal Station, returned the bike, checked into my hotel, got cleaned up and rushed back to the hall for the performance.

The performance that evening was Mattheus Passion by Bach. My seat was in the balcony and was actually very uncomfortable because it was a pull down seat with no leg room. But, it was overwhelming to be in this amazing hall so I didn't really care. Plus all of my neighbors felt badly for my seat and so starting conversations was easy as we waited for the performance to begin and I was fed a lot of Dutch candy by my kind neighbors.

The evening's performance included an orchestra, a choir and several soloists. The vocals were very good, but I kept wishing that Bach would let the organist loose so I could hear the fabled reverberation of the hall. During the intermission, I wandered the hall including the stage and wound up chatting with the ushers in the balcony. I explained that I was studying acoustics and that I had some questions about some features of the hall. The ushers were really friendly and we wound up chatting for a while. They knew a lot about the design of the hall and changes that had been made during the years which were interesting to hear.

The next morning I caught the early train to the airport and flew back to Copenhagen where my friend, Monica was waiting for me. Four days in the Netherlands was not enough. I would really like to return someday to wander more of the countryside.

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