



## Travel Dispatches

from

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# Amsterdam

Our morning flight from Edinburgh lifted from the verdant soil of Scotland to give us a broad view of the farmlands and villages below, and the gorgeous new Queensferry Bridge in the distance over the River Forth. It's the longest 3-tower cable-stayed bridge in the world, and was



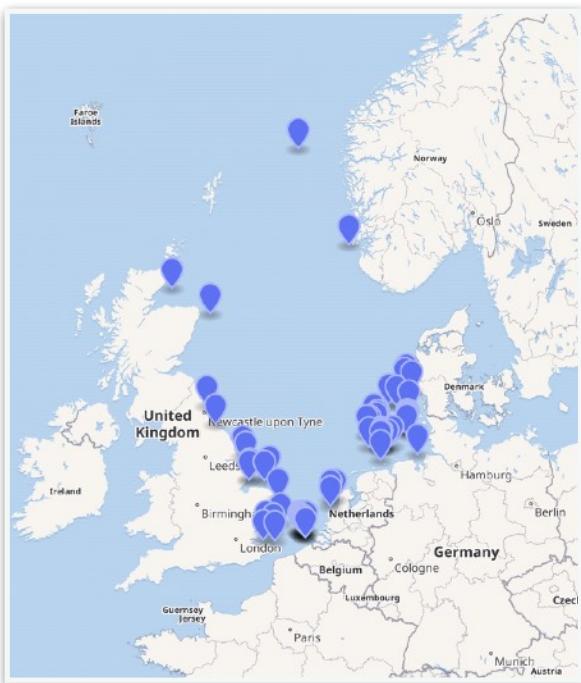
opened by the Queen herself in 2017. We were shortly over the North Sea and heading southeasterly for Amsterdam.

Far below we could see a portion of the wind farms and towers that speckle the shallow

waters of the North Sea, providing clean energy to the Continent. The North Sea is blessed with extensive shallow areas, such as the vast Dogger Bank, the Long Forties, and the Broad Fourteens, that are rich in fisheries and also provide excellent locations for offshore wind farms. There are broad shallows along the coastlines of England, Scotland, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, and The Netherlands that feature additional large wind farms, as we see just below while passing the Dutch coast. The UK alone is planning for alternative energy sources to provide **all**



their residential energy needs by 2050. We seriously consider energy usage in our travels, but this 2-hour flight spared us a day-long train ride south to London, a transfer to the EuroStar through the Chunnel, and another transfer at Brussels for Amsterdam.





The beautiful green Dutch farmlands and villages just below our wings looked much the same as in the UK, like a game board filled with tiny toy houses and cars, and people that look like ants. And at the busy Schipol airport they remind us of



how far below the water level we're currently standing in what used to be an old shipping port, a "ship hole."



We tapped our credit cards to board the fast train to Amsterdam's huge Centraal Station and soon spilled out onto bustling streets among

the throngs catching rides on the city's excellent tram system.

We roll our bags only a block or two from the train station to the nearby Avenue Hotel. It's a nice and modest place, and our room has charming city views over the rooftops of neighbors just across the alley, and bicycles parked far below.

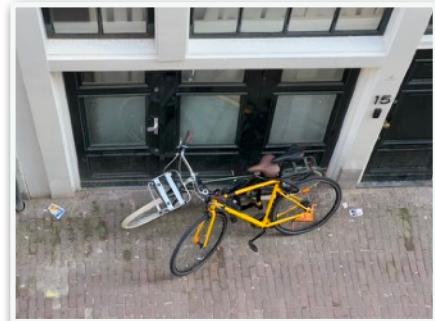
We've enjoyed longer visits to Amsterdam in the past, but we'll only have one night here before we meet up with a Viking river boat for an 8-day cruise up the majestic Rhine River, a journey through deep history, past fabled German castles on crags overlooking the

river, followed by debarkation at Basel on the Swiss border. The 8-day trip costs us about what we'd spend on a month and a half of travel in Europe, and we



thought deeply about forking over so much cash for a cruise. But in the end we decided to go for this probably once-in-a-lifetime event.

There are around a dozen or so companies that offer comfortable river cruises in a variety of countries worldwide. They generally range from 4-star to 6-star service, depending on accommodations and onboard offerings. The Rhine and the Danube are some of the more popular rivers for cruising in Europe, with 8-day cruises ranging from around \$2,000 to \$6,000 per person. But there

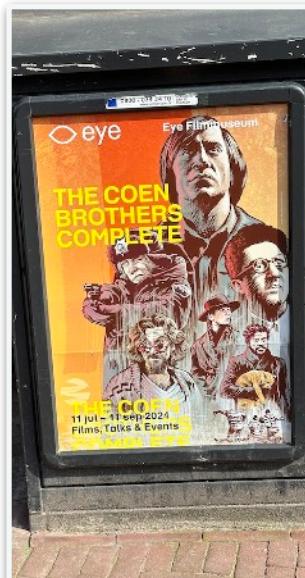


are shorter and cheaper cruises on the river by companies such as the KD line (Köln-Düsseldorfer), that offer scenic day trips, castle cruises, dinner cruises, etc., that run about €30-50pp. And a few years back, we paid only €40 each for a day long ferry ride from Bratislava up the Danube into the heart of Vienna.

**We got to Amsterdam a day early** so we could wander before boarding our river cruise. The sun sets late here and dinner is in order, with any number of streetside chow houses to choose from. We settle into some really good food close to the Centraal Station and the passing tram lines.



After dinner there's time for a wander down quiet side streets to experience the daily life of the city: children's sidewalk chalk drawings, crowded bike parks, art galleries, signs in Dutch that we try (and fail) to read, a couple of guys hoisting a washing machine to an upper apartment, a store selling hemp ice cream, and other everyday Amsterdam delights. It's a wonderful city to explore into the evening.





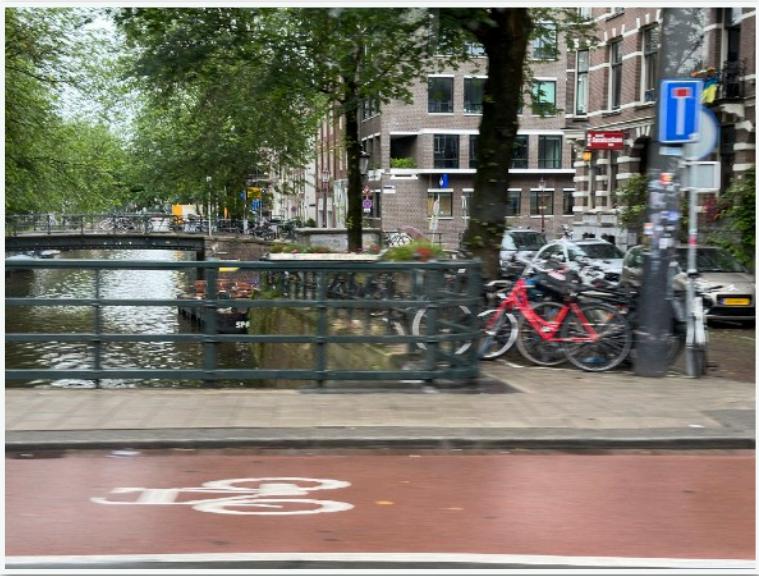
So we drop off our gear to the helpful young guys at the Viking tent, and they ask, “Is that all?” They’re surprised that we’re not as heavily laden as almost everybody else on the boat. But we’ll still have three months on our Euro Itinerary after this cruise. And whatever we pack, we’ll have to shag it ourselves from trains to streetcars – and often up stairways to apartments. It’s a strong incentive to leave behind anything that’s unnecessary. Or discard it along the way.



**The river boat doesn’t leave until late afternoon**, so we head to the Museumplein, a broad grassy plaza that’s easy to reach on frequent trams. It’s where the most important art museums in Amsterdam are concentrated, and we get a nice cheap tram tour of the city on the way.



**In the morning we hire a taxi** to go stash our gear on the river boat. He tells us where the Viking river boats usually are, but we show him the very different dock number that we were sent – and it’s in the opposite direction. Then, after we find no Viking boats at all on that dock, he takes us back to where he said they’d be in the first place. Ah well, we got an extra side tour out of it.



**There's a big street fair –** with Dutch sweets and hot coffee! – under tents at the rainy Museumplein. And there's a typical beautiful, young, tall Dutch girl who stands at least a head taller than Carolyn. Back in the 1980s we encountered many tall young ladies here, and whenever we saw another tall girl on the rest of that 3-week train trip through Europe we'd say, "Oh, she must be Dutch."



**The impressive Van Gogh Museum** has the world's largest collection of the artist's work; the Stedelijk holds an impressive collection of Picasso, Monet, Matisse, Mondrian, Rodin, de Kooning, and Yayoi Kusama; and the MOCO (with additional locations in Barcelona, by the Picasso Museum, and in London, by the Marble Arch





station), features everything from Banksy's graffiti art to 1960s icon Roy Liechtenstein, plus Warhol and Basquiat. And the famous Concertgebouw, with its almost perfect acoustics, is one of the top concert venues on the planet.

**But the biggest star in the crown** is the old Rijksmuseum, for its 1.5 kilometers of gallery space



housing some of the most important art pieces in the world. It's been many years since our last visit to this massive museum and we're ready for an update.

The Rijksmuseum collection is filled with important pieces from the Dutch Golden Age, when the ships of this small nation dominated world trade. And like many of the world's top museums, it contains so many other valuable works of art that appear in important textbooks and essential references. This is where you come to actually see, up close and personal, those gorgeous pieces that were mentioned in your college art history class. They range from delicate ceramics and a soft portrait of a lady quietly reading by a vase of flowers, to a sculpture in agony, a very old biplane, a remarkably intricate rendition of a lady in a starched collar, and a lady doing needlepoint. In paintings like these,



the artist often used a brush with only a single hair to express each flowing hair on his subject.



I still appreciate the feel of a good book, and I'm in awe at the degree of care taken to express these old worn pages and open leaves tossed into a pile upon a table. I can almost smell the dusty leather bindings.

**There's something for almost everyone**

in this venerable museum, from finely crafted historic cannons to elegant firearms that may have been only for show. People are waiting on the shore in another piece for their ship to come in laden with fish. Or maybe treasure. A dog patiently awaits a lady to show what's hiding behind her skirt. And a handsome young man stares wistfully at the viewer.



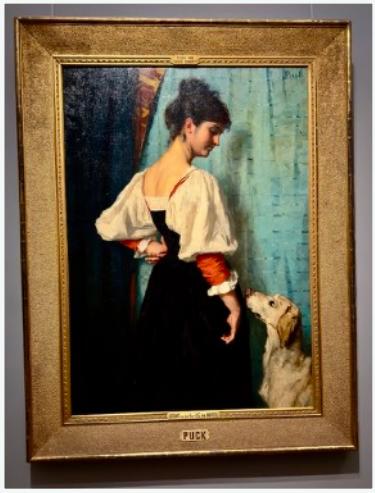
While the 'starving artist' narrative can be inspiring, art has long been a business. And some of the artists who have done well included notables in their work—like the guys in this frame, many of whom paid a healthy load of guilders to get their pictures included here.

Someone else may have paid well to get their dog, and other pets, included with an overflowing table of fruit.





Compare Vermeer's small output to the thousands of works produced by Picasso during his eight decades of painting. The Art Loss Register even lists more than a thousand Picasso works among those stolen over the years.



I recently read the 1999 novel *The Girl With the Pearl Earring*, but that famous painting by Johannes Vermeer is hanging in The Hague. Meanwhile, the fine craft and detail work in *The Love Letter* and *The Milkmaid* show why Vermeer produced only a few paintings per year, and left only 34 attributed works after his death at the age of 43. He was largely forgotten for two centuries, until he was rediscovered by scholars and collectors.





Those guys from the old Dutch Masters cigar boxes are also here. I used to keep some of my youthful stamp collection in one of those boxes.

And Rembrandt's brooding youthful self-portrait gives us a foretaste of his brilliant ability to employ darkness in his work.



**One of the most important pieces in the museum, *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt, was cordoned off during our visit and undergoing restoration.**  
Rembrandt's masterpiece, painted in 1642, was already 243 years old before the current Rijksmuseum was opened to the public in 1885, and it has long been the museum's major attraction.

It's had an interesting history, having been attacked over the years (1911, 1975, 1990) by various lunatics, and was once even carted off to Paris by Napoleon. Currently it's undergoing work that includes removing a dark layer of varnish that left the mistaken impression that it was a night scene – but protected it from at least one knife attack. Protective glass now keeps the crowds at a distance, but allows us to watch the conservators at work.



**And after a long day of museum walking** we find ourselves back at the nearest Tram stop, returning to that Viking ship that will soon be departing for the Rhine.





For more about the other museums along the Museumplein and intriguing Amsterdam in general – and all those bikes! – check out our Dispatches from previous trips:

[dispatches.wilkeskinsman.com/tierra\\_de\\_tortugas/2016/09/summer-2016-amsterdam.html](http://dispatches.wilkeskinsman.com/tierra_de_tortugas/2016/09/summer-2016-amsterdam.html)

[dispatches.wilkeskinsman.com/tierra\\_de\\_tortugas/2018/06/summer-2018-amsterdam.html](http://dispatches.wilkeskinsman.com/tierra_de_tortugas/2018/06/summer-2018-amsterdam.html)

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**And watch for our next post,** Cruising the Rhine, about our Viking River Cruise from Amsterdam to Basel, Switzerland.

You can write to us with comments, suggestions, and questions at:

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Thanks, as always, for traveling with us.

—PRW & CJK