

Ten Days to Paint, Photograph, and Love the Netherlands and Belgium

By James D. Trolinger, The World's Worst Tourist

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Pauline loves gardens and flowers and photographing them; I love art and plein air painting. River boat tours are especially adaptable to these passions, explaining why we chose the Viking Tulips and Windmills 10-day river boat cruise through the rivers and canals of The Netherlands and Belgium. We were satisfied, impressed, and are planning our next one. If you want a feeling for a river boat cruise in Europe, read on.

Of the many advantages river cruises have over ocean cruises, docking each day in a different city, within walking distance of city centers is, arguably, number one, essentially moving your hotel, with you in it, from city to city with a pleasant, scenic, ever changing scenery between moves. Equally important is the smaller number of passengers, just over 100, enabling intimacy, like being part of a large family where members and staff form personal relationships. It would be hard to imagine having better service or more attention than we enjoyed, with Viking staff, almost as many as passengers, covering every conceivable detail to keep passengers comfortable, informed, entertained, reassured, and spoiled with attention and luxury. Also, such a small number of tourists never overwhelms a tourist attraction the way large ocean liners do.

This journal entry covers highlights, insights, and impressions that help me remember the pleasures, lessons learned, and possibly useful information to any reader considering this kind of vacation. The writeup includes some of my paintings and sketches from the 10 days.

Trip Overview

The excursion included walking tours and typically a half day of free time in Amsterdam, Kinderdijk, Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges, Hoorn, and Arnhem, all extremely interesting and easily walked towns. Longer trips between cities (See map.) happened over night. Educational aspects included world-famous museums, cathedrals, Holland's age-old battle against the sea with tours of ingenious windmills and the massive Delta Works project, and the "Bridge too Far" and war museum in Arnhem. We chose to add Rubens' House and museum in Antwerp in our free time. Culinary aspects included Dutch cheeses, local favorites, herring, delectable Belgian chocolates and gourmet meals on the ship. Hoorn included an intimate tea and dessert in a local home.

We spent the last day exploring the Keukenhof Gardens near Amsterdam, which proved to be the highlight of the trip and thankfully, a full day of sunshine. I painted and sketched, usually in ten to thirty-minute starts with refinements made back in the ship.

The Ship-The Viking Skirnir shown here has

four decks. The front half of the ship contains the restaurant on the top floor, the bar and lounge on the middle floor, and crew quarters on the bottom deck. The central part contains snack lounges, library, and computer



room, and reception is on the middle level. In the rear, the rooms without decks are the first floor and second and third contain private decks for each room. The top deck has a walking path, miniature golf, and a garden.

Our room- a third floor “Veranda Suite” with an outdoor deck large enough to seat two for tea, large screen TV, and wireless access (It’s slow; if you need to spend much time staring at your I-phone, stay home).

Our meals- choices included a restaurant, buffets, and snack bars, and breakfasts and lunches at a small buffet,



located in the lounge on our floor, and elegant, gourmet dinners from a menu in the restaurant on the second floor. The snack bars offered a wide variety of hot drinks and pastries, and we used them a lot more than we should have.

Entertainment- Aquatoria Duo, an outstanding pianist and singer, complemented by other musicians, played in the lounge for the entire trip at lunch and after dinner. Special entertainers included a wooden shoe maker and silver smith demonstrating their crafts and three different regional singing groups. We could observe with drinks or watch the entertainment on a large screen TV in our room, which also included movies, TV, and bow cameras. The bar also has a dance floor.



Aquatoria Duo-I love drawing musicians

I always felt comfortable and relaxed on the ship because so many options are there. One doesn’t have to do anything, or one can choose from a wide range of possibilities. As I walked around the ship, I began seeing familiar faces and simple greetings evolved into comments and conversations. We could sit on our private deck, the top deck, in the bar, library, or snack rooms, and when docked, leave the boat for longer walks. This being said, I must also point out that it is also easy to fall into the trap of doing everything, which can lead to rising

early, racing to meet deadlines and buses, following tight schedules, missing meals, and losing sleep. We did find ourselves inadvertently in that trap a few times.

Days 1&2-Amsterdam

Amsterdam is a wonderful city, and the Dutch are my favorite people in the world, always friendly and helpful. Interestingly, most of the Dutch speak English without accents and understand English better than most Americans. They are so competent in English that they don't dub TV and movies with Dutch, but add Dutch subtitles, which improves their English and teaches children English much faster. They switch seamlessly between speaking Dutch and other languages.

Our taxi from Schiphol Airport took us to the Viking ship behind the main train station around noon. After lunch on the ship we checked into our rooms. Being familiar with Amsterdam, we left the ship for a walk, took a few photos, did some quick sketches and planned an early evening. Our walking tours of Amsterdam became more serious on our first full day and included shopping, painting, and over six miles covered.

The dinner restaurant has one sitting, so it pays to arrive a bit ahead of time. As we lined up to enter the restaurant, we struck up a conversation with the couple in front of us, Betty and Allen. Then as we began looking for a table, Betty invited us to join them, and we did. Eventually, another couple, Rachel and Mike, who were a bit late and searching for a table, spotted two empty seats at our table, and we welcomed them to join. It seems that people who do river cruises are almost always interesting and friendly. Fortuitously, an immediate friendship emerged between the six of us, and during the remainder of the voyage we shared a dinner table every night, experiences, walks together, and came to know a lot about each other. No one dominated conversations, and everyone participated, greatly enhancing our experience of the adventure.



From left, Jim, Mike, Alan, Betty, Rachel, Pauline



Betty and Pauline



Alan and Betty

Day 3-Hoorn

Our ship left Amsterdam around 4 AM and arrived in Hoorn around 8 AM. Shortly after breakfast, I walked onto the front deck and enjoyed this view of Hoorn. I essentially had the entire front deck to myself and sketched this view. The scene gave me the feeling that Hoorn was a small town, but later when we walked into Hoorn in small groups, along interesting buildings, pubs, shops and over foot bridges and into the city center, I discovered that Hoorn is not a small town.

Pauline and I enjoy exploring the towns ourselves and often leave the guided tours to go at our own pace. However, some of the small guided tours by local resident guides offer a unique benefit that would be difficult to obtain otherwise, benefits that eventually will no longer exist. Their parents and some of the guides themselves were alive eighty years ago when the Netherlands and Belgium were totally immersed in the horrors of Nazism and the war. They can relate hair raising personal experiences that bring us closer to comprehending the reality of that period. These are special people of a unique generation with special knowledge, experience, and dedication to their jobs. Their remarkable resilience and ability to forgive and move on is truly amazing. Hopefully, they can help us learn how important it is to prevent such things from happening again.





Hoorn City Center



It's hard to imagine what these tourists see on their I-phones that is more interesting than what is right in front of them. This has become a typical scene of the new screen-addicted generation.

From the city center, shuttles transported groups of about 10 people to individual homes where we joined locals for tea, cake, and conversation. It was a nice experience to sit around and converse with someone who actually

lives in and loves this place, providing a feeling you just don't get when you simply walk around amongst strangers.



Pauline discussing gardens with a local homeowner who hosted us for tea.

Day 4-Arnhem

We left Hoorn and headed south for Arnhem, which is best remembered as the city near “the bridge too far”. This was the site of a disastrous defeat of the allies in WW2, where the planners were so caught up in their ingenious plan they refused to listen to the local resistance who warned them the plan was not a good idea, because the city contained a strong and fierce German force, which became even better equipped by intercepting tons of allied equipment parachuted into the wrong place. We wound up providing them with weapons that made it easier for them to kick our ass.



Arnhem has an amazing memorial museum and a cemetery where thousands of soldiers from other countries are remembered. One floor of the museum is a walk-through replica of Arnhem during the siege, complete with burned out buildings, rubble, and soldiers hiding behind walls while the viewer is surrounded by explosions and the sounds of war. Attendees are warned not to enter if they suffer from anxiety.

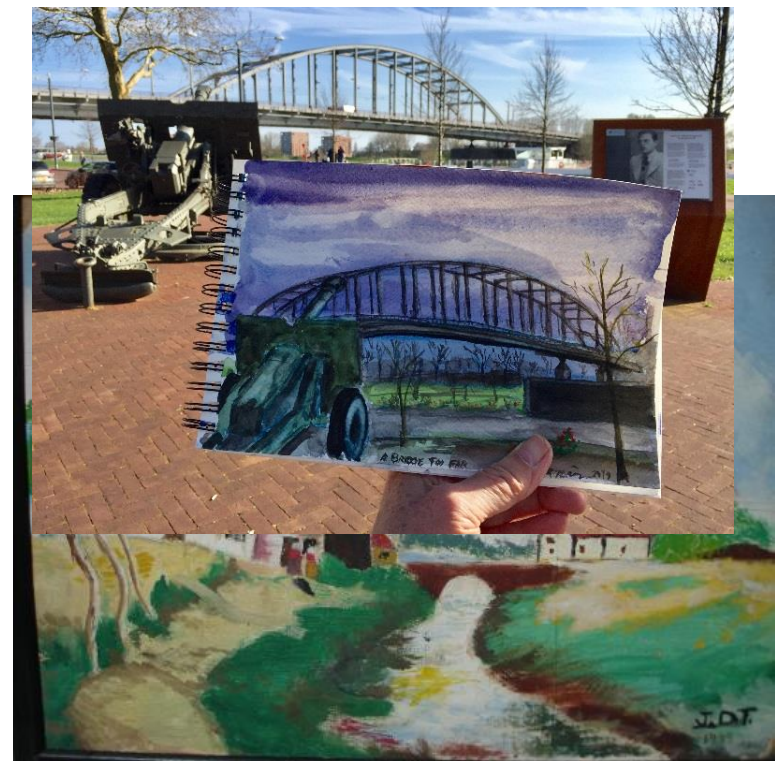
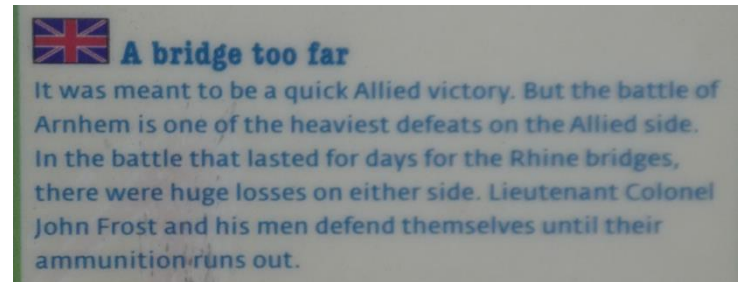


The memorial cemetery, where each anniversary is memorialized by children laying flowers upon graves. Many of the graves contain unknown soldiers.

This church was the last stand of occupying allied troops, who fought until they ran out of ammunition and ultimately were forced to surrender to surrounding Germans, who had not only cut off their reinforcements, but had also had intercepted much of the air dropped supplies meant for the allies.



A Bridge too Far



At the end of the day, in Arnhem, we set sail and traveled overnight arriving in Kinderdijk shortly after breakfast.

Day 5-Kinderdijk and Windmills

Windmill Painting-I painted my first windmill, from a photograph, as a nine-year-old student, and it remains as one of my favorite paintings with Tennessee art master, Miss Corrine Houston. I had learned single point perspective as well as atmospheric perspective seen in the distant wind mill. Over sixty years later, I had the opportunity at Kinderdijk to paint the real thing from the deck of a Viking River ship; a few years later, I was back again for another shot.



Painting done from the top deck of the Viking riverboat during our first visit to Kinderdijk a few years ago.



Painting during this trip



Windmill sketches during our visit to Kinderdijk

We left Kinderdijk shortly after noon and headed for Antwerp. There is never a reason to be bored on a river boat trip. The river and its banks provided entertainment from our private room deck, and also from the top deck, which provides a panoramic view plus other travelers with whom to interact. The banks are home to a variety of old and new windmills.

A new wind turbine, can easily power an entire neighborhood, costs the owner about 1.5 million euros, and for those lucky enough to have gotten in on government subsidies, they produce enough electricity to make the payment on the loan to purchase it. After about 20 years the purchaser owns it, and at today's prices, can retire

on the windmill output, assuming the cost of maintenance stays sufficiently low. Between wind and solar power, the Netherlands is rapidly approaching fully renewable energy.

In addition to the local scenery, we witnessed every conceivable floating structure and kind of ship, including many ships like our own. One of the more unusual sites during this trip looked like Noah's ark. A closer look revealed a giraffe looking over the bow confirming that, indeed, it was Noah's ark, or at minimum a good replica. We arrived in Antwerp in the early morning.

Old fashioned wind mill, rapidly being replaced by modern turbines.



Noah's ark, on the Rhine river; Notice the giraffe on the bow.



Day 6-Antwerp

Antwerp is on the River Scheldt, linked to the North Sea by the river's Westerschelde estuary. It is about 9 miles south of the Dutch border. With one of the largest ports in the world, the city is known for its diamond industry and trade.

After docking near the center of Antwerp, our visit began with a guided walk through the city through amazing architecture decorated by sculptures lining roof tops. Antwerp's market place is surrounded by buildings that, like many Dutch structures have, over time, sunk into the ground leaving them leaning at different angles.



Sculptures line the roof tops of Antwerp's buildings.



Buildings in Antwerp's market place. Notice the different building tilts caused by sinking into the ground.

The name, Antwerp, derives from antwerpen based on the words "ant" (hand) and werpen' (to throw) in Dutch. A sculpture in the center of the marketplace explains the "Hand Throw" significance depicting a legend of the freeing of the city from a giant, who extracted a toll from ships passing along the river. Anyone refusing to pay the toll had his hand cut off and thrown in the river until a brave sailor cut off the hand of the giant first. The sculpture depicts the sailor hoisted by nudes above the defeated giant, throwing the giant's severed hand into the river. I found it interesting to study this sculpture from all angles to connect its many features.



The cathedral houses a treasure of paintings by Rubens and others. The bishop has added modern art to complement the classical paintings. An interesting comparison can be made between Rubens' Descent from the Cross, and as abstract version of it. A close examination reveals elements of Rubens' original.



Descent from the cross-Rubens

Abstract Descent from the cross

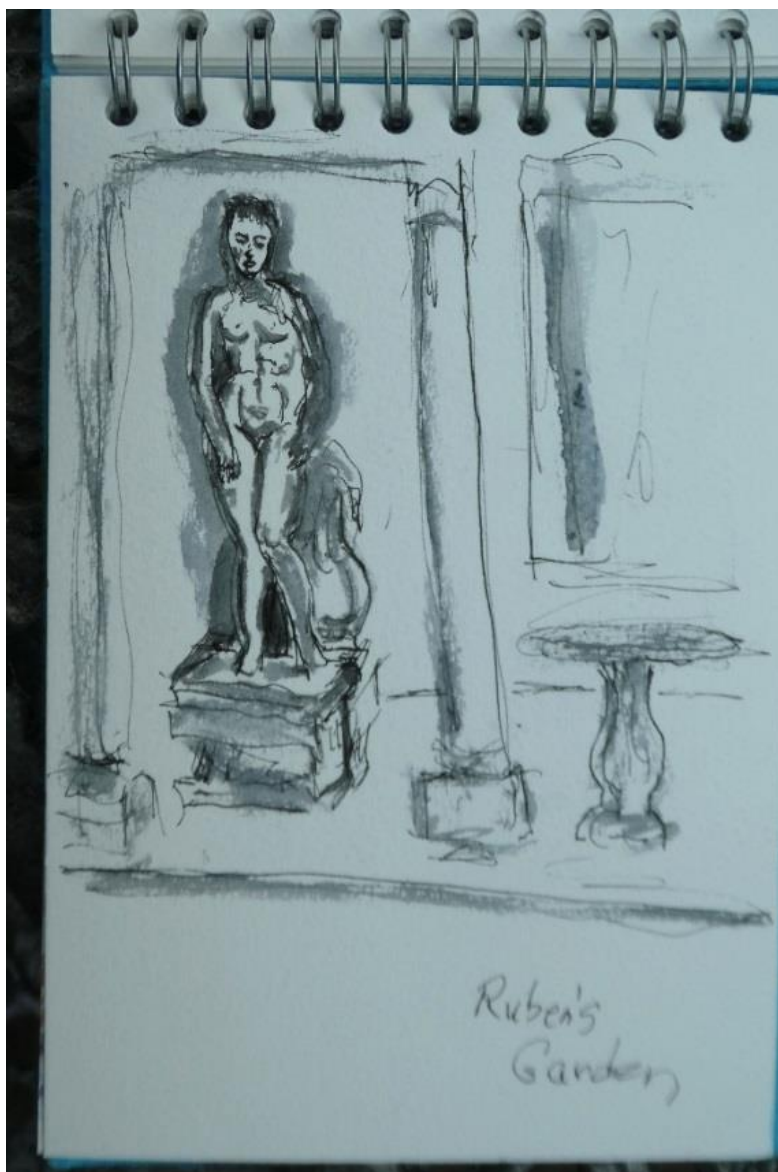
We returned to the ship around noon in a light rain and had lunch in the third deck buffet. By the time we had finished, the sun was out again, so we walked back into the city with the main objective to visit Rubens' home, now a museum containing many great Rubens paintings and a beautiful garden with sculptures. My favorite paintings include Rubens' classic Adam and Eve and Diana and the Hunt.

Rubens collaborated with other painters in this commission for a wealthy land owner, probably a hunter. He painted Diana and her companions while others painted the animals and surroundings, a common practice at the time. Rubens was possibly the first artist to become rich through his art.



Diana and the Hunt-Rubens and assistants

Adam and Eve



I was determined, as a matter of principle to do some sketching in Rubens' home, so I sketched this sculpture in the garden.

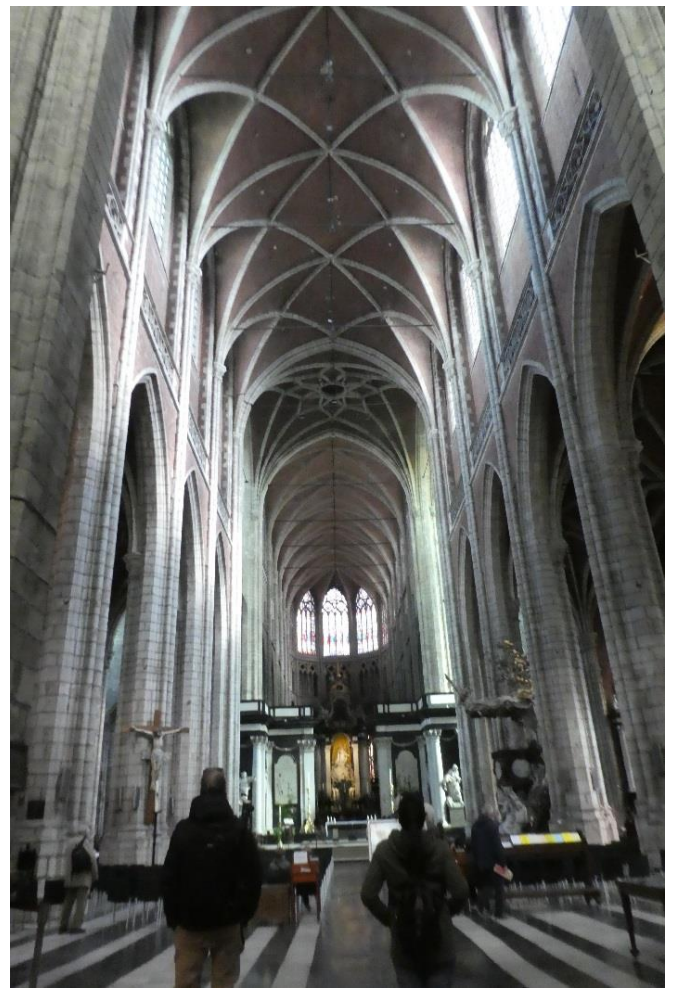
As soon as we walked out of Rubens home, a lightning storm, accompanied by a huge downpour, broke out. We were about a mile from the ship, which was due to depart in two hours, so we had no time to hang around. Then it began to hail. Our rush to get back combined with the fury of hail and rain resulted in a wrong turn, and got lost for a few panicked minutes before regaining our bearings. Relieved to see the ship, we arrived just in time for the usual evening briefing for next days events.

After dinner, the singers did a special Abba tribute, and I could not resist sitting in and drawing the performers. It was a late night.

Day 7-Gent

After arriving at Gent the next morning, we considered two options, 1. a quick breakfast followed by a bus to Brugges for a morning visit, and 2. a relaxed breakfast and morning followed by an afternoon bus to downtown Gent. After opening the curtains and staring into a freezing rain, the decision became a no brainer. Although Brugges is an amazing place, we were ready for a relaxed morning. By noon, the weather had cleared, we took the bus into Gent, and concluded we had made a good choice.

The bus dropped us within walking distance to the Gent Cathedral, home of the famous Gent Altarpiece by Van Eyck and his brother. The altarpiece has an interesting history of thievery and is one of the most stolen works in existence. It's panels have been stolen and recovered more than once and one is still missing. The walk to the cathedral and the area around it offer beautiful architecture, including many sculptures on building faces and roof tops. Also near the cathedral lie the city hall and clock tower. After visiting the cathedral, Pauline did some shopping while I sketched surrounding structures.



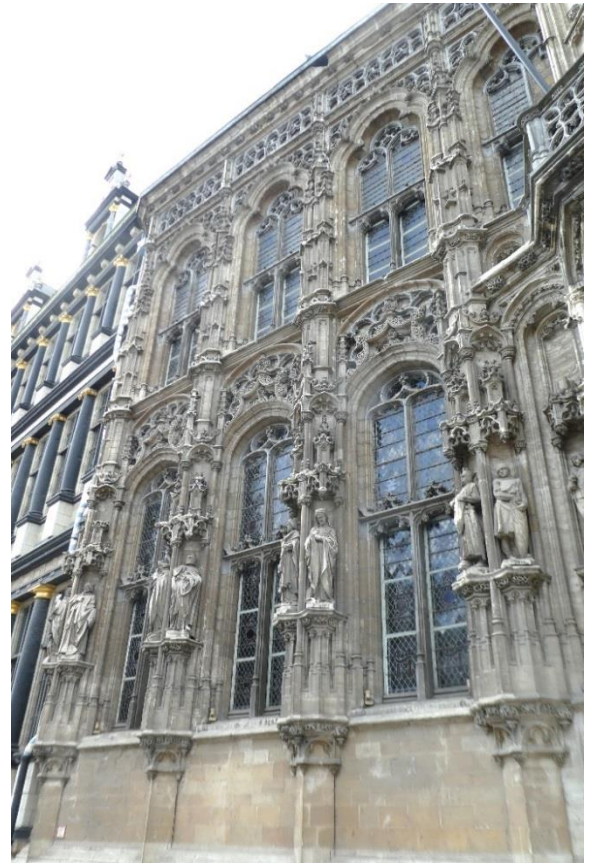
Gent Cathedral and inside.



Town Hall



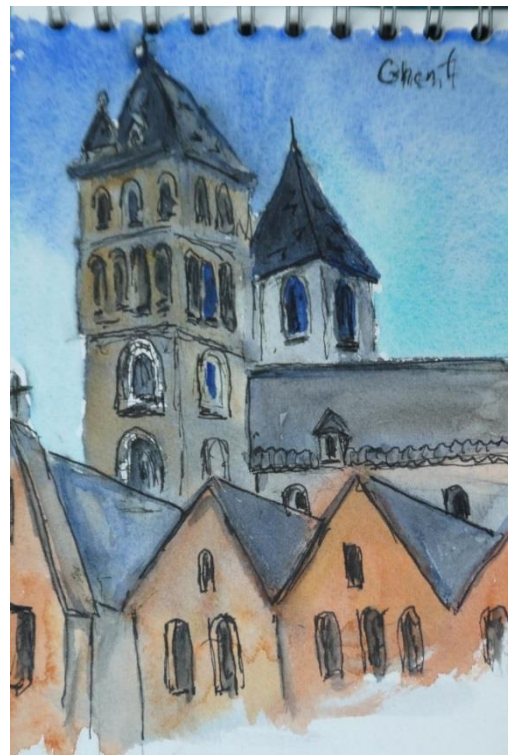
Gent clock tower



Wall sculptures



Typical housing in Gent



A church in Gent

While waiting on the bus to return to the ship, I did a quick study of the church behind the bus stop. We returned to the boat just in time for dinner. The boat set sail for the trip to Zeeland where we would take side trips to explore some of the waterworks and the small town of Veere.

Day 8-Zeeland and Rotterdam

In the morning we elected to take the “tulips and windmill” tour, which took us through fields of tulips to a tulip bulb farm. Somewhat to our dismay, we discovered that bulb farmers cut off the flowers to strengthen the bulb, leaving empty stalks standing in the field. Consequently, most of the tulip fields were now tulipless. At the factory, we watched assembly line workers packaging bulbs by the thousands. While it was interesting, it was not the vast fields of tulips we had expected to see. Our tour then moved to visit and tour a modern windmill on a private farm. There the locals described their windmill as an investment they had made 20 years earlier that will enable them to retire soon using the output of the turbine.

Much of the Netherlands is below sea level, requiring dikes and pumps to prevent sea water from covering it. The southwest part of the Netherlands comprises islands that once were surrounded by sea water. Through brilliant feats of engineering, the sea inlets were dammed and the salt water was replaced with fresh water from the rivers that once flowed directly into the North Sea. This made possible the reclaiming of land from the sea at the expense of placing it below sea level. In 1953 a disastrous storm devastated huge areas of the Netherlands, Belgium and England and broke through the dike protecting the recovered land. In the afternoon, we visited the region that was hit the hardest, where sea water had flooded thousands of acres, killing many Dutch people who had little warning of the impending disaster.

Recovering the land was a huge effort aided by the British who produced large floating concrete boxes and floated them from England into the gaps in the dike to patch the dike. The boxes were so large that one of them now houses a museum to remember the flood through artifacts, personal stories of heroism, suffering, sacrifice and strange coincidences. Once again, our local guide shared his unique experiences. His mother had traveled to a large city hospital, where as he was being born in a safe location, the rest of his family perished in the storm.

After leaving the museum, our bus took us to the nearby town of Veere for a walking tour.



Church at Veere



Day 9 and 10-Amsterdam-Keukenhof Gardens

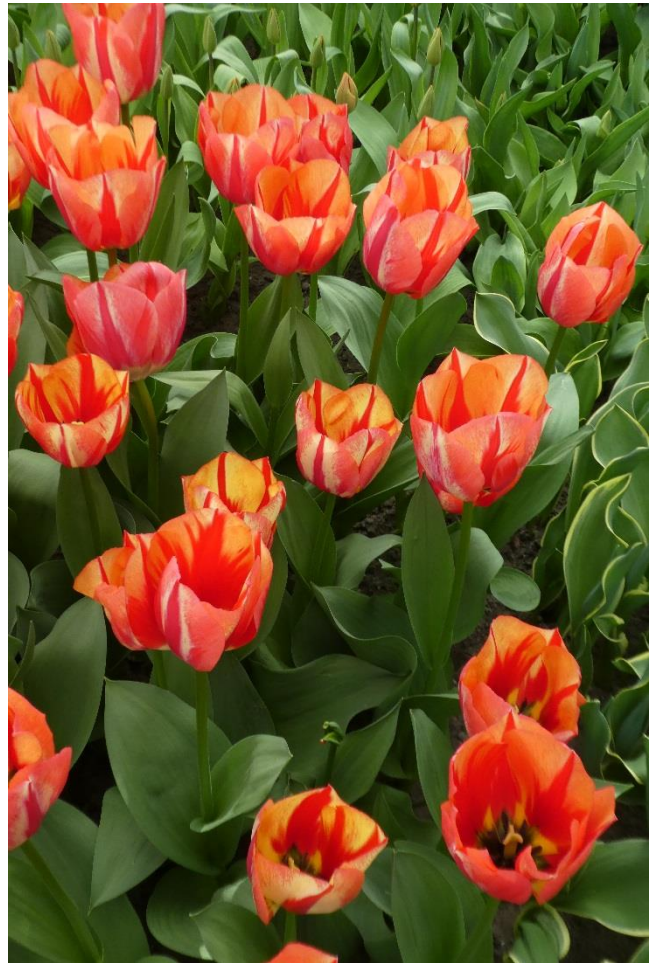
Early Friday morning, we arrived back in Amsterdam, where our journey had begun. From several options, we chose a full day visit the Keukenhof Gardens near Amsterdam. This proved to be the highlight of the trip with tulips and other flowers in unbelievable numbers and varieties. The gardens cover about 800 acres and contain vast fields of various flowers. We spent the day strolling the gardens and took a boat trip through the amazing flower fields surrounding the gardens. The gardens offer endless beds of the largest and most colorful tulips I had ever seen. It was a wonderful, relaxing, and beautiful way to end our trip.

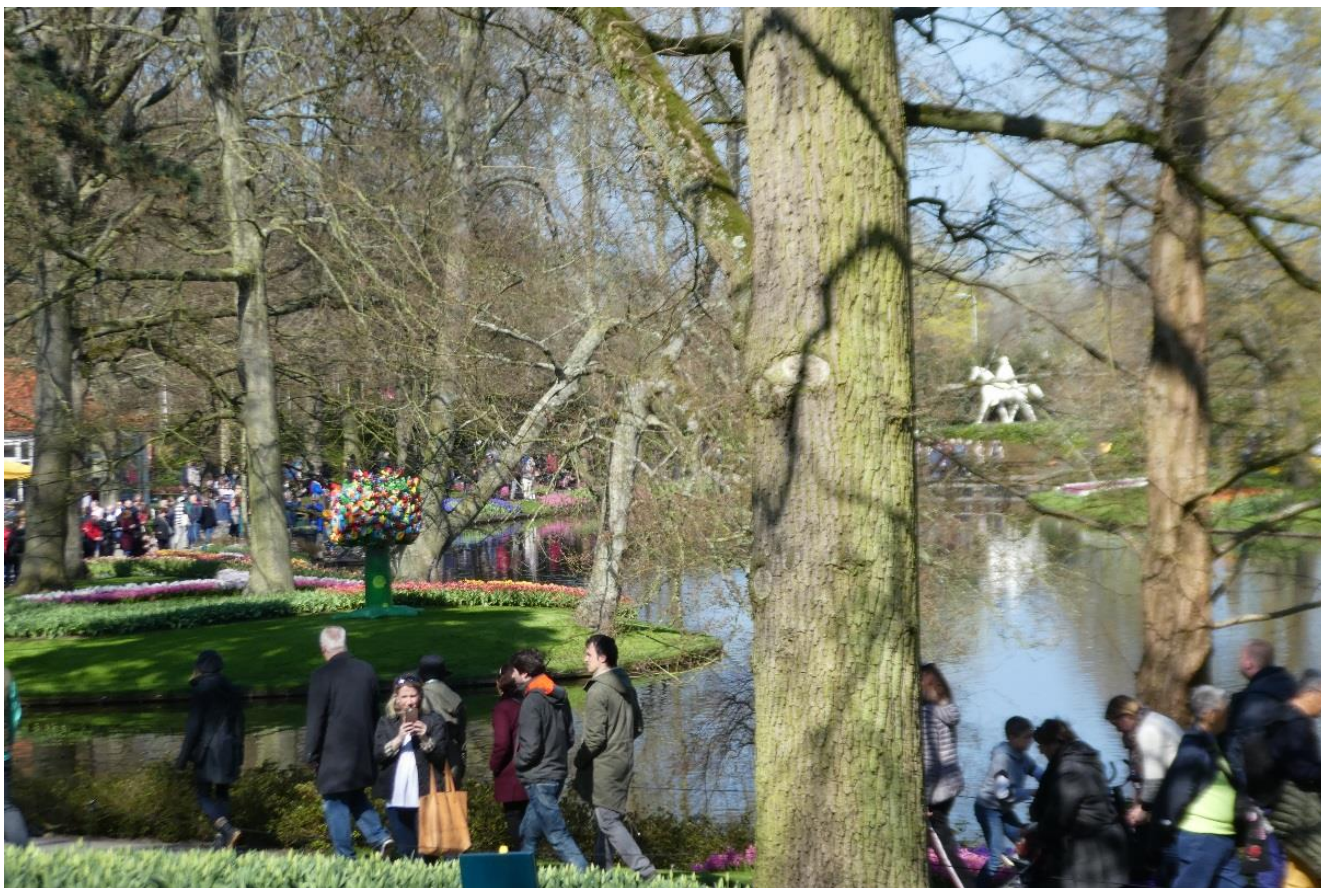




Hyacinth Fields

Tulips in Keukenhof Gardens





One of my painting scenes, still unfinished



Day 10-Back to the airport for our 75-minute Easy Jet flight home. (It's would be more appropriately named "Difficult Jet", but it is low priced and reliable.)