

Europe's Low Countries

The Netherlands & Belgium

A 10-day tour to Amsterdam & Bruges
with visits to De Haar Castle, Damm, Ghent, Alkmaar & Zaanse Schans

Day 1: Your European Adventure Begins

Meet up with your fellow travelers for your overnight flight across the Atlantic to Amsterdam.

Day 2: Welkom op De Nederland - Welcome to The Netherlands

After your afternoon arrival in Amsterdam you'll be met by your tour leader & travel into the city as we begin our exploration of Europe's 'Low Countries', so named for their largely flat & watery landscapes.

There will be time to check-in to our centrally-located hotel, then we'll venture out for a short walk & to enjoy a welcome dinner in a local eatery, the perfect welcome.

Day 3: South to Belgium - De Haar Castle & Bruges

This morning we board our tour bus to travel south towards one of Europe's richest medieval cities, Bruges, our destination for the next three nights.

En-route we will stop to visit the dramatic De Haar Castle, founded in the 15th century but rebuilt after a fire in the 1800s. As well as the ornate interior we'll explore the spectacular grounds around the castle's moat.

During the afternoon we'll continue south, arriving in the canal-laced & ivy-draped town of Bruges where we'll check-in & take a leisurely stroll to dinner.

Day 4: Beautiful Bruges

Bruges seems to come straight from the Middle Ages, with its ancient architecture & canals. Our walking tour of the pedestrian-friendly streets & alleyways of the city's center, a UNESCO World Heritage site, includes a visit to the Church of Our Lady, home to a Michelangelo sculpture that was his only work to leave Italy during his lifetime.

The tour will finish in Bruges' market square, where you'll be free for lunch - Flemish Fries with mayonnaise anyone?

During the afternoon we'll visit the masterpiece-packed Groeninge Museum. Much smaller than many of Europe's other leading art museums, the Groeninge is less overwhelming & its collection is a perfect sampling of the artistic treasures of the Low Countries.

Finally, before our group dinner you'll have an opportunity to climb the 366 steps of the Belfry for panoramic views over Bruges.

Day 5: Bruges at Leisure

We have left totally free for you to spend how you choose.

This morning your tour leader will accompany any takers on a bike ride to nearby Damm, a pretty village 4 miles from Bruges. The route to Damm follows a flat & shady tree-lined canal, making it an ideal excursion to join the Dutch on their bikes.

After exploring the village we'll return to Bruges at lunchtime.

We'll rendezvous tonight for our group dinner in another traditional Belgian restaurant.

Day 6: Ghent & our Return to Amsterdam

We begin our return journey to Amsterdam with an extended stop in Ghent for the morning & lunch.

The largest town in all of western Europe in the 13th & 14th centuries, historic Ghent was the center of the Flemish cloth trade that made this corner of Europe so wealthy.

Your tour leader will introduce you to this busy, lively city, whose reminders of the past are all around, before you'll have time for a reeled lunch or to explore the city center.

Just outside Ghent is our second stop, the *Brouwerij Huyghe*, or Huyghe Brewery.

We'll take a guided tour of this celebrated brewery, dating from 1654 & famous today for its award-winning 'Delirium Tremens', to learn about what makes Belgian beer famous around the globe & even enjoy a taste ourselves.

Our arrival & check-in at our Amsterdam hotel will be in the late afternoon, allowing time to relax before tonight's group dinner.

Day 7: Alkmaar Cheese Market

The historic town of Alkmaar is our destination this morning.

Every Friday for hundreds of years producers & traders have gathered in Alkmaar for its cheese market. After the town's official welcome to visitors the buying begins with sniffing, crumbling & tasting of each cheese. Once a deal is done the cheeses, large yellow rounds of Gouda, are carried away on a wooden 'sled' for weighing by porters in traditional dress.

After spending our morning & lunchtime in Alkmaar we'll return to Amsterdam & begin to explore the largest city of the Netherlands.

At one time Amsterdam was one of Europe's leading cities, at the heart of a huge trading empire that spanned the globe. Nowadays the city is a friendly & charming city, its famous canals lined with historic gabled houses dating back to its 17th century heyday.

This afternoon your tour leader will take you on a relaxed walking tour to introduce you to the city, its history, & some of its major sights.

Later we'll enjoy a *rijstafel* group dinner in an Indonesian restaurant, Amsterdam's most popular ethnic cuisine thanks to its close ties with the former Dutch colony.

After dinner, we'll learn about the more notorious aspects of Amsterdam & Dutch tolerance as we take a walk through the Red Light District & learn about how the Netherlands regulates the world's oldest profession. Along the way we'll also see local "coffee shops" part of the Netherland's creative approach to drug policy.

Day 8: Amsterdam in Depth

Today we will get to know the city better, traveling on foot, by tram, & by boat!

Our first visit today will be to Anne Frank's House. It was here that Anne & her family hid for more than two years during World War II before they were betrayed & deported to the concentration camps.

With more canals than Venice, downtown Amsterdam is best explored off a tour bus so we'll take a canal boat tour of the city in a glass-topped boat next, to see more of the city's canals & nearly 1,200 bridges!

After free time for lunch, we'll visit another of the city's top attractions this afternoon - the Van Gogh Museum. Dedicated entirely to Van Gogh, the museum is a highly popular visit, housing the world's greatest collection of his works including many that everyone is familiar with, such as his iconic sunflowers & starry nights.

Later we'll make a stop at the world-famous Heineken Brewery to see how & where one of the world's most popular beers is made, right here in Amsterdam.

Dinner tonight will be in a restaurant specializing in traditional Dutch *pannenkoeken*, thin pancakes with savory or sweet toppings.

Day 9: Zaanse Schans - Holland's Famous Windmills, Clogs & Cheese

A short train ride out of the city will take us to the village of Zaanse Schans, our destination for a morning discovering the Netherland's famous windmills, clogs & cheeses.

Zaanse Schans village is home to cottages, windmills & workshops from all over the Netherlands

This afternoon is free for you to enjoy your last hours in Amsterdam at leisure: rent a bike & cycle the city's quiet canals, see the 'Old Masters' paintings of Rembrandt & Vermeer in the Rijksmuseum, shop the pedestrian Kalverstraat, or visit the Amsterdam Arena - home of Ajax soccer club.

Tonight we'll gather for our farewell group dinner as we share memories & toast new friends. Proost!

Day 10: Farewell to Europe

Sadly it's time to bid farewell to the wonderful Low Countries as we head to the airport this morning. Your daytime flights will have you home in the USA later today or early tomorrow.