

LILY EXPLORES HOLLAND'S TURFRROUTE

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Springtime in Holland

When we decided to embark on a spring cruise exploring the waterways of Holland's Turfroute we thought there may be some similarities to Ireland and we weren't disappointed. Even the weather played ball and for the first week the heavens opened and soaked the beautifully rural landscape in a continuous downpour of drizzle, battering the blousy blooms of the spring tulips creating its own Dutch version of a 'soft' day.

Much of Holland and in particular, southeast Friesland was involved in turf production with the small, narrow waterways of the Turfroute being specifically created between 1630 and 1830 to allow shallow-drafted barges access into the most isolated bogs. Aiding in the harvest and transportation process these little waterways also acted as a way in and out for the turf cutters who often worked in appalling conditions and harsh weather cutting the fuel by hand. Around this network of waterways many towns and villages soon built up and these historical places are now a magnet for tourists.

The Turfroute is only open a few weeks each year as it is run and cared for by volunteers. An entrance fee is charged (€17.50) which goes towards the upkeep, allows boaters one circuit of the route and includes allowance to stay at a number of moorings for up to three days at any one time. The small intimate waterways of the Friesland Turfroute are



One way traffic through Aldeboarn

linked to a number of larger waterways, which are open all year and pass through the neighbouring provinces of Drenthe and Overijssel. These can be combined together to form a large circular cruise known as the Big Turfroute and this was the journey we undertook in spring 2013.

It was a good day's cruise from our base to the twin-towns of Akkrum-Nes, gateway to the Turfroute. From here we joined the Boorne, a pretty canalised river to Aldeboarn, one the oldest turf settlements in the country and a conservation area. A one way system operates through the pretty village as the waterway is extremely narrow and traversed by iron swing bridges. Pressing a button on the quayside acknowledged our arrival and a short wait later as if by magic, the friendly bridge-keeper appeared to safely see us through whilst oncoming traffic was held in a waiting area. One of the best places to stop along this section is at Uilesprong. There are moorings alongside a polder pumping station which regularly holds open days and along with the nearby Museum It Damshûs these give visitors an excellent overview of the area explaining the processes of land reclamation and turf production in detail. There are good walking and cycling trails all along the Turfroute; the one here, named after Ferdinand Domela (1846-1919) a prominent socialist who fought to improve conditions for turf cutters, involves crossing the waterway on a self-operated chain ferry, which proved quite a novelty!

The Opsterlandse Compagnonsvaart runs for 33km from Gorredijk to Appelscha situated near the Drenthe border and is the Turfroute's main waterway. In 1974 there were proposals to fill-in sections through Gorredijk to make room for car parking which prompted Father Leo Van Ulden of the local Catholic Church to form an opposition group and campaign to save the waterway. Known as The Foundation De Nije Kompanjons it is thanks to this dedicated group of volunteers who liaise with authorities and waterway departments as well as regulate and maintain the navigation that today's boaters can continue to enjoy the Turfroute.

Gorredijk is also where we encountered our first lock and needed to pay our dues on

which we were handed a cotton-printed bag containing literature on the surrounding area. There was also the opportunity to purchase a burgee depicting the Turfroute logo and a book written by one of the lock keepers containing a collection of cycling and walking trails accessible from mooring points. With the lock being situated in the heart of the town, surrounded by bars and cafes we felt as if our locking and rope skills were under close scrutiny, luckily for us the inclement weather seemed to ward off most of the inquisitive! As the lock gates have no balance beams to push on, the Turfroute staff open and close them by using a long weighty hooked pole which looks precarious and of course also draws in the crowds.



Opening locks, Turfroute style

Exiting the lock we were immediately confronted by the first of many small swinging footbridges crossing the straight waterway all of which needed to be opened. There are numerous lift bridges on the Turfroute, the larger ones are keeper-operated but the majority of small footbridges, especially in rural areas need to be self-operated. In the summer when children are on school holidays they will often operate these for a small tip, usually €1. The most unusual footbridges are to be found in the town of Appelscha, these are operated by a pump-handle stowed in a metal box on the bridge itself. This town sits on the edge of the Drents-Friese Wold National Park where there is an informative visitor's centre, café and many walking and cycling trails through the surrounding countryside which is very diverse. Ranging from bog and heath to vast areas of inland drifting sand dunes this is only a short bike ride away from the waterway and makes a great day out.



Buster with his bike trailer

Those of you who have read about our travels before will recall our dog Buster has health problems affecting his walking so before

embarking on this cruise we acquired a 'Doggyhut' bike trailer. This has enabled us to explore further afield without having to worry if Buster will make it there and back. Anyone with an older dog or one with walking problems should consider getting one of these, it has opened new doors and is helping us keep fit in the process, can't be bad! The trailer is lightweight and folds flat making it easy to stow away onboard.

The Tsjonger, a canalised river is the place to head for complete isolation. Surrounded by a mixture of vast meadows, heath and bogs the wildlife is amazing and a haven for insects. It is believed that 60% of Friesland's dragonflies come to this one area to breed so it is of great ecological value. The Turfroute staff use eco-friendly electric scooters along this section and will follow you along opening and closing the locks and bridges, which makes for very relaxed cruising. The most popular port of call is the compact harbour at Oldeberkoop which was undergoing refurbishment during our visit.

On entering the province of Drenthe to join the Big Turfroute, there is an immediate change of character as the waterways are larger, deeper and straighter. The Drentsche-Hoofdvaart was built between 1767 and 1780 to aid the carriage of turf but was also used for the transportation of other produce including sugarbeet, potatoes and flour. It is now used mainly by leisure craft as a through route to the coast or to Germany. On this waterway the lock keepers are responsible for designated sections just like the Grand Canal and they will contact the next keeper as and when you exit their section so your arrival is expected. There are many lovely mooring places; one of the most popular is Dieverbrug where up to fourteen days free mooring is permitted. There is plenty to do and see: to the west of the waterway is Diever where one of the provinces many ancient megaliths can be viewed, there is also an open-air Shakespeare theatre and some listed lime kilns worth exploring. A short cycle trip away to the east is the village of Dwingaloo which on our arrival was a hive of activity as the newly appointed King of the Netherlands was due to visit. It seemed as if the whole population was out and about, streets were being swept clean, bunting and flags erected, even the unusual onion-shaped spire of the local church was being draped in vibrant orange cloth in celebration of the royal visitor!



Meppel Basin

One of the busiest places we visited was the city of Meppel. This was once an important distribution centre for the turf business and even today still has extensive docks capable of dealing with craft weighing up to 2,000 tonnes dealing mainly in aggregates and containers. The city's coat of arms and flag interestingly depicts clover or shamrock leaves which represent the surrounding lush countryside and three black rectangles signifying the local importance of the turf industry. There are plenty of moorings, the nicest are accessed by locking up into the basin and are overlooked by a beautiful windmill. Being a stroll from the shops and Murphy's Irish Pub in the main square, these are very popular.

We entered the province of Overijssel a short distance south of Meppel where the lakes of Beulaker and Belter Wijde needed to be crossed. These are small compared to the Shannon lakes, nevertheless the open expanse of water and cooling breeze offered some welcoming relief from the sudden hot spell the weather had thrust upon us. Drawing less than a metre enabled us to fully explore the lakes and islands, for those needing more depth a buoyed channel marks the main route passing through an area named Blawe Hand, believed to have originated from the days when turf cutters working in all weathers suffered from cold blue hands! The surrounding De Wieden and De Weerribben National Parks together form the largest continuous peat moor in northwest Europe.



Giethoorn: Venice of the North

One of the highlights of our trip was visiting the former turf village of Giethoorn. Known as the Venice of the North due to its large number of tiny canals crossed by timber footbridges it was once only accessible by punt and even now much of the day-to-day business still operates this way, even the weekly rubbish collection. We found plenty of mooring spaces on the main canal approaching Giethoorn and in the public harbour which is where we left Lily to head off and explore. As only small boats are allowed access to the main village taking your own dinghy is best however, there are craft for hire including row boats, punts and electric-powered 'Whisper' boats. There are marked water trails around the village and through the surrounding reed beds, from which reeds are still harvested for use in furniture and thatching. Many of the waterside properties contain museums and small businesses, where the most popular buy



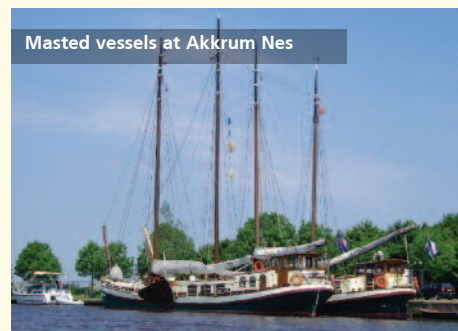
Tugs at Heerenveen

is the locally produced Giethoorn Blue pottery.

Heading along the Kanaal Steenwijk-Ossenzijl the lift bridges sensed our approach and operated automatically, very modern! At Ossenzijl we joined the Linde, a small twisting river marking the boundary between Overijssel and Friesland where the adjacent meadows were covered with golden swaths of buttercups. Nearing the end of our route we visited the town of Heerenveen, which translates as Lords Fen. On the outskirts is Oranjewold, once an area of open heathland. This was purchased by the Frisian Nassaus in 1664 who built an impressive palace and created the pleasure grounds of Oranjestien. The area quickly became popular with the landed gentry who set up home here constructing impressive mansions. Whilst they lived in the height of luxury, the turf cutters they employed lived out a meagre existence in desperate conditions. To complete our circular route we headed northwards from Heerenveen passing a tug restoration works on the commercial waterway It Deel to link back up with Akkrum-Nes.

Today turf is no longer harvested from these areas and it is interesting to see how the Dutch have turned the history of turf production into a popular tourist attraction. The Turfroute campaigners should be congratulated as not only have they saved a beautiful and unique network of waterways but also opened up a rich and diverse area of countryside to the general public. With boat hire available locally and the helpful waterways staff on hand there is no wonder this circuit is growing in popularity. We thoroughly enjoyed our spring exploration of the Turfroute and look forward to returning in the near future.

Unfortunately we were unable to source a map of the Turfroute suitable for print reproduction. You can see a map on the Turfroute website at www.turfroute.nl/ligging.html – ed



Masted vessels at Akkrum Nes