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Amsterdam - Antwerp - Bruges Tour

In this tour of Bike & Barge Holland Tours from Amsterdam to Bruges we use the bike to show parts of the Netherlands and Belgium. This southbound tour combines the river delta landscapes of 3 major European rivers: Rhine(Rijn), Meuse(Maas) and Scheldt(Schelde). Cycling over the dikes of the majestic waters of the low lands is breathtaking. On our way fortified towns like Vianen, Gorinchem, Woudrichem, Heusden and Geertruidenberg are historical witnesses of the value of these old European routes.

The river clay landscape changes into the woods and heather fields of the former Duchy of Brabant. In the Independence War of the Netherlands - the Protestant cities of Holland against the Catholic Spain of Philips II - Brabant eventually was split up in 2 parts. The former capitals Hertogenbosch en Bergen op Zoom ended in the northern Netherlands. The gothic cathedral of 's Hertogenbosch (Den Bosch) is still one the most beautiful testimonies of Catholic heritage.

Antwerp was a booming harbor city in the 16th century until the Dutch blocked it from the Spanish. Its splendid Cathedral of Our Sweet Lady - 4 Rubens paintings - and the City Hall Square with its guild houses show the prosperity of the days gone by. Nowadays Antwerp is the center of a vibrant economical Flemish revival. It makes it an ideal city for a day of exploring along the old alleys, the markets, and the museums. Amongst them Rubens House, the former house and studio of Peter Paul Rubens, the Diamond Museum, and the Royal Museum of Fine Arts.

On our way to Bruges we follow the Schelde river valley. The Schelde is tidal with a spectacular, sometimes more than 5-meter difference in water level. Scenic rides, bike ferries, and pastoral dike villages lead us to the Schelde towns Dendermonde and Gent. The latter has an independent and revolutionary history and is probably the best kept Flemish pearl; beautiful as Bruges, lively as Antwerp.

The amazing medieval center of Bruges is on the list of Unesco World Heritage Sites and is possibly the most renowned historic Flemish city. Here our tour ends with a city walk along the most beautiful sites. Your last full day is spent in Bruges. Bruges is about a four-hour train ride from Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam. Trains run usually twice an hour.

Saturday: Amsterdam – Vianen

This tour starts when everyone has arrived on the Angeline. You get introduced to the crew and guides and then sail off, out of the Oosterdok into the waters of the 'IJ'. This corner of the huge inner lake of the Netherlands is the former harbor of Amsterdam. It is now a booming part of the city with swanky waterfront residence area's and modern businesses in the old harbor buildings. We continue over the Amsterdam – Rhine canal, completed in 1952, which is with 87.000 ships a year the busiest canal in the world. It connects Amsterdam with the Ruhr-area in Germany.

We cycle a small distance starting from Nigtevecht. A countryside road leads us along the river Vecht where in the 18th century the wealthy inhabitants of Amsterdam built their country-houses, semi-castles. We pass lovely villages as Vreeland, Loenen and Breukelen. Brooklyn-New York got its name from this Vecht village.

After 17 km of biking we return to the boat to sail on to Vianen, where we spend the night along the Lower Rhine River. The Rhine comes from Switzerland and Germany, with its branches Lek and Waal. It is mainly water coming from the melting ice in the Alps.

Vianen is a small town with a well-preserved lovely old centre. It still has the street pattern of the 16th century and some city walls. The old entrance gate welcomes you into town.

Sunday: Vianen – Gorinchem

This quiet Sunday morning starts with a ride on top of the dikes along the Lek River. These dikes have been enlarged recently, because the river waters can be fairly high in spring. A decade ago there were severe problems in this region, when the dikes were about to break. We pass through the town of Culemborg, the birthplace of the founder of today's Cape Town, South Africa: Jan van Riebeeck.

Both groups bike through the green pastures towards the picturesque Linge River. Leerdam is the most famous town situated along this winding water way. Leerdam is known for its glass production. The day ends in wonderful Gorinchem (or Gorkum), situated at a strategic point of the rivers. An old arm of the Meuse ran here into the

Waal. Together with the fortress of Loevestein and the fortified neighbor town Woudrichem on the south bank of the river, these three strongholds protected the vital entrance to Holland over water. Thanks to its strategic position, this city developed itself from the 13th-century. The ground plan of this fortified Gorkum is in the shape of a star. This defense construction became a specialism all throughout the country in the 16th-century.

Monday: Gorinchem – Den Bosch

We start the day by crossing the river Waal by ferry. On the other river bank the fortified town of Woudrichem is waiting. Here we take some time to stroll around on the cobble stoned streets, along the old harbor and the brick houses. One of the city's entrance gates is still in tact.

Through a countryside of rivers, dikes, fields and farms we continue this picturesque ride to the town of Heusden. This former fortified town is very well kept; earthen walls, entrance gates, cobble stone streets and beautiful old houses. The star-shape pattern of the defense works around town can still be seen very clearly. The only building that didn't survive time is the city hall, renowned to be the most beautiful of the Netherlands. It survived many attacks of the Spaniards in the 17th-century, but collapsed in WW-II. Only 4 hours before the Scottish tanks and Polish divisions marched in to liberate the town in November 1944, the tower was blown up. In the cellar 134 civilians - 10 % of the population - who hid themselves got crushed. Heusden is a wonderful stop: little shops and restaurants, a marina inside its historic walls, the windmill and a wooden draw bridge. All together a picture!

Onward we go the Den Bosch. This capital of the province of Brabant was already a city in 1225. The St Jan cathedral from 1529 is one of Netherlands most impressive gothic buildings.

The interesting Binnendieze is an underground river that winds through the oldest neighborhoods of Den Bosch. In the evening we do an underground river tour that shows you the medieval set up of the town in a breathtaking way.

Tuesday: Den Bosch - Geertruidenberg

Soon after we leave the Den Bosch in the morning we pay a visit to Vught, where one of the three concentration camps in WW-II in the Netherlands was located. It was the only camp run by the Nazi-SS. After the visit we enter the higher sands grounds of Brabant, tree-lined and with vast heather fields. We head for the National park of the Dunes of Loon and Drunen. The landscape was shaped during the ice

ages, when sand covered the open area. What remains today are small sand dunes, dry arid soil, trees, marshland and more.

In the afternoon we pass typical Brabant villages where we should not miss out on a good bakery stop.

Geertruidenberg is a small town with an interesting history. Once a stronghold for Holland it became part of Brabant after the Napoleonic period. The historic center is nice for an afternoon stroll. We may spend the night here, but more likely Angeline will sail a bit further to give us a head start for the next morning.

Wednesday: Geertruidenberg – Bergen op Zoom

Leaving Geertruidenberg we reach an agricultural area. In the sea clay polders one can see orchards and crops like sugar beets and potatoes. One of the largest sugar refineries of Western Europe is located here near Dinteloord.

Soon we reach Oudenbosch, where there used to be 3 sugar refineries. Nowadays it is the horticulture being the main use of land. A major attraction in town is the Basilica H.H. Agatha and Barbara. Around 1880 this small copy of the Saint Peter's in Rome was built.

From Oudenbosch we bike to Bergen op Zoom, which is our hometown for tonight. The city's history goes back a long time. Therefore it has quite some wonderful old buildings to see. The downtown area won the Dutch price of best inner city in 2007.

Thursday: Bergen op Zoom - Antwerp

When we leave Bergen op Zoom we soon reach the border with Belgium. A very disappointing experience for those who look forward to a real border crossing: No passport control, no extra stamp, no money change.... One may spot the different details in the streets, which you should first try to discover for yourselves. (The occasional cobblestone roads may be one of them).

Today is a ride through wooded grounds and heather fields. In this part of the Belgian Kempen Province are towns with beautiful houses. There are quite some Dutch people living here for the better tax climate that Belgium provides.

In this area are three big Jewish cemeteries for the Jewish population of Antwerp. Each of them have over 10.000 graves. The reason they are situated just over the border in the Netherlands rather than on Belgium ones is curious : the Belgium government never guaranteed for eternity the cemeteries to keep their location. The Dutch didn't give the guarantee either but never denied it either.

These rich suburb towns are slowly bringing us closer to Antwerp. The ride into this large harbor town is on bike trails mainly.

Our barge is located in the Willemdok, an old harbor area being converted into an upscale living neighborhood. The Willemdok is 2 km from the old city center. Antwerp is the city of shipping, but also of diamonds, Rubens, fashionable shops, museums, churches and many quaint streets and squares.

Friday: Antwerp (free day – no biking)

Antwerp is Belgian's number one harbor city and they say after Rotterdam one of the biggest harbors in the world. Most of that industrial zone is located north of the center along the banks of the Schelde river.

Historical events followed each other in time: the settlement Antwerp started in 836 at the west side border of the German empire. In the 13th-15th-century Antwerp started growing as a harbor town. Trade in English wool was important. The leadership of Charles V brought a lot of prosperity in the 16th-century, until the independence war of the low lands against the Spaniards broke out in 1566. When most of Flanders stayed in Spanish hands the north blocked off the Schelde and therefore the harbor of Antwerp. Amsterdam and Rotterdam took over the leading position as big European harbors. In 1585 the siege of Antwerp took place by the Spanish army. Protestants were killed or fled to Holland, giving an extra boost to the development of the old competitor. The Catholics stayed.

Around 1800 Napoleon enforced his power, in 1830 Belgian separated from the Netherlands and in 1866 the discovery of diamonds in South Africa made Antwerp into the most important diamond market of the world.

We start the day with a guided walking tour. A local guide brings you along the interesting sites to the old center of Antwerp.

Today there is no biking programmed, which gives you the opportunity to explore by yourself. You may want to use your day just giving the legs a rest, enjoy a nice lunch on one of the many scenic terraces or do some shopping. However, Antwerp is equipped splendid museums, beautiful churches and monumental streets with medieval houses.

Worth to visit or to do:

- Onze Lieve Vrouwe Kathedraal (Cathedral of our Lady). The biggest gothic cathedral of Belgium. Open 10-17. Costs € 5/ 65+ € 3.
- Grote Markt square, old 16th-century houses and city hall.

- Museum of Fine Arts (Schone Kunsten) paintings from masters (1360 -1970) like Rubens, Jan van Eyck and Frans Hals. Open 10-17. Costs € 6 /60+ € 4.
- Museum of modern Art (MuKHA) Open 11-18. Costs € 6/60+ € 4.
- Rubens House. Museum where Pieter Paul Rubens worked and lived. Open Tue-Sun 10-17. Costs: € 8/65+ € 6.
- National Shipping Museum (Scheepvaartmuseum) MAS reopened in 2011 in a new building at the Willemdok where we are docked. The building has a nice view on the top floor. You don't need a ticket to do so. For the museum you pay 5 €, for the temporary exhibitions another 8 €.
- Diamant museum.. Open 10-17.30. Costs € 6/60+ € 4.
- Museum Plantin-Moretus. Old printing presses, large collection old topographical maps, beautiful building. Open 10-17. Costs: € 6/65+ free.
- Harbor/river cruise of 50 min. Leaving every hour next to The Steen. Open 13-16.
- Upscale shopping street: "Meir", with a beautiful shopping mall called the "Stadsfeestzaal".

Saturday: Antwerp - Dendermonde

We leave town through a bicycle and pedestrian tunnel crossing the Schelde river to the west. Slowly we see the industrial influence and the big-city-life disappear and a lovely quiet landscape appears. Small fields, trees and houses scattered all over in between the tiny villages. We reach the town called Temse. It has a typical Belgian centre with tiny streets paved with the famous cobblestones. Water has always been important here, which still can be seen by the numerous shipyards. Biking over the longest bridge over the river we reach on the other side of the Schelde a nature area. The twigs of different willow trees used to be "harvested" for basket making, a typical former local profession. Small roads along castles, sleeping villages and over dikes, lead to Dendermonde, which means the mouth of the river Dender that merges here with the river Schelde. The Dender is the fastest flowing river of Flanders with its 80m drop.

Today you can witness the extreme water differences of the Schelde river. At low tide even the bike ferries cannot run anymore.

Dendermonde is the town where we stay overnight. The city used to be a defense town with city walls. Most famous it is for the Horse Beiaard, a legend from the 16th century.

Having a beer on the quaint market square after an evening stroll is recommended.

Sunday: Dendermonde – Gent

We bike today along the south side of the Schelde. It is Sunday, which means lots of bike-racing clubs may pass us on the trails today.

On our way to Gent we come across some castles and mansions.

People were already impressed by the beauty of this region a long time ago. Another aspect that makes this area attractive for us is the cultivation of flowers, like azaleas, roses and begonia's.

Gent is a very old city with a long history. It started with Roman settlements, the foundation of the Saint Baafs (Bavo) abbey around 650, the ravaging of Normans around 850 and the economic growth because of the trade in wool cloth. In 1400 Gent was, after Paris, the biggest city north of the Alps with 64 000 inhabitants. Today it counts 230 000 people and the main income is the industrial sector. Gent is connected to the North Sea through a canal. It has the second largest harbor of Belgium.

The city has many highlights that ask for some attention:

The Saint Bavo church from the 13th century is free to visit. The ruins of St. Bavo's abbey, the castle of the Counts of Flanders, the Belfry and the town hall can be visited for a small entrance fee. Museums worth to see are the Fine Art Museum (paintings from 15C - 20C, eg. Jheronimus Bosch who made fascinating old altar pieces/triptychs).

The Museum of Contemporary Art (eg. Cobra) and the Bijloke Museum about the history and archeology of Gent.

In Gent we are docked 2 km from the old city center.

Monday: Gent – Aalterbrug

Today we meander through the landscape of the meandering river Leie. The Leie flows into the Schelde river in Gent. The area is known for its woods, beautiful quiet towns, mansions and parks. Many poets and painters were attracted by this area in the 19th century.

We plan to visit the Ooidonk castle. The centre of the site is the 16th-century stately home Ooidonk Castle. It was built on the site of a 14th-century fortress of which next to nothing is left. The difference between Ooidonk and similar sites that are open to the public, is that this is a real home where the owners live, and that it is beautifully kept up.

We spend the night in Aalterbrug. This is a small town that is split in two by the Gent-Bruges canal. This canal was dug around 1623 and was used as a major link in between the two cities by the upper class people. The "Gent barge" would travel by night up and down, providing a comfortable journey compared to travels by road. Famous people who traveled here were Peter the Great, Louis XV and Leopold I.

Tuesday: Aalterbrug – Bruges

The bike ride is gorgeous today, trails winding through lots of forest. A break in the Lippensgoed-Bulskampveld domain is special because of its herbal garden, the nature visitor centre and the enormous trees. All this is located in a 232 ha sized park. The canal, lined with poplar trees, leads us towards Bruges. That city is our goal for today and it is one of the most famous towns of the country. The center is well kept, compact and very quaint. We spend an extra day here. The barge is located on the south side of town, near the train station, within walking distance of all the Bruges highlights.

The city walk tonight gives you a good impression of the town. It helps to orientate yourselves for the time you spend here later by yourself.

Wednesday: Bruges (round trip)

Our goal today is the coast. We get there by train and take the bike with us. Quite an operation, because the trains are only set up to take a few bikes. We may have to wait for the next one. Don't worry, they run very frequently. Both groups bike for a longer or shorter ride along the coast which is in fact a row of beach resorts. These resorts are quite popular and vary in size and popularity. To us it means a nice break after our inland biking for 11 days. Leaving the coast we ride back to Bruges through the polders where small winding roads pass hamlets and farms under the famous Flemish skies.

Bruges is never very far away. Coming back into Bruges, we have a nice visit organized to ...

Once back you have to say goodbye to the bike. We turn them in for a check-up. In the evening we have our farewell dinner, after which your guides will be leaving.

Thursday: Bruges (free day)

On this day off, you can enjoy Bruges by yourself.

Interesting to visit are:

- There is a pass for all museums available. Valid for 3 days, 15 €
- Groeninge Museum, 6 centuries of paintings of the Dutch, Flemish and Belgian masters. Open 9.30-17. Price € 8/ 65+ € 6.
- Arentshuis - Brangwyn Museum, the Lace Museum. Open 9.30-17. Price € 2/ 65+ € 1.
- Saint John's Hospital, reconstructed hospital life, decorative art, furniture etc. Beautiful view on Leie river. Open 9.30-17. € 8/ 65+ €6, incl entree Memlingmuseum. (Apothecary closed between 11.45-14)

- OLV-ter-Potterie church, Open 9.30-12.30 13.30-17. Price € 2/ 65+ € 1.
- Belfry, a medieval Belfry Tower. 366 steps to a wonderful view and the impressive clock mechanisms. Open 9.30-17. Price € 4.
- Often Summer evening concerts.
- The Lace Centre. In the afternoons ladies make lace. Address: next to Jerusalem Church, Balstraat. Open 10-12 14-18.
- Beguinage from 1245. Almshouses. Has a little museum about the daily life of the Benedictine nuns, which is closed for lunch.
- Basilica of the Holy Blood, 12th-century. € 1,50.
- Brugge-Gruuthuse museum. An old city palace houses a museum about 15-17th-century life. 09.30-17 € 6/65+ € 5
- Church Onze-Lieve-Vrouw, tower 122m (400 feet). € 2/ 65+ € 1.
- Museum of Archeology € 2 65+ € 1
- Town Hall / Brugse Vrije € 2 / 65+ € 1
- Museum of Ethnology € 2/ 65+ € 1
- Museum of the Belgium poet Guido Gezelle € 2/ 65+ € 1
- Mills € 2,00/ 65+ € 1. Open 9.30-12.30 13.30-17
- Gent-gate
- Diamond Centre. History of Europe's oldest diamond centre. Open 10-18. Price € 6, + € 3 to see show.
- Minnewater, Lake of Love. Near Beguinage.

Tourist transport:

- Bruges by boat. Leaving at numerous places along the canals. 30 minutes. Price: € 6,90.
- Bruges by horse-drawn cab. Leaving from Markt Square. A trip lasts around 45 minutes, via the Beguinage. Price per cab € 30.
- Sightseeing Line Bruges. Bus tour with individual headphones, 50 minutes. Leaves from Markt square 10-17pm. Price € 14.

A laundry service can be found in the Langestraat, in the east part of town.

Friday: Departure

Everyone is to leave the barge by 9am. The train station is within walking distance of the barge (about 10 minutes). Amsterdam is about a four hour train ride from Bruges. Trains usually run twice an hour.

Amsterdam – Antwerp - Bruges Map

