



AMSTERDAM and BRUGGE April 2014

Amsterdam was an “experience”. We stayed in a typical Amsterdam house.....four flights straight UP, tiny spiral steps, very small attic room and a shared bath with the adjacent occupants.....all this for the bargain price of over \$200 a night. In the Netherlands, the most densely populated country in the world (Google fact), things were expensive and space was limited. And it was very crowded to say the least. Everyone has a bike or maybe two and they ride them at mach speed. Bikes are the major form of transportation and some have clever seats or strollers attached for their everyday activities, like picking up kids at school, buying groceries or riding to work in fine clothes with brief case, musical instruments or anything else one might need for the day. The history of this city is fascinating and has a personal connection to its ART. Some of the best museums in the world are here and they alone could keep one busy for a lifetime. During our visit, it rained almost every day and between the explosion of umbrellas, the trams, the buses, the cars, the boats, the canals, the church bells, the pot-smoking tourists and the Red Light District, I felt exhausted most of the time just trying to absorb the cacophony of sights and sounds. But to be fair, I liked it better than most BIG cities. It does have a unique feel of youth and freedom. Outside Amsterdam –in the country was where I found the charm of what I had imagined. Keukenhof Gardens is breathtaking no matter what the weather. The varieties of tulips are neatly arranged for impact and burst of color. The air is filled with fragrance along the winding paths and the fountains and swans complete a vision of fantasy that made me want to start singing.....*Tiptoe Through The Tulips*. On other short adventures from Amsterdam, we found Zaanse Schans filled with tiny houses that had quaint facades, a splash of windmills and blue painterly skies. Voldenham gave tours of making those famous wooden shoes and the cheese factories actually had docents in lacy Dutch hats. Haarlem was a smaller version of Amsterdam with clip clopping horse rides and cafes that seemed to say.....stay awhile longer. Lovely.

Off to Belgium, we took the train and stayed in Brugge. The city center is compact and surrounded by circling canals with arched bridges for that made for the perfect photo opportunity. Long ago used as a great trade destination, today the canals in Brugge are filled with swans and tourist boat rides. But this time....there's a tranquil feeling where one glides from the past into the present and leaves us smiling. This small medieval city is today a World Heritage site. The narrow cobbled streets are lined with picturesque buildings that show pride and artistic detail with their Flemish stepped brick gables and Gothic architecture. In the daylight, the canals reflect the trees and chimney rooftops. At night, they reflect the lights and romance of a time long ago. Mercifully saved from world wars, the character and charm of Brugge remains unbroken. The small adjoining area of Beguinage was founded in the 13th century as an enclosed community for the spiritual needs of women. From here the canals are lined with unending bike paths. We rode for miles discovering little towns and taking in the scenic views. Somewhere along the way, we did manage to eat our share of Belgium waffles and that says it all. Purely delicious.