

The Netherlands

THE
CYCLING
Paradise



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7

Welcome to
Cycling Paradise
the Netherlands!



8

Cycling,
the Dutch Way



25

Acrobats on
Wheels



43

Everybody
Bikes



67

Borrowing,
Sharing, Renting



75

Bikes for
Every Body





80
Special
Bikes



93
The Cyclists
Café



143
A Friendly
Place to Stay



98
Discovering
the Country

A Selection
of the Most
Beautiful Cycling
Routes of the
Netherlands

157
Useful
References



A group of cyclists is riding along a dirt path that winds through a dense forest of tall, mature trees. The trees have thick trunks and lush green foliage, creating a canopy overhead. The path is flanked by tall grasses. In the foreground, several cyclists are visible, including a man in a blue shirt and a woman in a green top. Further down the path, more cyclists can be seen, and the path leads towards a bright, open area in the distance.

**Welcome to
Cycling Paradise
the Netherlands!**

Have you noticed that not many cyclists, with the exception of racing cyclists and a handful of senior citizens, here wear helmets? Clearly, they feel safe without them. The message is clear; in these Low Lands, cyclists have nothing to fear.

Is this an exaggeration? Not really. The Netherlands is a cyclists' paradise. There isn't a country in the world in which you can settle on your saddle and feel so at ease. It has been this way for a century and the country's inhabitants have a vested interest in keeping it that way. Also newcomers quickly discover that in this tiny and flat country, the bicycle is the ideal mode of transportation. Handy, cheap and non-polluting.

The bicycle has a long history in the Netherlands and its future looks promising. In the congested city centers, cars and their pollution are losing ground to the CO₂-free bicycle. Thanks to the Corona crisis, cycling has gained even more in popularity. For fear of contracting the virus on public transportation, the Dutch have gone out and purchased (electric) bicycles for traveling to and from work. Not only that; the sunny spring days lured many city dwellers to the bike shop. During the claustrophobic lockdown, the bicycle brought a breath of fresh air.

This change is sure to have its impact on the streetscape. The bicycle paths are becoming more crowded and the government is looking for the best way to create space for all those new cyclists. Whether these be

children, students, commuters, couriers, meal deliverers, e-bikers, parents with cargo bikes full of toddlers, and – let's not forget – tourists... it doesn't matter. Fortunately, the Dutch are good at planning and organizing. They have plenty of experience weaving the Dutch bicycle into the flow of traffic. The Dutch infrastructure for cyclists is among the best in the world.

These measures entail a lot more than tunnels, bridges, flyovers, highways and ferries that are exclusively for cyclists. In this country, there are also specialized establishments for cyclists (one-of-a-kind cyclist cafés offering aromatic coffee blends), as well as a fantastic network of excellent and cheap places for cyclists to spend the night and the largest bicycle parking facilities in the world – called, for good reason, 'bicycle hotels' by their proud designers.

Final proof of the fact that the Netherlands rightly considers itself a cyclist's paradise is the intricate and excellently marked network that laces together the national and regional cycling routes. Following a simple system of numbers and arrows brings you to the most picturesque of places, such as lively, stereotypical Dutch villages, but also fields full of blooming tulips, panoramic views of wide rivers and vast nature reserves. You can enjoy these in utter peace and quiet, as many of the paths are closed to motorized traffic. Can you imagine anything more heavenly?

Cycling,



the Dutch Way





A moment of hesitation, as you mount your bicycle for the first time in the Netherlands, is to be expected. Traffic is so different here... There's so much more going on; cars, cyclist, scooters, pedestrians – one big ant hill of activity. And those narrow streets... How do you survive in this maelstrom?

Don't worry. It's not as bad as it looks. Compare it to the moment you enter a cold swimming pool. A shudder passes through you – and then you're comfortable. Just don't rush things. Don't toss yourself in in one go; take the time to get used to your surroundings and then gently go down the steps.

The first, and most important, thing to know is that cyclists in the Netherlands are anyone's equal in traffic and are treated with respect. Contrary to what is the case in oth-

er countries, they are not left to their own devices. They have rights and they claim them. Dutch cyclists ooze self-confidence. It takes courage and insight to adopt this attitude, but once you have, the sky is the limit when it comes to enjoying your new mode of transportation.

In an article in *The New Yorker*, Dan Kois tells how he and his wife and children tackled the challenge when they moved from Virginia to Delft for three months. At home, they were used to riding their bikes, so they

did not anticipate any challenges in the Netherlands. They were wrong. Anxiously, they clutched their recently-purchased second-hand bicycles as they stood on the edge of the sidewalk in the inner city of Delft. They really wanted to join the army of cyclists that was rolling by. But they didn't have the nerve. The frenzied traffic, the uneven cobble stones, the absence of barriers along the canals, the cars that passed them at a hair's breadth – it was all just terrifying. Yet also thrilling. So they went in search of a quiet little side street to practice.

Yet, also in the quiet little side streets, mishaps lay in waiting. They had trouble avoiding the pedestrians; while stepping on her bike, their daughter collided with a pass-

ing cyclist; they hesitated when crossing an intersection and incurred the wrath of the cyclists behind them. Kois discovered that his American road mannerisms were not suited to Dutch traffic: 'In the US, I always slow down when approaching an intersection, hoping that the other drivers will stop. Even when I have the right of way. Because back home, drivers pay very little attention to cyclists, they just swing their car doors open or take a turn without checking their mirror. The system there has been developed exclusively for cars.'

Riding their bicycle in Holland proved a revelation to the family. 'Bicycles are the boss,' Kois writes. 'Busy intersections often have a tunnel or a bridge so that the cyclists





can continue unhindered. But more importantly; drivers are used to the presence of cyclists and to the need for taking them into account. Because most of them ride bicycles too. They know the threats, they know what to look out for. They don't just turn right; they look in the mirror first.'

At first, Dan Kois found it difficult to maneuver his way through the stream of traffic. 'Bicycles, cars, scooters, pedestrians... all moving in different directions – it was more than I could process. Why did these people seem so confident, while all I could see was danger?'

Cycling experts advised him to communicate 'visually' with other cyclists. Use your body language, adapt to the stream of traffic and be flexible about the path you want to take. In short: 'The Netherlands is crowded. From a young age, the Dutch are used to keeping an eye out for others and to take them into account. They have learned to negotiate, using their bodies. Watch how they do it and once you've mastered it yourself, you'll be just as unperturbed as they are.'

And this is how the Kois family managed to learn to ride their bikes like the Dutch. The day Dan cycled his way from Delft to The Hague with a basket full of computer equipment attached to the steering wheel of his bike, Dan knew he had become assimilated. Remembering how he had once jealously watched a guy steer his bicycle with one hand while holding on to a television with the other, he thought to himself: 'I can do that too, now! I am one of the gang!'

It pays to persevere. Xing Chen, from Singapore, can confirm that. It took her a while too, to feel at ease on the bicycle too. Then

again, she *had* chosen one of the most difficult cities for beginning cyclists: Amsterdam. The chaos that reigns on the streets of Amsterdam requires the utmost concentration of even the most experienced of cyclists. And indeed, for this scientific researcher with the Dutch Brain Institute, the first rides proved quite nerve-wracking.

Xing understood that she was not the first newbie who was having trouble surviving in the local traffic. Even harder than processing the many rules and the forest of traffic signs, was getting used to the idiosyncratic behavior of the local cyclists. Amsterdam cyclists pay very little heed to the traffic rules and generally literally follow their own course. They ride into incoming traffic, ignore red lights, cycle over the sidewalk and seldom use their hands to indicate a change of direction. In order to help inexperienced foreigners survive this mess, Xing wrote the book *Learn to Cycle in Amsterdam*. Because you really have to *learn* how to do this. It is an art.

Xing Chen's advice is based on her own observations. A few years before moving there, she had visited Amsterdam as a tourist and had rented a public transportation bicycle. It had been an unforgettable experience, quite different from cycling through the quiet suburbs and the peaceful country roads that she had grown up among. Even though her first impression of Amsterdam traffic had been one of chaos and clutter, she had still felt an urge to grab a bicycle and join the fray. It proved the fastest and most practical way to navigate the city.

One of the first things Xing did after moving to Amsterdam, was buy a bicycle. A reg-



ular lady's city bike; simple, sturdy and convenient for everyday use. She uses it to go to her work – a 10-km ride – shopping, the movies, visit friends, and a whole bunch of other things.

Not all expats are as brave as Xing, some simply feel safer on the metro or the tram than in the hectic traffic. 'I have colleagues who have lived in the Netherlands for four or five years and who have never ridden a bicycle,' the neuroscientist tells. Because they are unfamiliar with them and are afraid, she explains. 'I myself don't mind cycling those 10 kilometers to my work, but I can imagine that – for others – that is quite a distance, certainly if it takes them through crowded streets and busy intersections.'

There are other newcomers who, like Xing, are not deterred by the bustle on the streets and who trust their judgment and their quick reflexes. Being able to react quickly is essential, Xing emphasizes in her book. 'In this hectic traffic, you can find yourself in a dangerous situation in the blink

of an eye. And when this happens, the trick is to be able to control your nerves and to react calmly and efficiently.'

Besides getting to know the written and unwritten rules of traffic, Xing wants novices to understand the need for being on the ball and developing quick reflexes. 'Your own safety should always be priority number 1. Always keep your eyes peeled and absorb everything that is happening around you.' Another piece of essential advice: always communicate clearly what your intentions are. Body language, says this experienced cyclist, is paramount in this. 'Make clear movements with your head and upper body, to indicate that you have seen the others, and make eye contact with other road users so that you can be sure that they have seen you too.'

Cyclists in Amsterdam are often compared to the huge groups of starlings that fill the evening skies in the fall with their acrobatics, weaving in and out of each other. These hundreds of birds appear to be as one



as they effortlessly follow the same pattern with perfect timing. Their wings do not even graze those of the others. Big city cyclists appear to have developed the same skill. The few times that they collide, this is more often with a car than with another cyclist. It takes a lot of practice and discipline to participate in this ballet on two wheels and come out of it in one piece, Xing has learned. 'But it is absolutely worth it. I wouldn't want to miss my bicycle for day and I can't think of a better way to travel around this country.'

Also Yannic Bode has come to the conclusion that a bicycle is indispensable to anyone who comes to the Netherlands for a longer period of time. This young man, from Baldham, near Munich in Germany, was studying International Relations at the Universities of Twente and Leiden. At home, he used his bicycle primarily for recreational purposes. 'In Germany, no one would go out on their bike to buy a crate of beer. You go shopping in your car, even if the supermarket is less than a kilometer away.'

After coming to the Netherlands, Yannic discovered the many additional uses for a bike, though it did take some getting used to. In the beginning, he was surprised at the sheer numbers of cyclists on the road and at how they dominated traffic. This was so different from what he was used to. It was like familiarizing himself with an alien civilization. Couriers on bicycles, delivering packages and pizzas; people commuting to work on their bicycles; dozens of randomly-stalled bikes by the pool, the movie theater, the café... and the ocean of bicycles by the train station. This was all very otherworldly to him. But he was quick to see the advantages and to make the switch from the German world of cars to the Dutch world of bicycles.

So it wasn't surprising that, the day he moved into his student housing, he bought a second-hand bicycle on Marktplaats. His car, he left in a remote parking spot. 'I only needed it for long-distance travel; in the city, it is pretty much useless,' is his opinion.



The bicycle changed Yannic's life in the Netherlands. 'You become much more productive, because cycling helps you save time. I can get anywhere I am going in the city within eight minutes. It took me three times as long by car. Driving your car in a Dutch city is just a huge waste of time. The bicycle also ensured that I was more motivated to do things. Such as sports. I would never have used public transportation to go to the indoor climbing center. On the bicycle, it took me five minutes.' Riding your bicycle is also more economical, Yannic says. 'There is almost nowhere you can park for free. And parking fines are very expensive in the Netherlands. Here they cost 90 euros, in Munich, 15.'

In many foreign cities, Yannic would think twice before getting on a bicycle. Simply because the drivers there are not used to the slower pace of those on two wheels. In the Dutch cities, he could make his way through the busy streets with ease and without a care, knowing that the drivers took the presence of cyclists into account. Because chances were, they rode them themselves often enough. 'Other participants in traffic read your body language and can tell by the way you hold yourself that you are planning on changing directions. Buses and cyclists smoothly move alongside each other, with inches to spare. In the Netherlands, this is perfectly normal; in other countries this could easily give rise to accidents. Not once



did I feel unsafe in traffic here?’

Many expats express this same sentiment. When cycling in the Netherlands, you feel safe. In the inner cities and in the countryside. ‘I wish we had the same infrastructure and traffic regulations back home,’ a Londoner sighed after a month of peacefully cruising the safe intersections and smoothly-asphalted bicycle paths, with her children.

Though it is true that the government is primarily responsible for our safety on the roads, also cyclists themselves can contribute to the comfort and joy of riding a bicycle in the Netherlands. And this starts with respecting the rules of the road. A few points worth mentioning are:

- Let your presence be known by having a sound bicycle bell and properly-working lights
- Extend your arm to indicate that you will be turning left or right
- Keep your eyes and ears on the traffic and not on your cell phone (it is a punishable offense to use your cell phone while cycling!)
- Do not mix alcohol and traffic. You can be fined for cycling under the influence.

If you keep these things in mind, then little can go wrong. Enjoy your discovery of the Netherlands; cycling paradise!