The provinces of Groningen and Drenthe are far from the tourist trails. Many travellers don’t venture this far north, and if they happen to, they choose the islands of Friesland for entertainment instead. But in so doing they’re missing out on the Netherlands’ rural heart, a place where traditions are kept alive, and relics of prehistoric residents dot the landscape.

Groningen may be the smaller of the two provinces, but it has the obvious attractions. Its namesake capital is a buzzing, youthful city (thanks to its substantial student population). Museums, restaurants, bars, theatres, canals, festivals – you name it, the city has it. It’s the centre of culture and entertainment in the north and makes a very good base for further exploration – or for just getting lost in a few of its fine cafes.

The rest of Groningen province – a rural landscape dotted with ancient churches – is sleepy by contrast. In Pieterburen, even the hardest of hearts will empty their wallets in support of the Zeehondencreche, a refuge for sick seals. The town is also the base for the strangely intriguing pastime of wadlopen (mudflat-walking). Bourtange, on the eastern border to Germany, makes the shortlist for ‘Best Fortified Town in Europe’; its hefty defences are just as forbidding now as they were in the 16th century.

Drenthe is an agricultural province, no question. Paddocks are separated by pockets of woodlands, creating a peaceful environment meant for slow exploration of its national parks and quiet contemplation of its dark chapter at Kamp Westerbork. Its biggest draw is its hunebedden, prehistoric rock masses purportedly used as burial chambers; but the likes of Orvelte, a village with one foot firmly planted in the 19th century, will also interest many travellers.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Experience northern culture at its best in the museums, cafes, bars and clubs of vibrant Groningen (p240)
- Join a wadlopen (mudflat-walking) excursion and stomp out a muddy trail on the Wadden mudflats (see the boxed text, p246)
- Walk the fortified ramparts of 16th-century Bourtange (p247)
- Wonder at the hunebedden (see boxed text, p249), mighty stone constructions left behind by ancestors long since gone
- Wander or cycle the beautiful boggy marshes of Dwingerveld National Park (p248)
GRONINGEN & DRENTHE

GRONINGEN

Following the style of Utrecht, Groningen is a small province named after its primary city. Beyond the buzzing town itself, farmland dominates the landscape in every direction, but among the polders (strips of farmland separated by canals), cows and sheep are a few other attractions worth seeking out. If it just so happens that mud, mud and more mud is your thing, then the northern coast will appeal, though the scenery is best near the German border around the fortified town of Bourtange. The regional tourism website, www.toerisme.groningen.nl, can be quite useful.

GRONINGEN CITY

Looking at a map of the Netherlands, Groningen seems a long way from anywhere (we’re talking Dutch distances here, not Saharan), but looks can be deceiving.

This vibrant, youthful city is very much part of the comings and goings of the country, and has all you’d expect of a progressive metropolis. Its student population (which has been around since 1614 when the university opened) of 20,000 ensures a healthy, hedonistic nightlife exists alongside the museums and other culture its more mature, established residents (think professors) demand. And like everywhere in this waterlogged country, you’ll find gabled houses reflected in still canals.