The Netherlands

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Southern Sojourn

Catch the Netherlands most iconic sights on a leisurely spin around the country's south.

Spend three days in lively Amsterdam. Visit the big museums, relax in Vondelpark, discover the foodie De Pijp neighbourhood and hang out with the locals at earthy brown café Hoppe on the Spui. Plunge into the city's celebrated nightlife in the Southern Canal Ring and escape the city by bicycle to enjoy the classic beauty of the Waterland region.

During your second week, visit Golden Age Haarlem, Keukenhof Gardens (in season), museum-filled Leiden, the Dutch seat of government Den Haag (The Hague), and Vermeer's charming home town Delft.

Kick off week three in cutting-edge Rotterdam. Take the ferry to see the windmills at Kinderdijk, then head for Zeeland's restored capital Middelburg and the nearby Delta Project. Travel through the Netherlands' southern provinces, stopping for the hidden canals of lovely Den Bosch. Continue to Maastricht to sample some great cuisine and meander through its medieval centre. Head north to Hanseatic Deventer and then west to the extraordinary Kröller-Müller Museum in the Hoge Veluwe National Park. Polish off your trip in historic, cosmopolitan university-city Utrecht.
The low-lying Wadden Islands are strung out like pearls in the Unesco-listed Waddenzee and are perfect for island hopping. Some ferry links require advance planning.

From Amsterdam, head to Texel. Bike along the island’s western coast from sleepy Den Hoorn through dark copses to the Ecomare seal and bird refuge. Comb the eastern side, visiting the superb Maritime & Beachcombers Museum in Oudeschild.

From De Cocksdorp at the northern end of Texel, board the morning ferry to car-free Vlieland to explore its nature and hiking trails before catching the boat to Terschelling, Friesland’s main tourist island. Hole up in peaceful Oosterend and cycle the untouched dunes, then hightail it by ferry to Harlingen, a pretty little port on the Frisian coast, and on to Holwerd, to ferry across to languid Ameland. Stay in the whaling port of Nes. Return to the mainland and continue east to the port of Lauwersoog. From here catch the ferry to the smallest of the Frisian Islands, Schiermonnikoog, home to an evocative, windswept national park, before returning to the mainland.

Circumnavigating the IJsselmeer

This itinerary focuses on beautiful IJsselmeer – Central Netherlands’ vast, shallow 1100-sq-km artificial lake.

Spend three days in Amsterdam for museums, parks, canal tours and nightlife. Head north along the IJsselmeer coast through the Waterland region to the tiny, traditional fishing village of Marken. Cycle the dykes to cute-as-a-button Edam. Stay overnight, then reach Alkmaar early to experience its centuries-old cheese market (in season), then explore the enthralling Zuiderzeemuseum in Enkhuizen.

Travel to Den Helder, and take a ferry to Texel. Spend two days on the island, enjoying the beach and bike exploration, then catch a ferry to Vlieland to appreciate the wilder side of the Frisian Islands. From Vlieland, get a ferry to charming Harlingen, from where Friesland’s lively capital, Leeuwarden, is only a short journey away – as are the nearby chain of coastal towns including boat-filled Hindeloopen.

Head to Hanseatic Zwolle and also visit the historic fortress towns of Naarden and Muiden.

Island Escapes

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The Netherlands' eastern expanse is largely ignored by tourists, but there are myriad highlights to be discovered.

Begin in Groningen, a vibrant city with students, bars, cafes and fine museums. Travel southeast to Bourtange, a perfectly preserved 17th-century fortified town, then move on to Borger and its prehistoric hunebedden, stone arrangements once used as burial chambers. Make your way through the woods to Kamp Westerbork to encounter its moving, horrible heritage. Head to Zwolle, an unhurried Hanseatic town ideal for backstreet meanders, and then to Weerribben-Wieden National Park for canoe-paddling.

From Zwolle it's a short hop to Deventer, one of the most appealing small towns in the Netherlands. Next, explore Hoge Veluwe National Park, a natural oasis that's home to a renowned art museum. Head to Den Bosch, which has a dynamite museum dedicated to its namesake artist. Stop at Breda to enjoy the city's cafés. Go back to nature at Biesbosch National Park before finishing in the lovely old streets and canals of Dordrecht.

Hit the country's most unmissable highlights. Begin with two days in Amsterdam. Visit the big-hitting museums and rent a bicycle to explore the charming Jordaan neighbourhood. On your second day board a canal boat tour and stroll through the Red Light District before getting cosy in a brown café.

Travel west to beautiful Haarlem – stroll the compact historic core, and view masterpieces at the Frans Hals Museum and the stained glass of the Grote Kerk van St Bavo. In tulip season witness the kaleidoscopic colours of the Keukenhof Gardens. Spend a day among old-world splendour in Leiden. Next, take a day in Den Haag (The Hague) and catch the Mauritshuis' exceptional art collection.

Head south to happening Rotterdam to tour the harbour and visit the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, the Maritiem Museum and the architecturally striking food hall, Markthal Rotterdam. The next morning, take a walking tour of the city's incredible contemporary architecture, then travel to Kinderdijk to explore Unesco-recognised windmills.
OUR WRITERS

Catherine Le Nevez

Catherine’s wanderlust kicked in when she first roadtripped across Europe, including the Netherlands, aged four, and she’s been returning to this spirited, gezellig country ever since, completing her Doctorate of Creative Arts in Writing, Masters in Professional Writing, and post-grad qualifications in Editing and Publishing along the way. A freelance writer for many years, Catherine has written scores of Lonely Planet guides and articles over the last decade or so, covering Amsterdam, the Netherlands and destinations all over Europe and beyond.

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Daniel C Schechter
Friesland, Utrecht, Northeast Netherlands, Central Netherlands, Maastricht & Southeastern Netherlands, Architecture, The Dutch Landscape, Dutch Cuisine

Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Daniel C Schechter now lives closer to Breukelen, Utrecht. During a 2006 visit to Leiden to see his niece who was studying there, he was so struck by the sight of a steady stream of commuting cyclists that he determined to relocate to the country. In 2010 he moved to Amsterdam, got a second-hand Gazelle and hit the trails. Five years later, he still marvels at the morning commute and has cycled through all 12 of the country’s provinces. Follow him around at netherlandsbikeways.blogspot.com