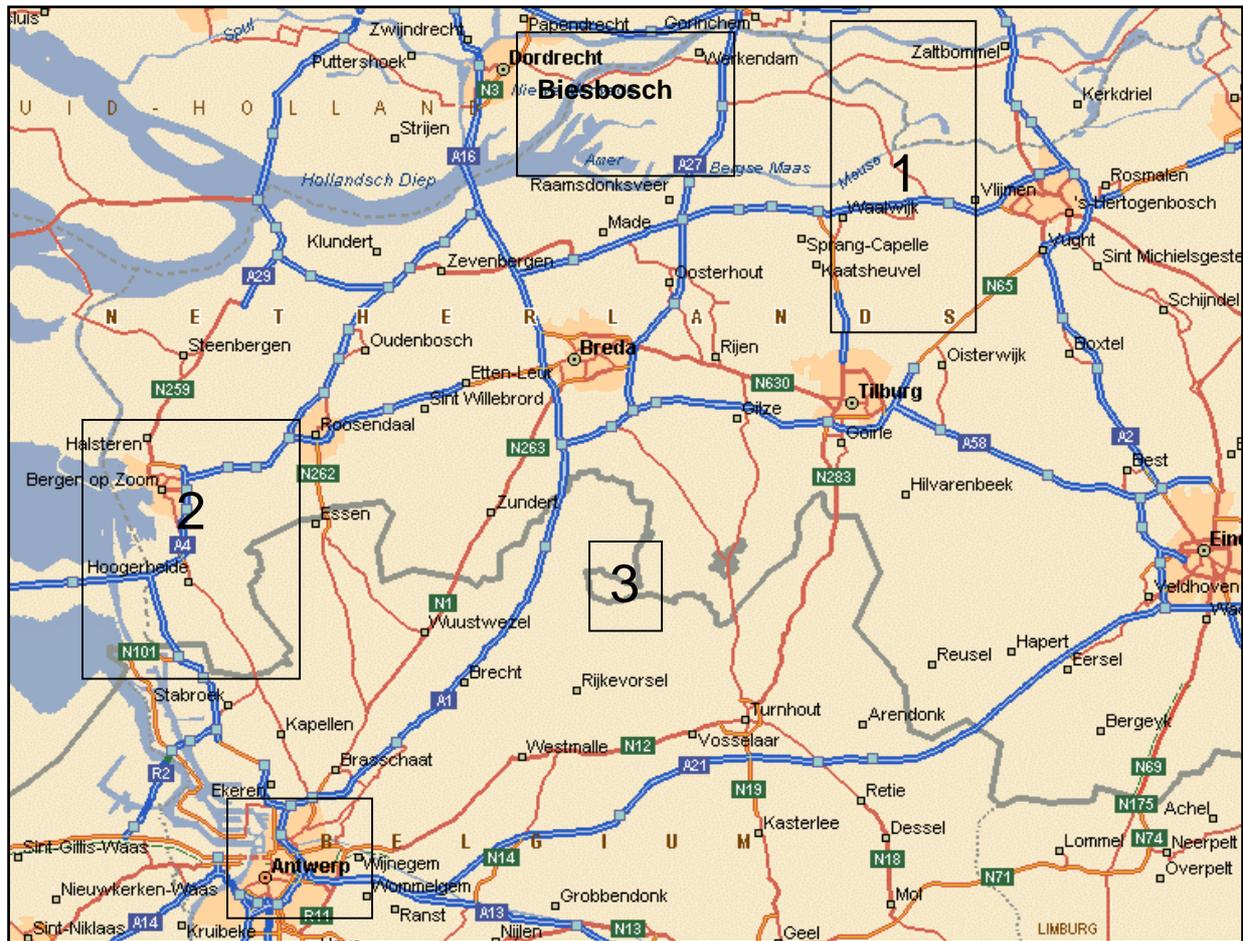


# IN THE DUTCH MOUNTAINS

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Photos: Paul and Evelyn Hesp



The locations of the weeks in the Netherlands

1 Drunense Duinen (first half week); 2 Markiezaat (Ossendrecht area, second half week)

3 Winding grey line: border between the Netherlands and Belgium

## A NEW LOCATION FOR MOUNTAINEERING

All good things come to an end, as Aristotle or Socrates said – and who am I to quarrel with dead Greeks? So with hike leadership: after 20 years, I've decided that it is time to do something else. Nothing, for example. We'll see. But, apart from visiting some of my favourite haunts (Rappottenstein, Dunkelsteinerwald) with a group one more time, it seemed logical to do something completely new as well in the last year. For example: taking members of a mountaineering club to the Netherlands.

Very few foreigners know that the Netherlands is more than Amsterdam, flower bulbs and windmills. The fight against ignorance is a good fight. Long ago, I was an infantry cadet in the province of North Brabant, which borders on Belgium. I went all over the region on foot, and it is still one of the parts of the country I know and like best. It is also a very interesting province in terms of landscape and political and cultural history. So I decided that I'd show Club members Brabant. Another plus of choosing Brabant was that Antwerp, just across the border into Belgium, would be more or less on the way. Antwerp is one of the great cities of the Low Countries and shares a lot of political and cultural history with Dutch Brabant (there is also a Belgian Brabant, but that's another story). I could also mention that the Brabanders, being our Southerners, have developed something like a Mediterranean *joie de vivre* – good food and drink are never far away; but this was a trip for tough mountaineers.



Guinea pigs crossing the Drunen Sands.

To ensure that everything would run smoothly, I did a trial run with Asya, Ivo and Skip last July. Temperatures were tropical, and as the programme includes crossing a Dutch desert we all got some good training for the trip to Oman which Mabrouk Methnani is (hopefully) planning. My guinea pigs gave me good feedback, which I used to adapt some points of the programme.

I wanted to keep the groups small, as this would simplify leading the cycling days in

the programme and make the experience more intensive (fewer partners for chats). To give enough people an opportunity to join, I therefore ran the programme twice, from 6-13 May and from 20-27 May. To keep my story (relatively) short I'll merge the descriptions of both weeks.

## MONDAY

Our 'base camp' was in the self-catering apartments of the farm-camping De Schaapskooi at Drunen. 'Schaapskooi' means sheep pen, and apart from sheep there is a horse, a border collie and a whole range of winged farm animals. One of the lambs was being bottle fed by the owners. It is not only an animated place, but the Drunen Sands, where we went for our first walk of the week, are right on the other side of the fence.

The Sands are an area of inland dunes, a miniature desert which is the product of wind erosion caused by overgrazing of land from the Middle Ages onwards. The sands were only brought under control in the 19th century and are now a national park. In a sense, therefore, this is a monument to environmental destruction! But on such a small scale it is actually fascinating. It is also fascinating to find bogs immediately adjacent to the Dunes. While during the first week we all got very wet in the desert because it poured much of the day (we then wisely skipped the bogs), we got very wet in the bogs of De Brand – also a protected area - during the second week, as the six-foot high reed jungle was still soaked from previous rains.

In both cases, the lunch break at De Kerkhoeve, the organic farm of Jo and José van Balkom, gave us an opportunity to dry out as well as to stuff ourselves during the magnificent buffet lunch prepared for us. The van Balkom's are very active in promoting a sustainable economy in the area. By shifting away from modern farming methods which heavily rely on chemicals and intensive animal husbandry, they and a large number of colleagues in the area help to create a healthier environment. In addition, the more varied landscape which results from less aggressive farming methods also makes the farmed areas more attractive for walkers and cyclists, complementing the 'green tourism' potential of the Sands and the woods planted around them to bring them under control.



Isabel rounds up cows for mr van Balkom

## TUESDAY

This day was largely spent sitting. My brother Jos, a former Commando (Special Forces) officer, had arranged a day at the Commando Boat School, which trains Dutch Special Forces for operations on, in and below water. The School is located close to a large marsh area at the confluence of the rivers Rijn (Rhine) and Maas (Meuse) called the Biesbosch. Most of this area is impenetrable on foot and access by boat is limited. The Biesbosch gives a good impression of what the Netherlands would be like without centuries of efforts to make and keep the country habitable. Visits to the Biesbosch information centre and museum, which have good visual displays on the nature of the area and the traditional occupations of the hardy people who inhabit it, were part of the trip.

Before the boat trip, in a flat-bottomed craft which could navigate the small creeks, sergeant-major Harry gave an introductory talk about the Commandos and the training provided by the Boat School. This is the toughest unit in the Dutch armed forces – in recent years, less than 10% of those who volunteered have finished their training. Becoming a Commando is far more than a matter of physical toughness: mental toughness (especially being tough on yourself), a talent for teamwork, initiative and brains are just as important. Rambos need not apply. Dutch Commandos are among others involved in operations in the Uruzgan area of Afghanistan where, apart from 'normal' fighting duties, they also try to improve local conditions through small development projects, such as better local energy and water supply.



On the way home during the first boat trip, with the huge Amer power station in the background. The boatsman on all the trips was Kees, the Boat School's technician.

To get at least a minimum of exercise, we cycled to the Roestelberg restaurant, also located on the edge of the Dunes, in the evening. Apart from pancakes, which in the Netherlands can be a meal by themselves, they stock forty types of beer. While that has nothing to do with mountaineering, it can make the way back something of a challenge.

## WEDNESDAY



Heusden. In the old days, windmills such as these (used for flour milling) were often built on top of the town walls to catch a maximum of wind.

To get some impression of the complexity of the Rijn-Maas river delta, we rode our bikes on dike tops, crossing the river Maas no less than six times (four times by ferry) in the course of a circular trip. One of the highlights of what the Dutch call the 'river region' is the old town of Heusden. Situated at a strategic location on the southern bank of the river Maas, it was heavily fortified during the seventeenth century. These fortifications, and many of the lovely old houses, have been restored in recent decades.

As you cycle along the narrow, winding dikes you look down

on the thatch roofs of the farms built at the foot of the dikes and into gardens, fields and canals.

Lambs, ducklings and goslings everywhere; we also saw a stork's nest with junior storks. Manufacturing and urbanization have to a large extent bypassed the area I selected, and therefore there is relatively little motorized traffic on the dikes. When you're not used to cycling Dutch style, hearing a bus or lorry creep up on you from behind can be a slightly unnerving experience on a dike: you can't get out of the way. Fortunately, every Dutch holder of a driver's licence has once been a cyclist, and will take great care when overtaking.

## THURSDAY

We packed our bags and took the train to Antwerp for half a day of sightseeing and beer sampling. The Belgians produce by far the best beer in the world, with an amazing range of flavours. Once you're used to their stuff, you won't touch Pilsner again. Fortunately, the Belgians export their beer to the Netherlands, and there are many opportunities to drink it locally on the Dutch side of the border (for example at the Roestelberg). One of my major tasks was to guide participants through the 'beer menu' which you'll find in many cafés and restaurants. Günter became quite addicted and acquired a fine collection of bottle caps of the various brands!



It was a great pleasure to meet our old friend Jean-Luc Destoop in Antwerp. He was a member of the Hiking Club until the early 1990s when he returned to his home town Brussels.

In the old days, Antwerp was a major rival of Amsterdam as a trading centre. Its wealth is reflected in a magnificent Gothic cathedral, an equally impressive Renaissance town hall and many splendid houses of guilds and rich citizens. The old harbour area, which borders on the city, has been transformed into a promenade with great river panoramas. After a brief tour, we all had lunch in a quaint old restaurant called 'Het Elfde Gebod' (the eleventh commandment – 'thou shalt enjoy') filled with 19<sup>th</sup> century statues of saints. I drank a rare Trappist Achel, brewed by the monks of the Achelse Kluis abbey, and I very much look forward to my next visit.

After lunch, everybody went their own way until late afternoon, when we travelled to our second 'base camp' at Ossendrecht. Half a day doesn't do justice to Antwerp – you ought to visit the home and studio of the painter Rubens, the fantastic collection of Flemish masters in the Museum of Flemish Art, and so on. But, after all, this was a trip for mountaineers.

## FRIDAY AND SATURDAY

In the village Ossendrecht, we stayed at the Volksabdij, a former monastery surrounded by woods, partly converted into a hotel. When you walk to the restaurant for breakfast, you are welcomed by the shrill cries of peacocks. The males, when not displaying their fantails before the ladies, are given to attacking the doors of parked cars which show their mirror images. I don't know what the owners of the vehicles think of that. Various types of elegant dwarf chicken potter about in the grounds as well. A great place to stay. And Ossendrecht is also a great place to eat. While the Dutch pancake and Chinese meals of the previous days were much appreciated, the food at the Volksabdij and two other local restaurants was in a different category altogether. But this is a report on mountaineering.

The programme was hiking followed by cycling during the first week and the reverse during the second. I'll lump the forms of locomotion together here.

The Volksabdij is twenty metres above sea level, and by Dutch standards that's a lot. In fact, it has made the difference between life and death as recently as 1953, when almost 2000 people were drowned during the worst storm in centuries. It flooded land all over the southwest of the country, including the lowest part of Ossendrecht, some sixty kilometres from the North Sea. The transition from the heavily wooded plateau to open farmland stretching all the way to the horizon is quite dramatic when you move on foot. You are soon in Belgium, and much of the fun of this day consisted of popping in and out of the two countries. Morning coffee was had in style, at Ravenhof castle in

Belgium; the castle's park is in the Netherlands, right across the road. Great enterprise was displayed here by Frits, who ordered a Trappist Westmalle Tripel, a beer which approaches wine in strength, at 11.00 am. Further along, the walk took us along the Grensstraat in the village of Putte, where the

houses on one side are Dutch and on the other Belgian. Putte's peculiar geography favours illegal border crossings, and many Dutch people fled south through Putte during World War II on the first stage of their escape from the murderous Nazi regime to neutral Switzerland or Spain.



Kalmthout Heath, east of Putte, is the Belgian part of a large cross-border nature park. The border is patrolled by rugged-looking but rather lethargic Galloway cattle.

Cycling also makes you appreciate the difference between the wooded plateau and the open lands near the sea. The route of the cycling day was neatly divided between the two types of landscape.

In both cases I started off anti-clockwise, under the trees. When I set out with the first group, the weather was not exactly promising; if it would deteriorate, we could at least have a reasonably pleasant ride before sitting out the rain in a village café. The weather however improved and after lunch in the pretty little town of Tholen, in the province of Zeeland just over the bridge from Brabant, the sun actually came out. But there was also a strong wind blowing towards us, and Zeeland mainly consists of open fields. Much of the cycling here was in fact on top of a dike, along a former bay of the North Sea. The bay was dammed after the 1953 floods, but there is still nothing to intercept the winds blowing from the sea. The Dutch tactic of sheltering behind the person on the windward side was explained to Günter and Nancy, and by the time we were able to turn our backs to the wind and race home to Ossendrecht Nancy had become quite an expert at determining the right angle for maximum shelter behind her husband.

The second group also went anti-clockwise, as I expected a headwind in the open polders if we went the other way around. There was actually very little wind and a lot of sunshine, but doing the route this way had an unexpected advantage: by late afternoon we arrived in the tiny village of Bath (pronounced 'baht') to find the local café open! This is worth an exclamation mark, as there had been no sign of life at this one watering hole in a huge wilderness of meadows and cropland on the four previous occasions that I visited Bath. Once I saw the landlord I



On the dike at Bath you have a wonderful view of the Westerschelde, the wide river which connects Antwerp with the North Sea.

understood: it was quite clear that he preferred being lazy to weary, as the Dutch saying goes. He did however have a couple of fine Belgian beers (there were tea drinkers in the group – I will not mention names). I could not resist asking for an itemized bill. He scribbled the word 'Vertering' (consumption), followed by the total amount, on a scrap of paper. Never use two words where one will do – that's my principle as well. Especially when I write about the tough business of mountaineering.



Postscript: Affligem is an effective Belgian antidote against hike leader stress.