Visiting The Netherlands, Spring 2006
By Stu Goldenberg

The Netherlands is certainly more than just Holland, for there is North Holland and South Holland, and ten other provinces, all gathered together, mostly below sea level. The Dutch have contributed much to our society through science, exploration, world trade, and more. It is also a very interesting country to visit by bicycle. Much of the Netherlands is just below sea level and nearly flat.

I am officially retired, but also permitted to continue to teach part time through the Faculty Early Retirement Program (FERP). Janie is also retired. She says that she loved working with elementary school children, but now that she is retired, she is enjoying her new adventures. Since we are retired, and have the time, we decided, along with our friends and neighbors, Pat and John Rogers, to take a little trip to Europe, more specifically to do what is referred to as a "Bike and Barge" tour of The Netherlands. This does not mean that we pull a barge around with our bicycles, but instead, we sleep on a converted barge that is tied up at night; eat breakfast and dinner on the barge, and cycle during the day to explore the country. Also during the day, the barge moves to the next anchorage for the next nights stay.

Our trip began and ended with flights between San Luis Obispo and Los Angeles International Airport and Amsterdam. The long leg was non-stop and boring. In this case, boring is good. The Amsterdam airport is actually about 20 km southwest of Amsterdam and about 20 minutes by train.

Cycling was on very narrow roads, which were for bicycles and cars going in both directions, but there was only enough room for cars in one direction except for a few wide places for passing. I was disappointed for the first two days because it seemed like we were on a Los Angeles freeway with all the cars. Janie was so overwhelmed by all the interesting and new things to see that she did not notice the traffic. There was no good reason for the unexpected traffic flow. Cycling was a pleasure after that, with little or no traffic.

Janie and I were cycling with the slower group, the one that concentrated on taking pictures. We opted to change the name of the group to the Kodak group. The faster group consisted of riders less interested in pictures but more interested in who got to the edge of the next town first. They also traveled longer distances. This difference in routes caused some envy the very first day when it was reported that the fast group cycled past a floating brothel, complete with merchandise in full view in large picture windows. Near the end of our two weeks, our tour guide took us on a night walk through the Red Light District of Amsterdam. I think we all were scared because of the caution given about all the pickpockets that operate in that area. Besides, what is the big deal about someone wearing just her underwear, standing behind a large glass window! Many current television and magazine commercials are much more provocative!

We were too early to see the many fields of tulips, which also meant we were just in time for continued wind, cold and rain. Having checked the Internet prior to our trip, we knew the weather would be somewhat unpleasant, so we were prepared with neoprene booties and gloves and with helmet covers. Janie and I certainly stuck out as tourists ... Americans ... with our bright yellow Gortex rain jackets and matching helmet covers, but we were warm and mostly dry. Many of the others in our tour (a total of 23 Americans) were not as prepared. We did get to see some fantastic tulips in the hot houses of Keukenhof.
Many of the original windmills that were used to pump water which would have filled in most of the below sea level country have been replaced with electric or diesel powered pumps. These engines would drive an Archimedes Screw, a device over 2200 years old! There remain about 200 "classic" windmills and they are now all considered historical buildings and have either been renovated or are being repaired. It is hard to appreciate the energy captured by these huge machines until you stand near one. The workings were wood with some metal parts. The wood on the wood parts is lubricated with bee’s wax and in the olden times, the metal parts were lubricated with animal fat. Now petroleum lubricants are used instead of the animal fat.

Consistent and repeated highlights of the trip included visiting art museums that contained works of some of the masters, such as Rembrandt and van Gogh, and sampling apple pie to determine the best source. We also visited many old buildings, mostly churches, each of which belonged to either the Catholics or Protestants at one time or another. One particularly large church in Utrecht had some spectacular stained glass windows. There was some Hebrew lettering on a particular window, which the experts claimed was just nonsense, that is, until a young man, recently having become a Bar Mitzvah, visited the church. He recognized the Hebrew lettering as being part of his Torah portion and provided the translation that the "pros" could not do.

Learning occurs in unusual places, such as the breakfast table. Being lactose intolerant, I had requested special food. The cook accommodated with goat cheese versions for me. Apparently goat lactose is enough different from cow lactose that I can digest it without any problems. So why didn’t my doctor tell me to try goat cheese years ago? We were very fortunate because our cook was formerly a caterer, apparently a very good one, before she decided she preferred the life aboard a barge.

The Netherlands has had some problems with violent immigrants so they have changed the rules for people that intend to move there. They now need to learn some Dutch history and learn the language, which includes passing tests to prove they have gained the desired education to appreciate the culture that exists in this very liberal society.

Our bicycling statistics consist of cycling 11 days for a total of 300 miles, with a total estimated elevation gain of 500 feet. Most of that elevation gain was over causeways. The high point on Texel Island was the top of High Mountain, a whopping 50 feet above sea level! We summited High Mountain!

We make no recommendations to others regarding such an adventure. Each of us has our own idea as to what is fun and worth doing. I will say that we have a tentative commitment to return to The Netherlands for another bike and barge tour, only this time the trip will last four weeks and will continue into Belgium and touch the borders of Germany and France.