

Netherlands river cruise a grand way to go Dutch

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RIVER CRUISING

There are many ways to travel Europe, but none offer the luxury, comfort and convenience of a river cruise. It's simply a fantastic way to take in the sights. You journey along quiet waterways instead of congested highways. No early morning wake-up calls. No packing and unpacking. No large crowds onboard. No waiting in line to get on or off the ship. And no transportation hassles when you arrive at the ports, because the ship stops right in the heart of each town or village along the way. There is always something amazing to see en route, and one of the great features of river cruising is that your tours are included. At some of the ports, optional excursions are offered at reasonable cost.

I recently enjoyed my second river cruise: a delightful seven-night Uniworld tour of the Netherlands. Uniworld, part of the Trafalgar Corporation, has operated in Europe for more than 30 years. Its fleet of 12 ships also cruise the rivers of Russia, Egypt and China. Their ships carry fewer guests than any other river cruise operator, and their level of service is excellent, with a ratio of three English-speaking crew members per guest.

We traveled aboard the recently refurbished River Ambassador. Total guest capacity is 128, with 64 staterooms on three decks. Features include a lounge with full-service bar, library/game room, dining room, sun deck, fitness centre, beauty and massage salon, gift shop, 24-hour coffee bar and reception desk.

PORTS OF CALL

Amsterdam

We had a full day to experience the unique charm of Holland's largest city. Our visit included a motor coach sightseeing tour and a guided tour of the Rijksmuseum, which features the world's largest collection of Dutch and Flemish art and artifacts. A highlight for me was Rembrandt's famous painting, "The Night Watch," which is truly incredible. Our afternoon was free, and we chose to walk Amsterdam, visiting wonderful sights such as Anne Frank's House, Dam Square and the Red Light District. (Pedestrians do not have the right of way, so watch out for bicycles and cars, which stop for nothing!) That evening I chose the optional candlelight canal cruise, which introduces you to a few of Amsterdam's more than 150 canals and 1200 bridges. The canal tour, reserved exclusively for Uniworld passengers, offers fresh local cheeses and wines to savour as you float past the incredible architecture.

Volendam and Enkhuizen

In the early morning, we set sail for Volendam, a quaint fishing village where some of the locals still dress in traditional costumes and wear wooden shoes. The shopping is great, with the best pricing on Dutch souvenirs, especially wooden shoes.

From Volendam it was a short sail to Enkhuizen, a trading centre since the 17th century. Included was a guided tour of the Zuider Zee open-air museum. This museum, similar to Heritage Park, allows you to step back into history. There is a collection of 19th century buildings where you can see sails being sewn, view a steam-powered laundry, and taste herring cured in wooden smoking sheds.

Kampen

From Kampen, we took a short motor coach ride to Geithoorn, known as the Venice of the North. Geithoorn gets its name from the masses of wild goat horns that were found by the first settlers in 1230. Its numerous canals and lakes were formed after the land was worked for peat. The 18th and 19th century houses are built on little islands linked by bridges. The best way to view these wonderful homes and gardens is by a canal cruise. There is a small village centre with several shops and cafes and a museum.

That afternoon, an optional tour was offered to the Palais Het Loo, a beautiful restored 17th century palace that served as the royal family's summer residence from 1686 to 1975.

Nijmegen

The Nazis occupied the Netherlands for five years, and it was in the Nijmegen region that the Allied soldiers pushed them back once and for all. The Liberation Museum celebrates the liberation and pays homage to fallen Allied soldiers. There is an Honorary Dome, along with a Roll of Honour listing the soldiers who died between D- Day (June 6, 1944) and May 8, 1945.

Kinderdijk

Kinderdijk, a Unesco World Heritage Site, is home to the largest collection of windmills in the Netherlands. Here you can actually go inside a windmill and see how the millers lived and worked. Prior to the building of the levees, windmills helped drain water from the land, making it habitable. At one time there were more than 10,000 windmills in the Netherlands.

Rotterdam

The second largest port in the world, Rotterdam is an old – and new -- city. There are very few vintage buildings, because most of this city was destroyed in World War II and rebuilt after 1945. A highlight for me was the internationally renowned Keukenhof Gardens, which are open from mid-March to May. There are over seven million bulbs planted on this 70-acre site; millions of narcissi and hyacinths are in bloom, and, of course, every kind of tulip you could imagine. For a reasonable price you can arrange to have bulbs shipped home. There are restaurants and souvenir shops throughout the park, plus plenty of places to sit and admire the flowers. Flower-lover or not, you can't help but be awed. It's easy to see why Holland is the world's largest flower exporter.

ACCOMMODATION

My stateroom was approximately 117 square feet and included a large picture window that opened at the top. The standard room offers individual air conditioning, flat-screen TV, generous built-in closets, safe, direct-dial telephone, hair dryer, umbrella, private bathroom with shower only, two twin beds or one queen – topped with Egyptian cotton sheets and luxurious European duvets. There are thick towels in bathroom, plush terry robes, and aromatherapy bath amenities. Tap water is safe for drinking, though complimentary bottled water is provided.

DINING

The food is absolutely incredible! The spacious dining room accommodates all guests. Seating is open, so you can dine when you want, with whomever you want. Dining times vary to accommodate tours or special events. Breakfast and lunch are full buffet. The sit-down dinners include a choice of two appetizers, two soups, three entrees, a variety of desserts and complimentary wine. Cuisine usually reflects the day's destination and most ingredients come fresh from local markets. If there is a special dietary need, it will be accommodated with prior notification. The Captain's welcome dinner and the farewell dinner offer set-course menus. Both nights are semi-formal; however the rest of the evenings are casual dress.

ENTERTAINMENT

On a river cruise, there are no casinos, theatres or multiple entertainment venues. There is one lounge with an onboard musician. Local performers are brought on board throughout the cruise; we enjoyed a group of traditional Dutch dancers, and a jazz singer. Many passengers like to enjoy pubs and entertainment off the ship. Since you're docked in the heart of town, the local nightlife is usually just a short walk away. Cruise directors will have lots of suggestions on where to go and how to get there.

GETTING THERE

There are many flights to Amsterdam. I flew British Airways via London Heathrow. British Airways offered great service and with their new terminal open I did not have to change terminals in London Heathrow.

Also Air Canada & Lufthansa fly to Amsterdam via Frankfurt and KLM offers non stop service from Vancouver.

Or if you wish Uniworld will arrange your flights with your cruise package.

Complimentary transfers to the ship are offered in Amsterdam.

GETTING AROUND

Each day, the cruise director offers information on the port, including maps and recommendations on sightseeing and shopping. Six excursions were included in my seven-night cruise. Tour groups are kept small, and are always fully hosted by a local English-speaking guide. The Quietvox portable audio headset system means that, no matter where you are, you can always hear the tour guide.

TRAVEL TIPS

- Book early! River cruises are very popular and fill up quickly.
- Many European itineraries require a valid Canadian passport with an expiration date at least six months after date of return.
- Currency for most European countries is the Euro; currency aboard the River Ambassador is the Euro.
- Many river ships are not in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities act; check to make sure your ship is wheelchair friendly.
- River cruises are unlikely to offer onboard medical facilities or staff.
- The River Ambassador offers a non-smoking environment; smoking is permitted outside on the upper sun deck.
- Internet service is available at satellite rates so it is pricey. There is no Internet service in the staterooms.
- Laundry service is available for a fee. Unlike other Uniworld ships, the River Ambassador does not have a self-serve laundry.

- Gratuities are subject to your satisfaction with your travel experience. They are paid in cash, preferably the Euro, and cannot be charged to your shipboard account. The suggested guideline is 10 Euros per guest per day for staff and crew (shared among all staff); 3 Euros per guest per day for the cruise manager.
- Uniworld offers a cashless system onboard. All charges excluding tips are billed to each guest's account, which can be settled by cash or credit card. Debit cards are not accepted, and there are no ATMs onboard.
- Excursions often entail quite a bit of walking, complete with lots of stairs and cobblestone streets. Access to sites visited on shore tours is generally restrictive for guests with physical limitations.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Want to go by river when you go Dutch? For details on cruises in the Netherlands, or any other destination, please call Bonnie Yeoman at (403) 299-5316 or email byeoman@calgarycoop.com. Or visit any Calgary Co-op Travel Office; dial our Call Centre (299-4144) for service after hours, Sundays and holidays; or book online 24/7 via www.calgarycoop.com.