



WHERE Belgium and the Netherlands

START Zeebrugge **FINISH** Europoort, near Rotterdam

DISTANCE 112 miles **WORDS** Don Stark **PICTURES** Don Stark

FERRIES, BIKES & BELGIAN BEER

Cycle touring doesn't require two weeks off work. CTC member **Don Stark** led a blokes' cycling weekend through Belgium and the Netherlands

The North Sea crossing was calm and the food was excellent, so we stuffed ourselves to just short of exploding. Two days of pedalling would surely burn off all the calories consumed? Besides, our collective wife couldn't see us and so make plain her disdain.

The plan for our weekend jolly was to pedal from Zeebrugge in Belgium to Europoort near Rotterdam in the Netherlands. They are the destinations of our local ferry services from Hull. We left work late in the afternoon and drove over the mighty Humber Bridge, heading for the P&O terminal. Our average age was 59, though we were like excited schoolboys who'd been let out for the weekend.

With bikes lashed to the car deck, we went upstairs to the cabins. To say they were small would be an understatement. On the loo I had my left elbow leaning on the door handle, my ear in the soap dish, and my feet in the shower tray!

CYCLING HEAVEN

Leaving the ferry next morning, we passed a few bewildered motorcyclists and lost caravanners and made our way onto the coast road going north east to the town of Knokke. I'd ridden this part of the route before and knew what to expect by way of cycling provision. Though the others had been told about them, they were still amazed by the wide, flat cyclepaths, and even more so by the respect shown to us by motorists.

The excellent Dutch maps were an interesting read for the cyclist whose eye naturally gravitates to spot



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DO IT YOURSELF

» Belgium and the Netherlands are ideal for your first trip abroad: they're close, flat, the cycling provision is excellent, and everybody speaks English. For more than 30 different route suggestions (along with general advice), go to the website ctc-maps.org.uk

heights and contours: we were at 1.4m above sea level. A few kilometres further on we had descended to -0.6m. Then we climbed back up to a heady -0.3m.

Soon enough, Frank (the eldest) got into his stride and the rest of us were straining our lungs to stay with him. At one point we formed a rather pleasing echelon, of which Frank approved. What he didn't realise was that I was holding onto his pannier in second place, Malc in third was holding onto mine, John onto Malc's, and so on. It was the only way we could think of to tire him out. It didn't work but at least the rest of us had time to catch our breath.

THIRSTY WORK

Our first day's destination was near Goes (pronounced 'whose', with a slight hawk at the start) on the peninsula of Zuid Beveland. We worked our way up to Breskens on the south side of the Westerschelde, which I couldn't pronounce. It's not 'wester-sheld' but 'wester-skelder' (and in Dutch, 'vester-'), with some throat clearing on the 'sk'. No language was more aptly named than Flemish!

These days Breskens runs only a small catamaran ferry for foot passengers and cyclists – priced 3.80 euros – as motor traffic now crosses via the Terneuzen tunnel away to the east. On the other side of the Westerschelde, scenery rolled by speedily as the treetops bent before the stiff breeze that was behind us.

The bars in the local towns that we passed through seemed to be shut on a Saturday afternoon, so we kept going to the city of Goes. The main square had a grand cathedral and was abuzz with bars and cafés. Parking the bikes, we sat outside and ordered beer and apple cake. As we sat and sipped, we watched the world



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FACT FILE NORTH SEA WEEKENDER

Distance: 112 miles (180km)

Time taken: 2 days (3 nights)

Daily mileage: 51 miles on day one, 61 on day two

Getting there: book online at poferries.com

Conditions: Mainly dry but cloudy apart from Sunday afternoon, which was gloriously sunny. Windy both days. The only uphill sections were the loading ramps to the ferries

Accommodation: Nights one and three in cabins on the ships. Second night in Trekkershutten

(trekkershutten.nl/en/). For B&Bs, see vriendenopdefiets.nl/. For 'lightweight' campsites, see natuurkampeertreinen.nl/. These sites are the closest you'll get to wild camping in Holland

Maps/guides: ANWB 1:50k topographic cycling maps, from themapshop.co.uk

Bike: Raleigh Pioneer Metro GLX ('Sir Walter'). Solid, reliable, good on the flatlands, and cheap

I'm glad I had: Sachets of porridge, coffee, and sugar. Cheese knife. Corkscrew. Emergency corkscrew



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pedal past with a dog in the basket and a slender-legged friend perched on the carrier.

We were replete. Luckily it was only 5km to the coast and the town of Wemeldinge, where tonight's Trekkershutten awaited us. These hikers' cabins cost about 40 euros a night for four people, and while they're a bit like Wendy houses it means you don't have to carry a tent, airbed and stove. When you've been cycling, such accommodation is fine. Besides, the evening saw us in a local hostelry, bantering with the elderly waitress and drinking dark beer at 7% abv...

MORE CARBO-LOADING

On Sunday we woke early and set off into a 21mph breeze. We all knew the theory of group riding but whenever Frank got to the front he was off on a one-man breakaway and the rest of us struggled. Our fitness levels varied widely – as did our bikes, a ramshackle assortment of classic tourers, a hybrid and a couple of mountain bikes. We stood out from the local club riders with their matching bikes, team strips, wiry muscles and skinny tyres.

It was a relief to all but Frank when we finally got

1) When in Belgium...

2) They're not called the Low Countries for nothing. But gears are still necessary for head and tail winds

3) The signed cycle routes don't deviate: they go into and through the town centres

to the southern end of the Zeelandbrug and turned downwind again to cross it. This leg was amazing: I have never ridden so fast so easily. The 4km bridge has a single carriageway road separated by a concrete barrier from the cycle track alongside. The wind was at our backs and we could hear only the purr of our tyres and drivetrains reflected back off the concrete walls as we whizzed along.

By mid afternoon the clouds had thinned and the sun was starting to peep through. As we cycled through the pleasant low-level landscape, it occurred to me how many of our English words are similar to the Dutch ones, particularly those that have anything to do with water: *canaal, dijk, jacht* (yacht), *havn, brug, sluis*.

Rather than arrive at the dockside early and wait around in the uninspiring Europoort complex, we opted to stop short and visit the ancient settlement of Brielle, with its lake the Brielsmeer. Sitting near the town's central church, we just had time to squeeze in one more refreshment stop. When the sun dipped further, we found the ship, our cabins, and the restaurant.

It turns out you can't eat whatever you like when cycling. We put on an average of three pounds each! 🍌