



This spread: Gent, Belgium

Rolling on the river

VOLANTE **Elyse Glickman** and **Derek J.**

Poirier experience the Netherlands and Belgium with a luxury river cruise courtesy AmaWaterways

PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE AUTHORS



This page: The canals of Amsterdam. **Opposite page, top:** Picturesque Volendam. **Opposite page, below:** Inside the cabin on the AmaSerena.





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HE OLD ADAGE goes that you've got to start somewhere. For Wien native Rudi Schreiner, it was driving from Wien to Nepal during his university years in the '70s. This adventure was followed by a "cruise" on a river raft through Peru to research how changes in society affect architecture. Those fateful journeys led to a globetrotting career along the world's great aquatic thoroughfares as a founder of Student Travel International and co-founder of river cruising juggernaut Viking Cruises.

Knowing the figurative bar on luxury cruise travel could be further raised, Schreiner founded Amadeus Waterways in 2002 with wife Kristin Karst and late colleague Jimmy Murphy. AmaWaterways set sail, thoughtfully balancing luxury and adventure travel through itineraries combining the world's great destinations with lesser-known gems awaiting discovery.

As avid travellers who watched *The Love Boat* as kids, living vicariously through a revolving door of Old Hollywood celebrity guests, the idea of a 21st-century version of this (seeing the world and meeting interesting people on a shipboard boutique hotel) is appealing. However, as cruises are also known for drawing an older demographic, we wondered how we'd fit in. We decided



to give the *AmaSerena* craft a test drive with a 10-day itinerary covering the Netherlands and Belgium, followed by two days in Amsterdam museum-hopping.

Our flights from Los Angeles landed us in Amsterdam about 10 hours before the official start of the cruise. We wanted to use the time to visit the House of Bols (the official Bols distillery museum with adjoining cocktail bar) and enjoy an Indonesian meal at Swieti Sranang in the Jordaan neighbourhood. The rub? We did not want to schlep our luggage across the narrow bridges and risk having

them fall in. Thankfully, the check-in process was seamless, and the *AmaSerena* staff promptly got us to our staterooms. They were bigger and more luxurious than expected, from bathrooms outfitted with marble accents to chic contemporary furnishings in soft blue hues to a lovely outdoor terrace.

Throughout the journey, the staff was superb, in that "anticipating-things-before-you-ask" kind of way. Australian-born cruise director Peter Whitehead set the tone. With his talk show host charisma, he was on the money with his delivery of passenger in-

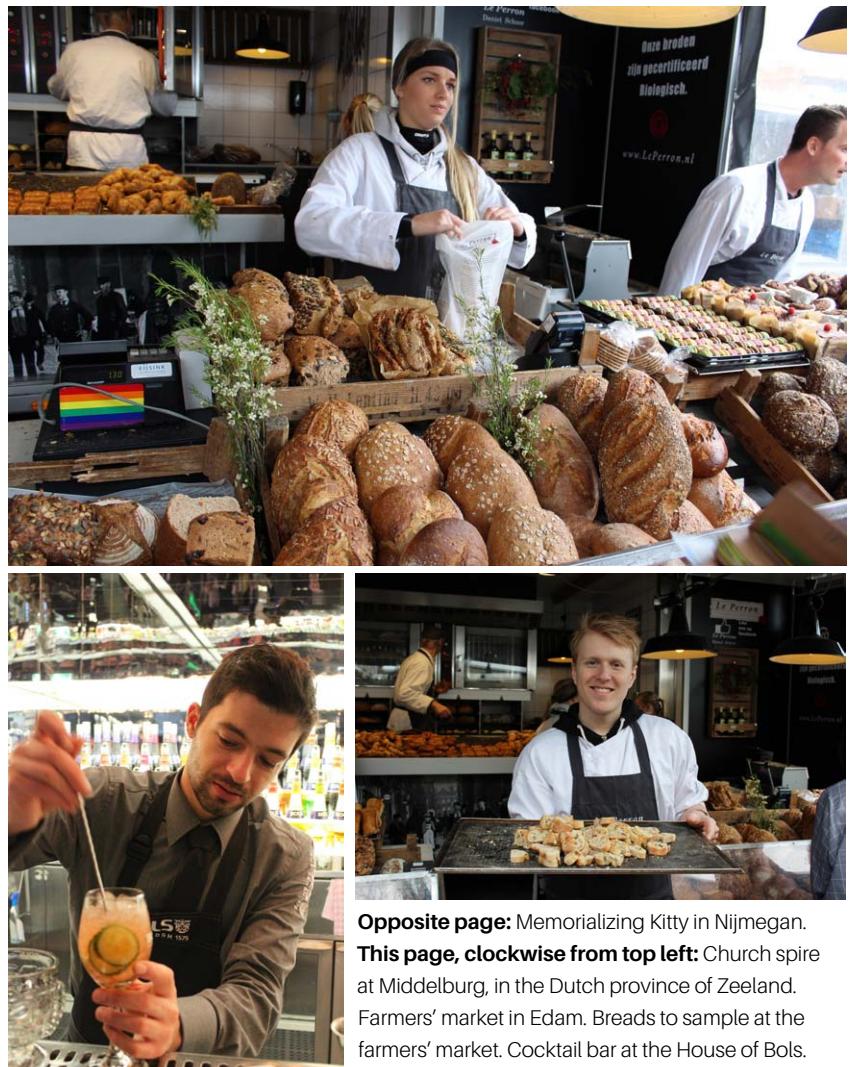


This spread: Rainbow
over Nijmegen, the
Netherlands.





Kitty Statue, Nijmegen



Opposite page: Memorializing Kitty in Nijmegen.
This page, clockwise from top left: Church spire at Middelburg, in the Dutch province of Zeeland. Farmers' market in Edam. Breads to sample at the farmers' market. Cocktail bar at the House of Bols. Nijmegan.

This page: Art in Nijmegen. **Opposite page, top:** The Jordaan district of Amsterdam. **Opposite page, bottom:** A local institution: Amsterdam's Café Papeneiland.







Top: Beignets at Désiré de Lille. **Above:** Buying cheese at Middelburg. **Above right:** A real Dutch apple pie. **Opposite page:** Rijstaffel, a dish imported from Suriname.

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structions, announcements, off-the-cuff remarks and natural rapport with individual guests. The staff followed suit, consistently upbeat and helpful without being cloying. If we tuned on the Travel Channel a year from now and found Whitehead hosting a show, we would not be surprised.

The on-board experience incorporates some nice old-school touches with the modernity. Nightly entertainment varied from a peppy pop singer, to a classical string quartet, to a music-themed game night that had everything but us television personality Jane Lynch hosting. Since the *AmaSerena* holds a maximum of 164 passengers, the experience on the boat feels exclusive and intimate. When the boat is sailing, passengers have the option of relaxing in one of the lounges, en-

joying spa services, exercising in the fitness centre or relaxing in their luxurious stateroom. Though we wanted to try out local restaurants, and did, it was tough to resist on-board food, given AmaWaterways is the only cruise line to be awarded *Chaîne des Rôtisseurs* status.

One of the advantages of a riverboat cruise that you stop in smaller cities and towns that you would not normally see unless you were travelling by car with a local who knows the landscape. Edam, Volendam, Nijmegen, Middelburg and Willemstad were certainly captivating little towns that we would not have seen on our own. As the dates of our trip fell after the Bruxelles bombing last April, our Belgian experience was curtailed. However, we were impressed with how deftly the



cruise line launched into “plan B” with inspired counter-programming of adding Nijmegen and Middelberg.

The itinerary on an AmaWaterways cruise can be as active or passive as you want it to be on any of the routes that flow through Europe, Asia and Africa. When the boat arrives a new city or town, guests are given the option of active bike tours of the location with a guide or more gentle walking tours. After our self-guided food tour of Antwerpen, we opted for a 10-mile architectural bike ride through the city with a guide, which was a fantastic way to see the sights, architecture and culture of in a relatively short period of time.

Edam is a draw for its eponymous cheese, and just try not to go into one of the cheese shops for sampling and succumbing to buying a kilo or two. The village’s quaint homes, landscaping, open spaces and swaths of northern Dutch coastline make it easy to see why local families set down roots. Volendam, which is as bustling on weekends as Edam is bucolic, has a vibrant boardwalk lined with several seafood shacks. The best of these is the aptly named Fish & Chips, proffering the national delicacy (freshly caught herring) and an impressive array of deep-fried seafood indulgences. We could not resist checking out the local bars, and Feest En Partycafé Motje’s regular patrons encouraged us to join the party.

Nijmegen’s city centre is divided between a wide boulevard with chain stores, and a

grid of ritzy, funky narrow streets with arty one-off boutiques. You walk a lot, as it takes a small effort to find hidden monuments and historical sites (including an historic synagogue and tribute to Kitty, regarded as that city’s Anne Frank). During a full-afternoon stop in Middelburg, we abandon ship (food-wise) to buy more cheese at their farmers’ market and take in an early supper at Hotel Brasserie de Huifkar, which offers excellent salmon and white asparagus when mussels are not in season.

One of the most exquisite stops of the itinerary was an outing to Apeldoorn and the Het Loo Palace, by way of Hollywood royalty Audrey Hepburn’s childhood home. Though less ostentatious in comparison to France’s châteaux and Britain’s manor houses, the stately expanse (built for Dutch king William III and Mary II of England between 1684 and 1686) captures the collective Dutch passion for travel, landscaping and fine arts, cultivated by the descendants. The tea room is a regally satisfying experience, offering an outstanding, flavourful orange-tinged carrot cake and other pastries, along with sophisticated custom tea blends that ward off the early spring, autumn or winter chill.

While the tiny town of Kinderdijk is oft-visited for the iconic windmills which have kept the Netherlands above water for generations, the quieter Willemstad provided an interesting counterpoint. In addition to its own windmill, fairy-tale-cute streets and the easygoing Eetcafe de Rosmolen, there is also

an eccentric anti-war art installation outside the old fortress walls, complete with a funky bar built into a hill.

We made the most of a short time in Belgium (Antwerpen and Gent), hitting some of Peter Paul Rubens’ highlights as well as eating our way through some of the country’s most noteworthy contributions to global food culture. For starters, there is nothing more universally loved as fries served with a zesty dipping sauce. However, experiencing *frites* in their place of origin is another matter. While mayonnaise is the traditional dip in Belgium, places like Friteur No. 1 and Frituur Suikerrui offer a variety of flavoured mayonnaises and ketchups.

Désiré de Lille’s full-sized café and street-side kiosks emit an aroma from baking waffles that draw predictably long lines. However, it also produces *beignets* that are far different than the ones New Orleans is known for. The Antwerpen version is almost the coquettish cousin of Dutch apple pie. In the space of ten minutes, a slice of apple (or pineapple or banana) is dipped into a batter and fried into a cake-like consistency. In Gent, with a guide from the *AmaSerena*, we went behind the scenes at Chocolaterie van Hecke. At this hidden-away micro-chocolate factory, we got a real appreciation for how challenging the craft is when we attempted to make classic Belgian chocolate shells without air bubbles and fill them with the right amount of ganache.

We ended our 10-day journey with a cou-

Centuries-old institutions like Café Papeneiland coexist with bakeries, and trendy boutiques

ple of days exploring the sights, sips, and sounds of Amsterdam. There is so much to do and see in Amsterdam that we extended our stay by an extra day with one night at the Ink Hotel, perfectly located next to the trams lines and major sights of the city. The luxury boutique Ink Hotel magnificently captures the eclectic, creative nature of Amsterdam.

Ink Hotel is a quirky modern spot in the former offices of Dutch newspaper *De Tijd* that's just a tram stop from Centraal Station. Today, Ink makes news for its inventive cocktails as well as its luscious breakfast spread of fresh-baked pastries and traditional dishes with a contemporary, global edge that matches up with its arty, cool ambiance and location.

No visit to Amsterdam is complete without a visit to the Rijksmuseum, the Bols Museum and Rembrandt's home and studio. For an unforgettable dining and entertainment experience, dinner at Supperclub Amsterdam is fantastic option, and for street food and ethnic dining experiences unique to Amsterdam, Eating Amsterdam Tours provides an insider's exploration of neighbourhoods like the Jordaan, where centuries-old institutions like Café Papeneiland coexist with butcher shops, bakeries, fishmongers, and trendy boutiques. Amsterdam's bar scene also lives up to its reputation, with innovative concoctions coming together at the Supperclub, Door 74, Tales & Spirits, and Hiding in Plain Sight.

The tour, centred on the eclectic Jordaan quarter, was particularly spectacular on the first warm, sunny day of spring, and not only because it was book-ended by two of the city's most popular farmers' markets: the Saturday Noordermarkt organic mar-

ket, arty and popular with tourists, and the Boerenmarkt, where locals do a lot of their regular grocery shopping. Densely packed streets and courtyards also provide enough delicious distractions to almost make me late for the tour, between the abundance of cheese samples, vibrant and exotic produce and baked goods.

The first thing my tour group learned at Café Papeneiland was that all-American apple pie was not necessary the be all and end all. The one-time haven for Catholics during the height of the Dutch Reform Protestant movement is a shrine for apple pie that's less sweet and more cake-like than its American counterpart, perfected by a substantial dollop of whipped cream. The secret, according to guide Thijs van Royen, is using sweet apple varieties indigenous to the Netherlands.

Café de Prins, which ended our tour, also draws apple pie enthusiasts. However, it is its sweet *poffertjes* (a smaller, denser variation of silver dollar pancakes) and *bitterballen* (a croquette-like snack fried golden on the outside, with a soft and savoury beef-pork centre, served with mustard) that have people packing the café.

In between, we hit several well-established specialty shops that reflect the fact that the Dutch not only have rediscovered their culinary roots, but found interesting ways to rethink their preparation and presentation. Louman's, a reigning butcher shop founded in 1890, is famous for their sausages and beef preparations including *osseworst* (raw, smoked beef sausage) and *gehaktballen* (meatballs). De Kaaskamer epitomizes everything a cheese shop should be, beyond its generous array of samples.

Though you can get good herring sandwiches and fried seafood in street-side kiosks throughout the city, the tidy Vis Plaza is an essential stop for herring connoisseurs for its fresh preparation of the delicacy as well as its perfect deep-fried cod that's part of one of the best takeaway lunch specials in this normally pricy area. Another splendid takeaway lunch place that also speaks volumes about the Netherland's trade history is the humble Swieti Sranang, which is a little off the beaten path. The menu focuses on Surinamese and Indonesian street foods, including *broodje pom* (Surinamese pom on a bread roll) and *baka bana* (addictive savoury and sweet fried plantain with satay sauce).

To chase the spicy fare served at Swieti Sranang, it makes perfect sense to stop at a long-established pub where world brands Heineken and Amstel are supporting players rather than star attractions. Café de Doffer, a classic brown café (historic bar) serves small-batch craft beers and *borrelhapjes* (snacks to go with drinks) to young and old, locals and visitors.

Back with my travel companion, who spent his afternoon at the Rembrandt Museum, I suggested we hit a *rijstaffel* place as Indonesian food was not widely available in multi-cultural Los Angeles. Using Yelp as our guide, we had a good if not flawless, meal at Kasjil et de Tiger, a trendy, reasonably priced spot where the chicken and vegetarian dishes were better than the meat dishes.

The drinks and breakfast at the Ink made for the perfect conclusion to a see-worthy journey. •

Address book

Amsterdam Metro

Eating Amsterdam

Tours

<http://www.eatingamsterdamtours.com>

The House of Bols

<http://houseofbols.com>

Door 74

<http://www.door-74.com>

Ink Hotel

<http://www.sofitel.com/gb/hotel-1159-ink-hotel-amsterdam-mgallery-by-sofitel/index.shtml>

& Sahmoud Places

Oosterdokskade 5, Amsterdam

Kasjil et de Tiger

<http://www.kantjil.nl>

Café Papeneiland

Prinsengracht 2, 1015 DV
Amsterdam

Café de Prins

Prinsengracht 124

Butcher Louman

Goudsbloemstraat 76

Swieti Sranang

Brouwersgracht 125

De Kaaskamer

Runstraat 7

Vis Plaza

Tweede Egelantiersdwarsstraat 13A

Café de Doffer

Runstraat 12–14

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Hiding in Plain Sight

Rapenburg 18, 1011 TX

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+31 6 25-29-36-20

The Supperclub

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IAMsterdam/Amster-

dam Tourism Board

<http://www.iamsterdam.com>

The Netherlands

Kaasspeciaalaak Edam

<http://www.edamcheese.com>

Hartog's Volkoren

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<http://www.elisa-pralines.com/en/welcome>

Désiré de Lille

Main Tea House: Schrijn-
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<https://desiredelille.be/en>

Belgium Beers: 280

Sortes

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