

# Discovering Holland by sea

*One last tug on the line and the 'klipper' Vriendschap is secured to the dock. In the distance, the Hoofdtoren chimes five times, calling the last 'tjalks' and 'klippers' back to port. The sails are down; the boat gently bobs next to the dock. Another safe voyage comes to an end. The skipper, Sjef, takes out a guitar and bellows out a sea chantey, the crew joining in. It's the turn of the century ... but which century is it?*

By Nanci Tangeman

This quayside scene could be six centuries old – or it could be only six days old. It could signify the end to a Golden Age adventure on the high seas, or just the close of a week away from the pressures of the office. Even in the year 2000, it's possible to relive an important part of Dutch history – sailing the country's many waters.

There are 450 traditional sailing ships operating in Dutch waters today, a number that pales next to the glories of shipping and fish-

ing throughout the past half millennium. There was a time, though, when only a handful of the ships survived.

In the 1970s, a few ship-loving idealists began to restore the traditional vessels, many of which had been half sunk or converted to storage areas or houseboats. It wasn't long before the captains were inviting paying

guests to sail with them, to help cover their operating and restoration costs.

Eventually, as the idea caught on, commercial companies, such as De Zeilvaart, began working with the owners, taking on the administration, marketing and logistics tasks, leaving the skippers and owners free to sail. What emerged was a vacation industry steeped in tradition.

Today tourists can book trips that range from a NLG 198 weekend jaunt around the IJ-

## Tips for booking your adventure

High season is 15 April to 15 October. Most companies begin booking in September for the following summer, but last-minute bookings aren't impossible. Also keep in mind a New Year's trip or other holiday celebration.

You can discuss with the skipper how much sailing you want to do, versus touring on shore. Some boats include information about the ports and different activities, but these are not always in English. Plan ahead and pack a guide book to the area. Also, ask for advice when booking your trip.

All groups have different dynamics. A team of footballers won't want to anchor offshore for the night, but a family group or a group who wants to get to know each other will want to stick around and socialize onboard. Talk to your skipper and the charter companies about your preferences.

These trips are extremely popular with German tourists, so be prepared to participate in a multilingual trip. Brochures detail

which languages are spoken by the crews.

These are great family adventures! Some boats have higher bulwarks than others, so are more suited to small children. Children are required to wear life vests. It's possible to keep them comfortably inside for the trip, but plan quiet activities.

Although you can't book a non-smoking cruise, an alcohol-free cruise or an adults-only trip, the later you book the more you'll know about your shipmates. Smoking is often allowed only on deck.

A day trip is typically 9:00 AM to 6:00 PM. Companies hire the boats for team-building; other groups for weddings and reunions – so schedules are flexible.

Remember, good sailing means good winds. There is no underestimating the cold, but dressed warmly and against the wet, there really is no concern. Bring a hat or hood and a knit hair band to keep your ears warm. Gore-tex coats and rain gear are

handy. On the other hand, for summer weather the shallow IJsselmeer and Markermeer heat up quickly for good swimming. Pack sunscreen!

Bring ear plugs if you're a light sleeper. Remember, you're adjusting to others' vacations, too.

Keep in mind that sailing on a holiday weekend may mean that the shops in the port towns are closed.

Once the sails are up, there is plenty of free time to relax and talk, read, play games or soak up the sea air – wet or dry.

The vessels are all risk insured. The crew has a third party insurance towards the passengers. Passengers are advised to purchase their own travel insurance – including coverage for such thing as a force 7 Beaufort wind. (Don't be intimidated by the clauses; the sail companies are happy to explain.)



The Klipper Nirwana from De Zeilvaart

selmeer and Markermeer to a two-week trip that extends to the northern waters of Norway for closer to NLG 1,443. There are day cruises for between 10 and 200 or more guests, and special boats reserved for young people aged 18 to 30. There are mid-week or weekend schedules, cruises specializing in handicapped travelers or senior citizens. There's even a trip where you can practice your yoga on deck.

What each of these trips provides, though, is a peek at Dutch history, as told by the skippers and crews who are keeping the old traditions alive.

The range of trips caters to every level of sailing expertise. Although more experienced sailors may charter a 'schokker' (Dutch flat-bottomed boat) or a 'lemsteraak' (barge) without a crew, most travelers choose to go with a skipper and first mate.

A typical team is Sjef Roest, skipper of the *Vriendschap* from De Zeilvaart's fleet of 120 vessels. He is assisted by Klaus, the first mate, and a ship's cat named Maomao. Heike from Friesland helps out in the galley.

Roest has been sailing traditional ships for seven years and knows his way around, onshore and off. He's precise with his instruc-

tions to novice sailors, especially since there are often a mix of native Dutch, German and English speakers on board. Though he's quick to explain how the sails or instruments work, it isn't necessary for would-be sailors to understand the concepts. Orders are broken down to pulling a particular rope in a specific direction at a certain time.

"Most people who come on board don't know how to sail," says Roest. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. "Sometimes it's those who know too much who get into trouble." Each ship has its own story. *Le Boheme* owned by De Zeilvaart was one of the fastest ships on the Rhine when it was built in 1876, designed to race against the current with its cargo. The *Zuiderzee* is the Netherlands' only original two-masted schooner still under sail. The ship has made two trips to Brazil during its 91-year life, but paid its dues hauling rocks between Germany and Scandinavia.

Roest's *Vriendschap* is typical of what travelers can expect when they book a trip. The klipper was launched in 1905 and carried cargo until 1983, first under sail and later with an engine. It spent most of its life hauling coal and other supplies between Antwerp

and Rotterdam. In 1985 the ship was refitted and totally renovated to a passenger vessel.

Nowadays the *Vriendschap* is kitted out with two and three-berth cabins, each with a sink and cold running water. There are two showers and two toilets for guests to share, as well as a roomy dining area and kitchen. A four-star ship, it can accommodate 20 guests.

"Most groups rent the whole ship with their friends, but there is a growing number of singles and couples booking and joining in on other trips," explains Sandra Niesten of De Zeilvaart, the largest operator of traditional ships in Holland. "If you have more than ten people, you can book your own ship."

Many groups, be they friends, club or family members, do their own cooking or eat at quayside restaurants, although a wide range of catering services are available for corporate day cruises and cooks can be hired for the longer trips. It's much like renting a holiday house without having to plan daily excursions for sight seeing. On the ship, the sights come to you.

As one captain put it, "There's a little bit of adventure in it, but you don't have to worry that you won't survive. You'll be a little sea sick at most." But even a bout of sea sick- ▶

