

Route advice, hotspot avoidance and hotels

Hello,

So you are going to visit the Netherlands and look at an Eriba? I work in Holland, commuting by car most weeks from our home in the UK, and just maybe you will find something useful from your road trip or at the very least avoid getting held up in traffic.

As you might guess, I qualify for frequent traveler discounts on EuroTunnel and the ferries, and you will need to hunt through the caravan club or discount travel sites for a cheap crossing. For summer 2005, I see that Norfolkline is offering a return crossing for a car and caravan for under £200.

I have assumed that you will travel to the Rotterdam area and use this as an exploration base. If you intend to go further North or East, then you will probably pass Rotterdam anyway.

Place Names and Language

If you learnt French at school, then apart from shopping in my favorite Auchan hypermarket at Grande Synthe, Dunkerque, you can pretty much put it away and keep going in English.

About 30 minutes North of Calais, even before you arrive in Belgium, the world around you will be speaking Dutch. And don't make the mistake of speaking French in Northern Belgium, you will not be popular.

Most of the place names will look odd as well, that's because the locals use the Dutch names, not the French versions we took up in the UK. So expect to see sign posts for Brugge rather than Bruges, Antwerpen rather than Antwerp.

The Dutch alphabet has one additional letter compared to the UK alphabet, the letter "IJ" and I'm sure they included it just to have fun with tourists. You will see it everywhere, as in the rivers Rijn and IJssel. Pronounce the IJ as a letter Y

Dutch computer keyboards do not have a separate key for IJ, they use the English keyboard and save money, which is a recurring theme in Dutch life.

And Q and X only appear in foreign words.

Choice of route:

If you live in the South East of the UK, then the journey time from Calais to Rotterdam is just under 3 hours (about 180 miles) and it is important that you do not exceed the speed limit in France, Belgium or Holland - the motorway networks are aggressively patrolled.

If you take the ferry into Oostende Belgium, you will save about half an hour in driving, and obviously any ferry to Europoort or Hoek van Holland takes you straight to the outskirts of Rotterdam.

Dover - Calais Ferry

The ferries take about 1hr30 plus the mandatory 40 minutes check in time, and you can take a coffee, eat a meal or just walk around.

Outside of the really busy weeks, the ferry operators seem to be quite flexible about arrival times, just letting you take the next ferry if you arrive an hour early or more importantly, an hour late.

I use both P&O and Sea France many times each year, both are good, I just go with the cheapest.

Assuming you will travel to Dover skirting around London, the best route is via the M20.

EuroTunnel

I've been using this service recently as the pricing is now (mid 2005) competitive with the ferries and the last few visits have only been for a few days.

The tunnel can be quite a bit quicker than a ferry, and save you about 1 hour on the journey. The exception to this is Friday nights when there can be queuing for the tunnel in both directions.

They can be quite funny about arrival times; sometimes making you wait for your exact crossing.

You have easy and direct access to the EuroTunnel terminal from the M20, and you save about 10 miles of driving by not continuing on to Dover.

Tunnel or Ferry?

Very much your choice, the tunnel can be quicker, the ferry more restful.

I guess the real choice is down to what deal you can get and when you are prepared to travel.

Crossing just after midnight or in the very early hours of the morning can be very cheap, but not so pleasant for the driver.

Other Ferries in the South East

I've heard very good reports of the Norfolk Line, Dover to Dunkerque service, and as noted in the introduction, they have been advertising good prices for cars and caravans.

Worth investigation, and take a look at www.norfolklane.com for details.

Harwich - Hoek van Holland

If you live in the Harwich area, and if the weather looks good, then the high speed ferry to Rotterdam is very convenient - and they were offering caravans for free earlier in the year.

Crossing time is 4 hours but if the weather is bad then it can be an exciting ride.

Hull - Europoort

Further North in the UK your choice is limited to one of the overnight ferry crossings from Hull or Newcastle to Rotterdam or Amsterdam.

These won't be as cheap, but remember to factor in all the fuel and time you will save by not driving all the way down to Dover and then back up to Holland from Calais, and then doing all this again on the way home.

Driving In Holland

Aside from the obvious “drive on the right” stuff, please observe speed limits on motorways, in cities, wherever. There are cameras, and both marked and unmarked patrol cars everywhere.

The Dutch road designers try to separate slow cyclists and pedestrians from motor traffic with separate pathways, so when you come to any road junction remember that the junction includes a separate cycle road.

And cycles on a cycle path have priority, as do pedestrians, so expect cars to stop unexpectedly at junctions and give way to a cyclist.

Also if you are unlucky enough to have an accident with a cyclist or a pedestrian, the car driver is always assumed to be responsible.

Motorways have the designation “A”, so for instance the A4 is the motorway from Delft to Amsterdam. Major motorways that link international cities will also display an E number, which continues across country borders. For instance, the motorway from Calais, past Dunkerque to Brugge is called the A16 in France and the A18 in Belgium, but the motorway signs in both countries show it as the E40.

The Dutch equivalent of a UK “A” road is the “N” road, such as the N57 along the beautiful coastal dyke from Middelburg to Brielle (and Rotterdam).

Travel Advisory – Antwerpen, Belgium: If you are traveling from, or back to, any of the ports in France or Belgium, then you need to pass the city of Antwerpen.

This summer, avoid the ring road (East) around Antwerpen because they are digging the road up again, cramming all the traffic into a contra flow and it's a nightmare.

Just before the ring road, you can take the ring road (West) via the toll tunnel (Liefkenshoek Toll Tunnel). Cost is around 4€ or 5€, the toll operators take cash or credit cards, and it is so much better than sitting in traffic for hours.

Note: The motorway signs will display the exit for the Liefkenshoek Toll (TOL) Tunnel as a left exit from the motorway. This is because the motorway splits in two, the left lanes heading West and the right lanes heading East.

Travel Advisory – Breda (NL)

Just north of the Dutch / Belgian border, the Antwerpen – Rotterdam motorway passes the city of Breda, and the road is being upgraded from two lanes to four, and this can also be a real bottleneck.

If you took my earlier advice, and followed the Liefkenshoek toll tunnel, you will follow the motorway network around the city of Bergen op Zoom and rejoin North of Breda, missing all the road works.

Travel Advisory – Belgium

If the motorway around Brugge (Bruges) is busy, then the level of traffic will just keep increasing as you close get to Gent and increase even more for Antwerpen.

As an alternative to the Liefkenshoek Toll Tunnel around Antwerpen, you can head North just after Brugge and take the new Toll Tunnel at Ternuezen into Holland.

The cost is also around 5€, and brings into Holland midway between the towns of Middelburg and Goes (try and guess how that is pronounced), and cash or credit cards are OK.

If the weather is nice, or even in the winter, then the coast road (N57) from Middelburg along the top of the sea dyke towards Rotterdam is just fantastic. In winter, expect to see lots of Eider ducks and Avocet, in the summer it can be very busy with tourists.

Route Planning

Buy a traditional map of Benelux before you go; or if you or a friend has a GPS (transferable) navigation system in your car, then buy or download the Benelux map.

I am a big fan of GPS systems, and their ability to take you from door to door anywhere in Europe. If you are relatively inexperienced at driving in Europe, or don't have a navigator sitting next to you, then they take all the worry out of finding your way.

If you are using a paper map, then write down the city names and road names on a 6x4 record card and stick this to the dashboard.

Before you go, use one of the free Internet route planning software packages like www.viamichelin.com to prepare multiple routes before you go.

If you have a rough itinerary, I can help you with specific traffic hotspots that you should avoid.

Caravan Stuff

Eriba Dealers

These can be found all over Holland, but if you are in the Rotterdam region, try a visit to Campoworld <http://www.campoworld.nl/> near Heinenoord, just south of Rotterdam.

Take exit 21 from the A29 motorway heading South, then take the N217 towards 's-Gravendeel for about 5km until you see a left turn for "Industrieterrein Heinenoord". Campoworld is on the right after about 800metres.

There are several Campoworld stores in Holland, but the Heinenoord store is the Eriba specialist with usually at least one of each Eriba model on display. Look upstairs for the Eriba Touring models.

For a full list of dealers, take a look at <http://www.eriba.nl/>

Camping Hypermarket

If you have come all this way, then do not miss a day trip to "Camping Sport De-Wit" <http://www.de-wit.nl/> just south of the town of Schijndel, near to the city of 's-Herogenbosch.

The biggest camping and caravan store in Europe, it's a shame they don't sell Eriba Touring caravans, but always worth a visit because you can make a real saving on loads of useful stuff and unusual stuff.

Compared to the UK, prices are roughly £1 = 1€, a saving of around 30% or more, and if you can go after the summer vacation period they have a big end-of-season sale with really good prices. Check the De-Wit web-site for details.

TAX

There is absolutely no tax or import duty to pay on the Eriba you bring back from Holland, France or Belgium, irrespective if it is new or pre-owned. All the relevant taxes have been paid in the country of origin by the first purchaser - so if you buy new in Holland, then you pay the VAT in Holland as part of the listed purchase price. Likewise pre-owned, someone else paid the taxes.

You just drive straight through UK Customs, there is no need to declare your purchase. But if there is just you in the car, then you should be prepared to stop for a routine check - most caravans will have a family in the car – and HM Customs like to investigate anything out of the ordinary.

Where to Stay

Depending on your previous experience of European driving, you may want to break your outbound journey with an overnight stop.

Outbound

I can give you loads of recommendations for family run hotels - like "Het Bloemenhof", a 9 room hotel in a converted Belgium farm, in the village of Dudzele near Brugge.

A single room costs Euro 52 (£35) per night, or Euro 75 (£50) for a double room, and this price includes a real Belgium farm breakfast.

Het Bloemenhof is about 2km from the town of Damme (old town square - loads of restaurants and bars - assuming you like Belgium beer - and 10km from Brugge – which has quite a few more restaurants and bars.

Return

Delft is a wonderful city, easy to explore on foot, and there are two great places to stay for three or so days:

With your new Eriba – stay at Camping Delftse Hout, <http://www.delftsehout.nl/> which is very popular and may be full in the summer, and you will need to pre-book. The camp ground is signposted from the IKEA store at the Delft motorway exit.

Or were you just visiting the dealers? Then try the Hotel Leeuwenbrug <http://www.leeuwenbrug.nl/> right in the centre of Delft. You will need to unload your bags and then park your car in the public parking square next to the hotel.

For an evening meal, we highly recommend the restaurant "LEF" on Doelenplein in Delft - good price, great food. <http://www.lefrestaurant.nl/> or if you are vegetarian, try the whole food shop and café or the vegetarian restaurant, both in the street Dertienhuizen

Contact

If you need more information or an update on the travel hotspots, just send any e-mails to robert.jackson@eriba-amiga.co.uk