

A SUMMER HOLIDAY IN THE BEFRANELUX



Regine at the Delta Works



Luxembourg - the old city

In June 2017, Richard and I hired a car and drove a clockwise loop through The Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg – a group of countries that is collectively referred to as the Benelux. We did a little foray into northern France, hence the title ‘Befranelux’.



Cube houses in Rotterdam



Pretty canals in Delft - home of the well known blue and white pottery

THE NETHERLANDS: Rotterdam. While Richard attended the Engineering Meeting of the international Square Kilometre Array project with his work colleagues, I explored Rotterdam on my own – feeling very safe walking around with my camera. The entire inner city was rebuilt after the war, and has ended up with an exciting mix of old and super-modern architecture.

Kinderdijk: About 40% of the country is below sea level, and thus the Dutch are engaged in a constant battle against the sea. The windmills in this UNESCO World heritage site, in conjunction with modern-day pumps, drain the polders and discharge groundwater into the river – if they were to stop, the water level here would apparently rise up to your bellybutton!

Delta works: Then we visited the Delta Works, the largest flood protection system in the world, along the North Sea coastline. The surge barrier consisting of 62 enormous sliding gates can shut off the entire Eastern Scheldt in 75 minutes.

BELGIUM: Ypres. Travelling through Belgium and Northern France we visited some emotionally moving memorials to the brave soldiers who gave their lives for peace. In the northern Flemish town of Ypres, we explored the excellent, informative and very moving ‘In Flanders Fields’ Museum. We saw the 1815 Memorial south of Brussels, on the weekend of their exciting annual re-enactment of the Battle of Waterloo.

FRANCE: Longueval. Near this small French town, we visited the South African Delville Wood Memorial. “The South African Brigade had gone into battle here on 15 July 1915 with a strength of 121 officers and 3,032 other ranks. At roll call on 21 July they numbered only 29 officers and 751 other ranks.”

BELGIUM: Amblève: We drove along the Amblève River, which meanders through a particularly scenic area near Liège, in eastern Belgium. At Comblain-au-Pont, we climbed up a hill to walk along a sculpture trail in the woods – the carved

stone sculptures were sometimes quite bizarre, but the view was gorgeous, and the tourist office staff were super friendly. At Remouchamps, we joined a guided tour of the underground cave system with its formations of stalactites and stalagmites.

LUXEMBOURG: Schengen.

In the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg (the only Grand Duchy in the world!), we visited Schengen in the far southeast corner. Here, in 1985, Germany, France, Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg signed an agreement to eliminate border controls between their countries, thus facilitating travel. Schengen (or rather a ship on the border river) was chosen, because it was situated at the tripoint of the Benelux countries with France and Germany. In June 1990, the Convention implementing this Agreement was signed. Since then, the number of member states has increased to 26. We also visited the nearby European Museum Schengen and a pleasant little café right next-door.

THE NETHERLANDS: Hilversum. Here, we found the media park of Radio Nederlands Wereldomroep – the place from where ‘Happy Station’, the English language radio show, used to be broadcast every weekend. I used to listen to it on my shortwave radio in the 1980s and 1990s.

THE NETHERLANDS: Amsterdam. On our final day in The Netherlands, we visited Amsterdam. We had arranged to meet Richard Tulloch, Australian playwright and fellow blogger who divides his time between Australia and The Netherlands.

GOODBYE TO EUROPE. It is amazing how much one can achieve with a combination of intermittently fluent/often halting French, friendly smiles, lots of hand gestures and a bit of willingness from both sides... and the use of Google Translate on a smartphone. This was the first time I had properly used my smartphone overseas. We bought a 1 Gig data card with Lebara Mobile, at Schiphol, and used wi-fi at our accommodation and mobile data everywhere else. The same sim card worked in all four countries! ■