

Outbound - Noord The Netherlands, Herne Germany 2011

It may have been 1st April 2011, April Fool's Day, but this did not daunt the enthusiasm that ambassadors felt as they boarded the north bound train in Amsterdam. Alighting at the Haren Station we were met by a sea of smiling faces our hosts and ambassadors of the F.F. Club of Noord. A warm



welcome ensued with our introduction to the first of numerous Dutch "food" cultures namely "mustard soup" and for some the thrice daily ritual of "coffee and cake". It was here in the garden of our luncheon hosts that we saw our first "tulip", now we really did know we were in the Netherlands. The welcome lunch included a power point presentation, which gave us all an appreciation of the regions physical features and also filled us with a sense of excited anticipation for the days ahead.

We then adjourned to our host's homes to un-pack, then a little time to "get to know you" accompanied by coffee and cake.

We were very appreciative that the Burgomaster, (mayor) of the City of Haren took time out of his busy schedule to welcome us to his city. Over coffee and cake he proudly told us of the future plans for the city as well as endeavouring to explain the "Dutch" political system – phew all those different parties, excuse the pun but for some it was a little "double Dutch"!

Then, along with our hosts and Noord members we went to the Hospitality and Tourism School. We were given a tour of the kitchens, the bakery and the vast study facilities which surprisingly also include numerous hotel rooms, where paying guests stay. We were then treated to a beautiful four course dinner, including wine, which was planned, cooked and served by students. These excellent facilities ensure that the students (aged 18+) are given a well rounded education in "hospitality industry" and as graduates they are sought out by prospective employers.



During the exchange free time gave everybody the chance to get to know each other a little better whilst sharing common interests. In my case E.D. Tina and partner Will took us for a quiet stroll through the beautiful Botanical Gardens. As keen gardeners Nev and I gained an insight and appreciation of this European garden, so very different to our local sub-tropical gardens.

No trip to the Netherlands would be complete without experiencing walking on the dykes, seeing tulips (a hydroponic tulip farm – full of blooms) and learning more about the history and the environment.

Ambassadors shared an unexpected visit to a little known (to us) War Memorial and then a tour of Camp Westerbork. This camp was where the Jewish people were taken and lived prior to being transported to Auschwitz. I personally was taken aback with the site of the remains of the train platform and various huts now in a state of decay.

This is constant reminder of a dark stain in European history and for some of our hosts, the visit sadly reignited unhappy childhood memories.

After inspecting the workings of a windmill we then adjointed to a seafood café where we were introduced to a vast array of fresh, local, delicious seafood. We were indeed honoured that a member of the now ex-Friesland Club joined us for lunch. As she had previously hosted Australians and had also been a member of an inbound exchange to Australia she was anxious to meet members of our exchange. We were humbled to know that she drove over a 200 klm round trip to meet and greet us! Over lunch she shared many thoughts on the early Dutch explorers. So to go half way around the world to have a history lesson over lunch was a unique yet welcome experience.



Having commenced the programme with a "mustard" experience it was probably fitting that on our last day we visited a mustard museum. Whilst our guide had a limited knowledge of the English language, this was more that compensated by his sense of humour and his knowledge of the history of mustard, its production and equipment and his product – Groningen Mustard. Again a unique experience.

During the exchange ambassadors in their "spare time" sent postcards sharing their exchange experiences with the last eleven (at that stage) new members to be inducted into the club.

Our farewell dinner was a sharing of our cultures with our hosts giving us lessons in Dutch dancing. This provided us all with some hilarious moments. Our Aussie "cultural" contribution to the farewell was to introduce our hosts and club members to the game of two-up, which they thoroughly enjoyed. Then, with our not so dulcet tones, "we endeavoured to entertain" as we sang some popular Aussie songs and were pleasantly surprised when our hosts happily joined us in singing Waltzing Matilda.

So a wonderful exchange where we FF Sunshine Coast ambassadors met our hosts as strangers. Yet over six wonderful days of shared laughter, a few tears and a lot of boot leather, we bid our new found friends - farewell.

In conclusion I would like to thank President Ray, who was the original E.D and who initiated the exchange "paperwork", also our gracious Noord E.D. and my host, Tina Koning and partner Will and the very hospitable members of the Noord Club.

The following comments, as per some of the ambassadors' evaluation forms, say it all. A "superb", "interesting and varied", "well balanced", "excellent overall", programme and exchange with "exceptional hospitality" to "we were truly received as friends". To my fellow exchange ambassadors, thank you, you were wonderful ambassadors for our club and our country and now we all have new lifetime friends, members of the FF of Noord, The Netherlands.

ED: Marilyn Berry

Then it was on the coach and off across the border to the Ruhr Valley in Germany and Herne. Many in the Herne club had been FF members since their student days, and were widely dispersed throughout the area, often necessitating long drives.

Our visions of a smoky industrialised area were incorrect as regeneration has made the area clean and green. Spring was in the air here, the trees beginning to leaf, the air warmer and nice sunny days. Many of the old mines and industrial buildings have been re-developed for other uses, such as theatres, retail outlets, and art galleries. We were amazed at the re-construction of whole cities, such as Cologne and Munster after the catastrophic devastation of war, sometimes re-created in their original medieval style, sometimes modern.



The Rhine cruise and the military orchestra concert and a visit to a working coal mine were enjoyed by all. Once again, we were guests at a Mayoral reception and given a visit inside the council chambers. We learned that local government here was very different from ours.

Our hosts showed us the beautiful castles, environmental parks, old wooden beamed villages, working barges on the many canals in the area, and ship lifts. With them, we visited family, their holiday homes in the forests, markets, and asparagus farms. Thank you Herne hosts for giving us an exchange which offered such a great variety of experiences.



ED: Tony Barry