



THE LOWDOWN

NOT EVERY CRUISE INVOLVES SULTRY NIGHTS IN THE CARIBBEAN OR BALMY MEDITERRANEAN DAYS. GT FOUND THERE'S JUST AS WARM A WELCOME ON THE CANALS OF THE LOW COUNTRIES

Think of Holland, and the first things that may spring to mind are hash brownies. Think of Belgium, and the first thing that may spring to mind is chocolate. Relish the thought. And there's much to relish on a cruise around the rivers of Holland and Belgium in supreme luxury, travelling aboard the excellent *Viking Pride*, chartered by gay travel company Travelpride.

Travelpride Gay Vacations provide a unique service to give gay and lesbian couples and singles an alternative to large-ship, all-gay cruises. Its focus, according to Travelpride's president, Steven Champion, is to offer smaller, more personalised holidays afloat which take guests to new and exciting destinations.

And it has to be said that Travelpride goes to extraordinary lengths to make its cruises, well, extraordinary. Whichever the destination, whoever the clientele, everything is meticulously planned to give each guest the experience of a lifetime. This means that Travelpride sails into ports larger liners can only dream of. In February next year, for example, it's offering nine nights on a unique trip around Costa Rica and Panama, which it promotes as "Lush, tropical beauty, excit-

ing eco-adventures and total self-indulgence".

However, the company's Holland and Belgium cruise earlier this year will be a hard act to follow. It was timed to conclude with two nights in Amsterdam to celebrate the annual Queen's Day, which this year commemorated the 25th anniversary of the accession of Queen Beatrix. It was spectacular, and, needless to say, there were thousands of other queens celebrating in their own inimitable style.

The trip began a week before Queen's Day, and guests who arrived early were treated to a guided canal tour around Amsterdam.

As soon as you board a Travelpride chartered ship, you're greeted by the staff, who immediately make you feel at home with a welcoming glass of the very best Champagne. Your luggage is taken to your cabin, one of 150 aboard ship, with which you are reunited in time for dinner. My cabin was amazing – larger than an average-sized lounge, it was fully fitted with ample storage space, a writing desk/ dressing table, a luxurious double bed, and a spectacular picture window that covered an entire wall. And, of course, an en-suite bathroom. It's quite simply a five-star floating hotel. ▶

Words by RICHARD HILL



► Dinner on the first night was a taster for all the delicious delights ahead. Onboard executive chef Mario Groemminger excelled in providing a superb menu for each and every meal, and each guest was welcomed into the dining room by the maître d'hôtel, Rocky Thankur. Not only was the food a feast, but Rocky's team of waiters were more than a feast for the eyes and provided first-class service throughout.

Travelpride presents a unique cabaret each evening, bringing along some of the finest performers around. Cashetta offered a highly unusual and unique blend of singing and magic, while Varla Jean Merman

ers, Rembrandt. While moored in Arnhem, yards away from the world-famous "Bridge Too Far", our excursion included a visit to Het Loo Palace, the favourite residence of the Dutch Royal Family. It's an amazing place, with some exquisite and elaborate gardens, many based on the designs of the gardens at Versailles.

At Nijmegen, the smallest city in The Netherlands, we received an extremely warm welcome from Helm de Laat, the managing director of Villa Lila, the local Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Bisexual Centre. Helm is an author and historian, and has studied and written extensively

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treated us to a hilarious mix of song, comedy and costume changes before our very eyes. But Matt Yee's *Divas Live* performance brought tears to my eyes, and not tears of laughter.

After each performance, if the *Viking Pride* was in port, Travelpride provided comprehensive guides to all the best gay haunts in the respective town or city – a refreshing change from other cruise companies, which generally prefer passengers to part with cash onboard at the ship's bar.

It's obvious that there's been extensive pre-voyage research on places of interest at every port of call, and there are daily excursions to all the best sights. Prior to departure from Amsterdam, the highlight was a trip to the Rijksmuseum, which contains works by, amongst oth-

about the gay-related history of Nijmegen. After his brief introductory talk aboard *Viking Pride*, he gave us a guided tour of the city, including a visit to the City Hall where, during the last century, sodomists were executed for their supposed "crimes". Helm also invited us to Villa Lila, where we were welcomed by staff, members and local residents who hosted us on visits around the gay bars, of which Nijmegen has a surprisingly high number for a city of just over 150,000 residents.

Next, we sailed for Dordrecht, located in the eastern end of the Rhine delta. We were taken on an excursion to the UNESCO World Heritage site at Kinderdijk, home to 17 working windmills which, prior to reclamation, kept at bay the sea that formerly covered over 50% of The Netherlands. Surprisingly, nearly all of the country's windmills

remain in working order in case power failure or diesel-fuel shortage prevent the modern pumping stations from keeping the land – most of which is at least three metres below sea level – from being flooded.

Another excursion took us to the Belgian capital of Brussels, one of the most powerful cities in the Low Countries. Today, of course, it's home to the European Parliament and NATO's headquarters, and to one of the world's most revealing (and relieving) statues, the Mannequin Pis. And the country is well known for two extra-special delights; lace and chocolates. By now, we'd reached Bruges, probably the most intact medieval city in the area. Originally an active trading port with strong links with Scandinavia, lack of funds has, ironically, lead to it remaining unchanged for hundreds of years.

Then we were off to Antwerp, originally known as "Antwerpen", a name derived from the amputation of the arm of the ogre Antigoon – perhaps an extreme form of one off the wrist.

Other excursions included a visit to the Neeltje Vans Delta flood-prevention barrier, opened in 1987, the city of Rotterdam, the Delft china factory and the outstanding tulip gardens at Keukenhof, arguably the most famous gardens in the world, comprising over 16km (10 miles) of paths and 32 hectares of plants, including the hundreds of thousands of eponymous tulips.

The final night and full day saw us back in Amsterdam to celebrate Queen's Day, a designated national holiday in Holland. It started out as a celebration of the Dutch Monarchy. Before 1949, it was celebrated on the birthday of Queen Wilhelmina. Today, the current monarch, Queen Beatrix, is received with a myriad of celebrations. Boosted by the arrival of over a million people, Amsterdam holds an internationally renowned street party, which goes on throughout the night until the evening of the next day. This year being the 25th anniversary of the

Queen's ascension, it felt like almost every one of the city's residents had turned up to join in and dress in orange. Gay celebrations are centred on the Homomonument and Reguliersdwaarsstraat.

For guests aboard the *Viking Pride*, there were night-time excursions to some of the best gay bars in town, participation in the main celebratory events and, on the following day, a privately chartered, glass-topped boat tour of the crammed canals for those of us who wished to embrace the experience but preferred not to fight our way through the thousands of people packing the streets.

But this cruise is only one example of the great lengths that the Travelpride team go to ensure their guests enjoy a magnificent, memorable holiday. By the first evening of each cruise, even the lone traveller will have made new friends in a warm and welcoming environment. Onboard events have a local flavour, and reflect the tradition and customs of the locality. On our cruise, we enjoyed a demonstration by a young craftsman who continues the family tradition of making clogs by hand, were treated to a special tasting session of the uniquely Dutch Gouda cheese, and to a robust and refined range of Holland's most popular spirit, variously known as Jenever, Genever, Geneva Gin, Dutch Gin and Holland Schnapps, each with a sweating and searing alcohol strength of between 35%–40%. Few of us declined the tasting or the subsequent late night, as many of us were simply too smashed to know where on earth we were.

Since its Holland and Belgium cruise, Travelpride has also chartered a cruise around Southern France, and next year will be hosting trips around Costa Rica in February and the Italian Riviera and Cote D'Azur in July.

So, if you're looking for a unique, memorable holiday experience, this is the one. And for those of you who may be tying the knot after the change to the same-sex civil partnership legislation this month, what better way to celebrate the ultimate honeymoon experience? ■



TRAVEL DETAILS

Contact Travelpride Gay Vacations at 1633 Q Street NW, Suite 230, Washington DC 20009, USA. Tel: 001 954 564 2039 (Washington DC is approximately 7–8 Hours behind GMT) E-mail: info@travelpride.com or log onto www.travelpride.com

easyjet flies to Amsterdam daily from Stansted, Luton, Gatwick, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Bristol and Belfast. Log onto www.easyjet.co.uk or call 0905 821 0905

