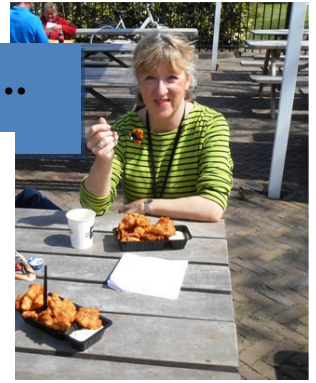
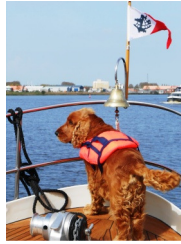
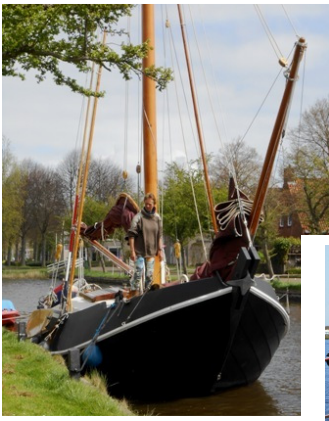
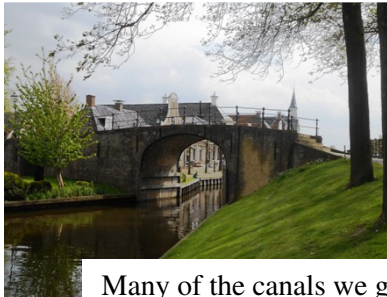


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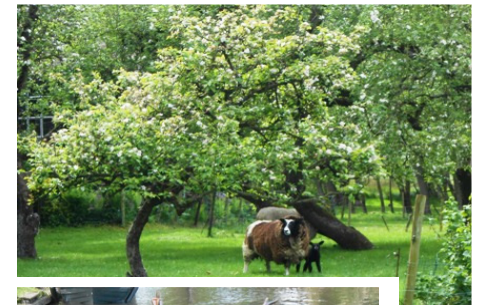
Off at Last on *Otter*....

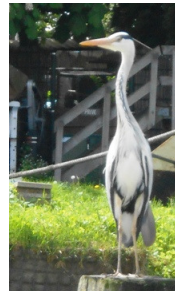
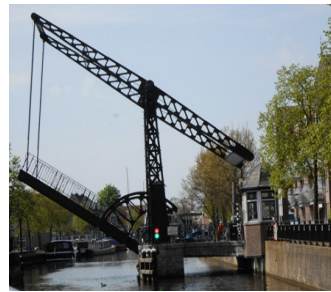


Finally, after a very pleasant “farewell” evening with Michiel and Jacqueline (the previous owners), we sneak off under cloudy skies, bound for yes, Sneek and on through the tiny villages of Friesland, first stop the tiny, fortified pearl of Sloten, Europe’s 2nd smallest city! It’s wealth generated today by...no, not cheese, no, not chocolates...but ketchup, not just any ketchup...gourmet ketchup. You have to admire the Dutch- not only do they have to cultivate every scrap of land they have, they also had to build it first.



Many of the canals we glide along are higher than the surrounding countryside. Sometimes we sail over motorways on aquaducts. One of the loveliest spots was Giethoorn, the green “Venice” of Holland, a whole village with only canals and paths, actually the opposite of most towns, it’s built on water crossed by strips of land, not vica versa. Farmers even used to move their cows around in row boats. Then, it lived by harvesting peat from the surrounding marshes, today the old homes have been restored and turned into stunning homes and B&B’s, and it’s massively popular with oriental tourists who rent the narrow punts to float around and admire them from. A peaceful little bubble that made even the canals seem hectic!

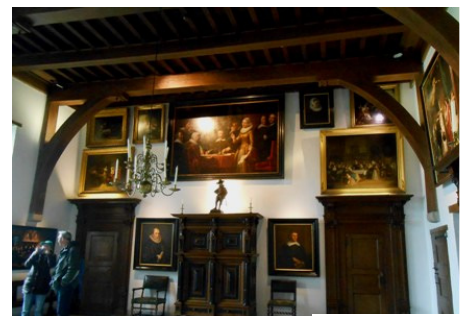




Each town has its own charm and story, of course. And surprises. You never know what you will find around the corner. A quirky bridge, a stork's nest, an inspiring home, a wedding party in Porsche or punt..or the male roller-blader who whizzed past Jan at some speed yesterday morning, wearing a skin-tight face mask and body top and well, absolutely nothing else...And the vessels, too, in all shapes and sizes -many lovingly- restored antique barges, sailing vessels, veteran tugboats and immense working-barges loaded right to the water-line pass us. Below - gull-winging it across the IJsselmeer on a windy day. Above, the "the ladies in purple and red" enjoying lunch in a brown café in Oudewater (members of the world-wide movement of ladies who refuse to grow old gracefully and also do a lot for charity!) They brightened up a very grey day!



Many of the towns, like gorgeous Elburg, are fortified....small 16th.century havens of cobble streets within the city walls, beautifully restored, so picture perfect. They do a good apple pie, too, which seems to be the most popular dessert in Holland (apart from pancakes, a national dish. Fine with me, either way...) From the road you would whizz past and never guess there were so many tiny gems tucked away...that's the beauty of seeing it from the canals. All the very best, faces the water



I had particularly looked forward to the castles, cathedrals and art museums and what better way to spend a rainy day than exploring the Muiderslot from 1280, the most-visited castle in the country, where the greatest artists, scientists and writers met in the 17th century. Such furnishings and atmosphere.

