

MEDITERRANEAN

SIGGY AND HEATHER | TRIP AROUND THE MEDITERRANEAN | MON 25 - WED 27 MARCH 2013

We're Away

The slow traffic to Brisbane airport did not dampen our spirits but we must admit it did cause us a little stress. Once we got through customs and sat in the lounge waiting to board our plane we finally realized that our 3.5 months trip to Mediterranean countries was under way.

Our preferred airline this trip is China Southern. The major reason? It was cheap - we soon found out why.

Before booking our flights, we ensured that we had no long layovers and the arrival times were optimal. By the time of our departure, the layover in China on our outward journey, had changed from 2.5 to 5 hours, we were arriving in Amsterdam far too early (before 6am) and on the way back we were arriving in Beijing at a ridiculous 5.30am. "Not happy Jan." We had to remind ourselves that the tickets had been very cheap.

Once boarded, we we found that there were no individual TV screens. The screens that did exist were not visible from our seats. Bugga! That only left our computers and the brochures in our seats for entertainment. Bugga again. The brochures were in Chinese and the batteries in our computers would not last the distance.

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Our Home Exchange Hosts

We are spending the first week in Arnhem, Netherlands on a house swap. George and Mieke, the owners, are an amazing inspiration to us. We met them last year when they stayed at our place.

We were impressed with their enthusiasm for life and travel, and their willingness to get out of their comfort zone. Best of all they gave us an appreciation about how we too can travel very cost effectively.

George and Mieke spent 3 months traveling all around Australia last year and they did it all by exchanging houses. Mieke spent many hours emailing and organizing home exchange accommodation.

Their house in Arnhem is a delight. It has all the facilities you could want and includes the use of their car.



INTERESTING As the cashier in the coffee shop at Guangzhou airport stamped my receipt PAID, the stamp fell to pieces in her hand. With a wry smile she looked up at me and said in broken english "stamper made in China!".



CLEVER CAR Our eco Peugeot C3 engine automatically stops running when we stop at the lights to conserve fuel. Heather still can't work out how it can do that.



BROKEN BIKE This one actually flew with the British troops on a glider in the airborne landings in Arnhem in WWII. Folding bikes from England have come a long way since then.

Parts of this trip will take us out of our comfort zone - getting lost may even be part of that!

China's Guangzhou airport is one of the largest and newest in the world. The weather was misty and cold when we landed. There was no covered entry to the terminal. Chaos seemed to reign supreme. The transfer bus was standing room only. The lounge waiting area was tiny and the seats very uninviting. Our long layover was not very comfortable. I found a quiet back corridor with no people so we took turns sleeping on the floor. Then, just 30 minutes before boarding, we were herded off to another departure area even more austere than the first. Another bus trip finally led to our plane. Happiness this time - individual TV screens. And then an announcement. Due to bad weather our take off was to be delayed for 1.5 hours. We had to stay in the plane for the duration but we were in more comfortable seats and we had a choice of lots of movies to watch.

The journey passed fairly well because we were even able to sleep for around 6 hours. The food was not bad either. The relaxation exercises demonstrated on screen at the end of the flight were excellent.

So what is our verdict about China Southern? We will rate them later once we find out how our return journey goes!

We arrived in Amsterdam to 2 degrees. We quickly got out our coats and enjoyed a hot chocolate with our hosts who had driven the 1.5 hours from Arnhem to pick us up.

After arrival at our "home exchange" house we took to our bikes to find a shop to fill up our fridge. It was really freezing. I had to shorten the journey because my fingers were so cold.

We both had great long sleeps in a very comfortable bed. 12 hours for Heather - about 14 for me.

This morning we took to the bikes again to see our local area. It was so cold that the local canals are still partly frozen. The bike ways are wonderful. There is a huge network of paths and roundabouts with dedicated signs and lights. Despite the freezing conditions people were riding everywhere. What a great sight.

HISTORY LESSON



WE VISITED THE AIRBORNE MUSEUM AT OOSTERBEEK AND LEARNED ABOUT THE BATTLE OF ARNHEM AND WWII'S OPERATION "MARKET GARDEN".

30,000 POLISH, BRITISH AND AMERICAN TROOPS WERE AIR DROPPED IN BUT FAILED TO CAPTURE A KEY BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER. THE FILM "BRIDGE TOO FAR" WITH A CAST OF MANY FAMOUS MOVIE STARS WAS BASED ON THIS WAR DISASTER.

MANY SOLDIERS FROM BOTH SIDES DIED BECAUSE MISTAKES WERE MADE AND ADVERSITIES WERE NOT APPROPRIATELY TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT.



George and Mieke outside their house

PHOTOS



Dykes criss cross much of the Netherlands



Touch typist at work



The land of canal homes



If you are tired you will sleep anywhere



Heather not knowing which way to look first when approaching a bike roundabout

WE HAVE CHOSEN TO VISIT THE MEDITERRANEAN THIS TIME AROUND. WE DID TRAVEL AROUND THE NORTHERN PART OF ITALY 30 YEARS AGO SO WILL GIVE MUCH OF SOME AREAS A MISS AND ONLY SEE THE SOUTHERN SECTION.

INCLUDING TURKEY AND A NUMBER OF THE BALKAN COUNTRIES IN OUR ITINERARY WILL BE STRETCHING OUR COMFORT ZONE BUT, "NOTHING VENTURED - NOTHING GAINED". IT'S A "SEE HOW WE FEEL" TRIP WITH NO DEFINITE ITINERARY.

Nijmegen

Despite carpet bombing during WWII the town can still boast a rich history with beautiful historic buildings, parks and museums. We drove in to the centre and parked our car but decided to walk around rather than ride our bikes. Luckily we did - no bike riding was allowed.

NIJMEGEN IS A MIX OF NEW AND OLD. UNFORTUNATELY IT'S BLEND OF CONTRIVED OLD WORLD CHARM AND ULTRA MODERN COMMERCIALISM HAD LITTLE APPEAL FOR US.

The cold air forced us to rug up with thick warm jackets, beanies and scarves. The place was very crowded but the outside cafe's had few patrons. There were the usual high street shoe and clothes shops all sporting the latest in summer fashion but we were more interested in winter specials. We could imagine what the town would be like in peak season in warm weather - chic, charming and atmospheric but crowded to buggery.



BIKES



THE NETHERLANDS IS A LAND OF BICYCLES. EVERYWHERE YOU GO YOU CAN SEE KIDS AND PEOPLE OF ALL AGES, INCLUDING OLDIES LIKE US, RIDING EVERY TYPE OF BIKE IMAGINABLE.

THE SHEER NUMBER OF BIKES WE SAW IN THE HUGE BIKE PARKS WAS AMAZING -

FOREIGNERS



ONE OF THE THINGS WE HAVE TO COME TO GRIPS WITH EVERY DAY IS THE LANGUAGE. GOING SHOPPING FOR FOOD OR ANYTHING ELSE IS USUALLY ASSOCIATED WITH LOTS OF SIGN LANGUAGE AND HAND AND BODY GESTURING - SOMETIMES WITH HILARIOUS CONSEQUENCES.