



A LONG WAY HOME

Colin & June McCarthy, Munster Centre Members

On the 2009 May Bank Holiday Monday we left Curragh Chase Forrest Park campsite after a very enjoyable weekend with our friends from the Munster Centre of the Caravan Club. We were heading for home in Midleton, but with a bit of a detour to check out a few flower beds.

As the Monday turned to Tuesday we were cosy in bed at Rosslare, waiting for the Tuesday morning ferry to Wales.



As Tuesday turned to Wednesday we waited in Dover for our ferry to Calais and we hit the sack in Gravelines at about 4.30 am.

After a late start we spent the afternoon exploring this beautiful town with its

extensive floral beds, the town is principally contained within a 'star' fort, similar to Charles Fort in Kinsale but much bigger, which was built in the 18th Century. We were parked in the 'Aire de Stationnement Pour Camping-car' on the riverside overlooking the local fishing fleet and yacht marina in the company of about a dozen other 'Campingcarists'; this excellent facility is provided free of charge by the local authority.

Thursday morning after replenishing food, wine, diesel and gas we headed for Antwerp. After a late start we arrived at rush hour only to find our chosen site 'full'. After consulting our library of campsite books we chose a likely looking site to the north of Antwerp, set the 'sat nav' and headed off – to the entrance of a tunnel with a 1.5t. weight restriction! We were saved however by a well worn 'self service' barrier which I lifted out of the way and made our escape from the three lane traffic jam. The tunnel seemed to accept a full sized single deck bus into its bowels so height didn't seem to be the problem, perhaps there's someone in there with weighing scales checking the weight of camper vans!

We headed off to Camping Floreal Club via another tunnel in the company of four lanes of HGV's and other assorted traffic, the M50 in Dublin is a Sunday day out compared to this. We eventually arrive, in reasonably good nick, at the campsite at about 6 pm for a meal, showers and a relax, after which we planned the next stage of our 'long way home'.

Friday after a leisurely breakfast, dumping the waste and refilling the water we left Antwerp and headed for The Netherlands and a relatively uneventful journey to Camping Op Hoop Van Zegen at Noordwijk aan Zee. This lovely

family run site on a 100 year old farm which at one time was famous for its cheese. The site is close to a huge beach and surrounded by bulb fields, it does however get quite dark at night!!



After a good nights sleep we awoke to a beautiful sunny morning with a plan to see a few flowers. After breakfast down came the bikes and we headed off to the Keukenhof Gardens. Having cycled through the beautiful Dutch

countryside, past canals, fields of colourful flowers and the odd windmill we reached our destination after about 50 minutes of leisurely travel. The gardens certainly deserve their world famous status. In late April and early May they are a blaze of colour with tulips showing in all the colours of the rainbow plus a truly vast selection of other flowers throughout the gardens and indoor areas. After over four hours of taking in this most spectacular of floral displays and a very tasty coffee and sandwich we headed back to Camping OP Hoop Van Zegan. On arrival we both felt very 'John Wayne' like after an hour in the saddle each way, it being our first cycle of the season.



Sunday dawned bright and quiet, we bid goodbye to our neighbours, a couple from the Well Road back home in Cork who were also looking at a few flowers and headed off in the general

direction of Amsterdam, we booked into Camping Het Amsterdamse Bos. We were greeted by a very friendly receptionist who explained how the 'strippen kaart' worked, it's got nothing to do with the Dutch pastime of taking ones clothes off for that all over suntan, it is in fact a really great way to use the fantastic public transport in all the cities of the Netherlands.

After a good night's sleep and four strips each off the strippen kaart we arrived at Central Station in Amsterdam, we really are in the dark ages in Ireland when it comes to organising our public transport.

After a quick call to the VVV (tourist office) we got tickets for the 'Canal Hopper' this is like the open top hop on hop



off sightseeing bus except it's a boat and like the bus the ticket lasts for twenty four hours from the time of issue. We used this to travel around Amsterdam to visit such places as Anne Franks house, the Gasson Diamond factory,

an outer harbour tour, to name a few, a week could easily be spent in this fabulous city but Rotterdam and our son Ross awaited us.

After tea on Tuesday, at Camping Het Amsterdamse Bos, if you pay a fee of half the day rate you can stay on site until eight o'clock in the evening, we headed 'down the road' to Rotterdam and booked into Stadscamping Rotterdam. Shortly after booking in Ross arrived on his bike, how else in The Netherlands, and we all headed in to the city to test the nightlife, we used a few more 'strippens'.

Wednesday, Ross had a day off, so we got up on the bikes and joined the rest of the locals on the fantastic cycle lane network and headed off to his place. We all spent the day checking out the sights and retail therapy locations of the city. After tea we were returned to the city by bus, the driver was so friendly and helpful he was like a personal chauffeur. We spent the evening enjoying an excellent meal which was washed down in one of the Irish Pubs. On the way back to the campsite, by coincidence, we travelled again with the same bus driver who enquired if we had enjoyed our evening, over the loudspeaker system of the bus, and as we approached our stop he announced it and wished 'his Irish passengers' a good nights sleep.

As I write this account of our time here in The Netherlands the aspect which stands head and shoulders over everything we have enjoyed is the good nature and helpfulness of the Dutch people we have met in the shops, restaurants, public transport and campsites, tourist offices etc.

Thursday we were on our own as Ross had to earn his crust so June and I headed back into the city and did the Harbour Cruise.

Rotterdam always equalled Europort, oil refineries and containers to me but the city and the port are two distinctly separated areas, neither impinges on the other. The city is a most vibrant place full of the most modern architecture; every thing is new as the entire city centre was flattened in a bombardment on 14th. May 1940. It is said the city planners are very progressive and give architects a relatively free hand. This has resulted in some spectacular buildings while at the same time each one seems to complement the others. The port is immense in its size and the goods handling facilities enormous. One of the current projects there is the permanent docking of the former transatlantic liner Amsterdam which was the flagship of the Holland America Line and was probably a regular caller to Cobh. It is due to open to the public as a hotel, conference centre, restaurant etc. in July of this year.



Friday, after a late breakfast we headed for The Haig (Den Haag) and booked into Camping Duinhorst. The very helpful receptionist again told us about the cycle lanes to the city centre and also to the beach

area, and 'strippens' could also be used if we chose to use the bus from the stop about ten minutes walk away. Camping Duinhorst is situated about a thirty minute leisurely cycle from both The Haig city centre and its coastal resort town of Scheveningen, with its Brighton type pier

out into the sea.

About all the cycling: In the Netherlands everybody seems to use bikes and an hour in the saddle is not at all difficult as the country is almost totally devoid of hills, so once the sitting on part has toughened up, travelling by bike is more or less effortless.

Saturday morning we headed on the bikes to Schevevingen to see its pier and have a stroll along its promenade. It also has a sea life centre with a walk through tunnel where you can share space with sharks and octopi among other creatures of the deep. There was also a fantastic display of sand sculpture on its truly huge beach. The weather turned a bit 'north sea'ish as the after noon progressed so we headed back to the camp site. We rounded off the day with an excellent value meal and a few drinks in the campsite bar/restaurant.

Sunday we took the bikes for another run to the centre of The Haig. After visiting some of the must see sights of this famously old and historic city we had a lovely lunch in a typical Dutch restaurant and found a most interesting place to do some stuff on the internet. We were directed to 'Jurplace', a hostel inhabited by a lot of younger generation types sitting around on large beanbags and dressed for a beach party, at lunch time on a Sunday!!!, June noticed a sign offering free bed in return for help running the place, I declined her suggestion that I could stay the night and she could get the bus back to the motorhome so we carried on our merry way together. Before we headed back to the campsite I did a lone ramble around some more sights while June got involved with some retail therapy.



Monday we checked out and headed via Antwerp to Bruges. Henrietta, the nice lady who lives in our satnav, advised two routes, one 221km/2h43mins or other 199km/2h38mins with a toll. Being one

who instinctively avoids toll roads, as you see more of the country on the ordinary roads I ignored my instincts and took the toll option, seeing on the map that it was a river crossing, I thought it might be a bridge worth seeing for a few Euro. Well, it turned out to be a hole in the ground about a kilometre long which cost €18 and it only saved 22km and less that €4 worth of diesel. Call me scrooge if you like but I think the person in the toll booth was only short a mask and a gun. Anyway, we eventually arrived at the Aire in Bruges and were promptly mugged again €22.50 for 24 hours plus 50 cents EACH to empty toilet, waste water and to get 5 minutes of hose time for drinking water. It did however include a 6 amp ehu, big deal. After a short stroll around the city we returned to the mh and hit the sack, promising to put the unpleasant surprises of the day behind us and start Tuesday afresh.

Tuesday we spent the morning doing the whole Bruges thing. I must say it is a spectacular place, so full of history. Most of the buildings seem to date from the 18th Century. The highlight was visiting the Basilica of the Holy Blood

where we saw the Tabernacle which holds a phial containing congealed drops of Christ's Blood.

While June did another session of retail therapy I checked out Camping Memling which is only about 35mins on foot or 15mins by bike from the centre of the city. There is also a bus from just around the corner. At €22.50 per night including all facilities, hot showers, ehu, etc. even the delivery of morning bread to your door, it is by far a better proposition than the municipal aire.

Before our 24 hours were up, being a car park type ticket operation if your stay exceeds 24 hours even by 1 minute you are charged another €22.50, we headed off for a return visit to Lille, after 23 years. Just before teatime we pulled into Camping de l'Orient in the neighbouring city of Tournai across the border in Belgium.

On Wednesday, we took the bus from outside the campsite into the centre of Tournai and enjoyed a light Belgian lunch after a little sightseeing. We then took an afternoon train to Lille. June retraced some of her steps from 23 years ago while I dealt with the photography. Lille is indeed a beautiful city, full of grand architecture from the late 19th Century which shows its history as a very prosperous industrial city. It is now a city with vast areas of pedestrianisation, full of cafes, street art and water features. After some refreshments taken leisurely, while we 'people watched' at one of the many street cafes, we caught the train back to Tournai to plan the next few days travel which was to take us back to Calais for our early Monday morning ferry.

Thursday morning we checked out of Camping de l'Orient and headed North as far as the St-Omer area. We planned to visit La Coupole, the WW11 site which was built by the Nazis from which to launch rockets at London. We arrived at the nearby town of Arques, famous for its Arcoroc glassware. At the Aire in Arques which is adjacent to the municipal campsite and is set in peaceful parkland surroundings on the shore of a fishing lake we pulled up for the night and gladly parted with the princely sum of €2.00 which was collected by a member of the campsite staff.

Friday morning we headed off to visit La Coupole. This huge reinforced concrete dome is now a museum dedicated to the plight of the local French during the occupation. The slave labour brought in to build the facility and space exploration to the present day. Ironically the scientists who developed the rockets to deliver the warheads to London were taken to the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. after the wars end and were instrumental in those countries development of space exploration and getting man to the Moon.

We spent over four hours at the site, which has a vast number of video presentations depicting life during the war years among its exhibits. We felt completely drained at the end but also had regrettably skipped most of the area which is dedicated to modern space exploration. Maybe another visit is warranted to complete the experience. After a mid afternoon lunch we continued in the direction of Calais and settled in for the night at the Aire in the town of Hondshoote, the aire is situated in the grounds of a windmill erected as a commemorative replica of one at

which, in 1793, a force of Parisian grenadiers successfully fought off British and Hanoverian soldiers under the command of The Duke of York.

Saturday morning we set off on the last few kilometres, back to Gravelines via Oostende to 'kick a few tyres' at Urbano Motorhomes. We finally arrived in Gravelines to a magnificent sunset having loaded our wine and beer requirements, en route, at the Carrefour in Dunkerque.



Sunday was spent relaxing in Gravelines over a coffee at one of the many restaurants around the town square and watching the 'Sunday sailors'

messing around in their boats on the River Aa which flows past the Aire. After dinner Sunday evening we left for Calais to join the queue for the ferry back to Dover. We arrived at about 10pm for our 6am Monday ferry and having failed to talk our way on an earlier ferry without paying a supplement, we moved to the parking area and set the alarm for 4.30 am.

Monday we arrived in Dover and headed at a leisurely rate in the direction of Oldland Common near Bristol where we had booked into the CC CL at Cully Hall Farm, a place we have used in the past, when crossing the UK as it is close to the M4 motorway. We rounded the day off with a Chinese meal from the local Chinese restaurant, who will deliver to the site.

Tuesday morning we bid goodbye to our hosts, Mr & Mrs Nesbitt and headed homeward via Asda in Swansea, Pembroke and Rosslare.

A few quick numbers:

Ferries, Irish Sea paid by Tesco Tokens, English Channel £68.00 return

Distance travelled 2736 Km

Diesel burned 296 Litres

Average MPG 26.11

Nights away 22

Nights on campsites, 14 - Total cost € 250

Nights on Aires, 8 - Total cost € 24.50

(Bruges was €22.50 of that)

