

The train station is also a major shopping center with lots of shops and restaurants on the level above the train tracks. One of the places I stopped by is a grocery store I remembered from my last visit here. It's always interesting to me to watch the locals as they shop and to compare the prices to those back home. Some of the best local fares here are all the cheeses and the Stroopewaffles, two thin waffle-cookies with a layer of caramel or syrup between them—super good! Today it's time for cheese, eels, and windmills. What a combination! When you think of the Netherlands, you may think of cheese and windmills, but EELS? Well, yes, that is one of our experiences today. But I'll get to that in just a bit.

We started our day at the breakfast buffet aboard the Crystal Mahler and this is the place to fuel up for the day, omelets, slices of bread, meats, yogurt, fruits, sweetbreads etc. A good variety and great taste. Then it's time to head out of Amsterdam into the Dutch countryside on our Crystal motor coaches. For this excursion, there are forty or forty-five people which would fit nicely on one motor coach, but Crystal wants you to be comfortable and not crowded, so we take two motor coaches and have plenty of space to spread out.

The Dutch countryside is interesting in this area as most of it is below sea level and we ride along the dry side of the dikes with the water above us on the other side of the dike. All the fields are green with cute little houses and farms spread out here and there. The sheep are grazing and the people are not in a big hurry.



Our first stop is a family cheese maker, and what great cheese. After touring the place, visiting the cows, sheep, and goats, and learning the cheese-making process, we get to the shop where they sell the cheese - lots and lots of cheese. They have samples out of about forty-five different cheeses, so I try as many as possible and end up buying a smoked herb gouda cheese stick to take along home.

We ended our afternoon with a stop at a working windmill. Since a lot of the land in this area is



reclaimed from the sea and sits below sea-level, the water that seeps in and collects at these lower levels has to continuously be pumped back out to the sea at a higher level. This is where the windmills come in. They are the pumping station. Wind turns the blades that turn the shaft that turns the huge screw that lifts the water up to the higher level. Simple as that. In the old days, the man that took care of the windmill lived with his family in the windmill itself (they still do in a few cases). It must have made for a very dull life, but you have to say these windmills are a beautiful sight to see the landscape. But I skipped the second stop of the day—the eel experience. Who knew it? There is a lake here where eels are plentiful and this local family that we visited owns a smokehouse and restaurant that specializes in smoked eel. So the owner gave us a tour to show us how the eel is smoked, and then passes out samples. I'm a little leery about eating this “snakefish” at first, but OH, WHAT A GREAT FLAVOR! Well, you learn something new every day and today it was the great flavor of a smoked eel!

