Sweet dreams come true in fairy-tale land

With its never-ending supply of chocolate and waffles, a model city and an enchanting theme park, Holland grants every child’s wish

must be mad, I kept thinking. Taking the kids to Holland on a ferry when I know they get travel sick. Oh dear. But it was too late to change my mind. Apprehensively, I packed travel sickness pills.

Luckily, the Stena Hollandica was glitteringly new, well-soundproofed and very stable, quite unlike the rumbling, rocking old ferries I remembered. Far from feeling sick, Siai and Arthur reveled in_exploiting_ the cafe, children’s playroom, shop and cinema, and begged to stay up all night. When I finally got them to bed, they slept through, and so did we. And the next morning, there we were in Holland.

So yay for superferries. And yay for Holland, which, as Sidney pointed out, is the “land of bikes” and, as Arthur added, “is the land of waffles and chips”. And the land of chocolate-sprinkle sandwiches, hot dogs and those sugary Dutch pancakes. You might expect everyone to weigh a tonne, but they looked pretty fit. Perhaps it was all that cycling.

Our first stop was The Hague, which was much more attractive than I’d expected. Our hotel, the Bel-Air, faced a sweep of woodland and was right in the museum area. There’s lots to see, including a permanent M.C. Escher exhibition and the famous Mauritshuis gallery. But because this was a children’s trip, we went instead to the model city of Madurodam.

Madurodam is a memorial to George Maduro, a war hero who died in Dachau at 1945. All its little buildings, ranging from castles and farms to oil refineries and council estates, are accurately modelled on real places and the whole site is enclosed in a dyke.

Teeny windmills

We loved it. The boys admired its extensive rail system and interactive technology and were thrilled to discover that ten cents makes a genuine Mars Bar.

The comfortable on-site hotel is definitely quirky. We found a carved mouse hiding in our room and a red fairy slipper in the wardrobe. Delightful, although I couldn’t say the same for the scary fibreglass goblin glaring at the loo, which had to be draped in a towel to protect everyone’s sensibilities.

The breakfast buffet was excellent but the sight of its huge iced cupcakes and buns and the prospect of lunching on chips again finally drove me to the local shops to buy some healthy food. It took time but at least we reached our next stop, Amsterdam, well stocked with grapes, cucumber and tomatoes.

Our hotel, the Mint, was bright and new. It offers funky, industrial-style views of ships and railway tracks and provides Apple computers with free wi-fi in every room so the boys were in their element.

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NEMO, one of Europe’s top kids’ museums, inhabits a striking green ship-like building on the harbour’s edge. It’s full of fun things based on science, anything from creating hydro-electric power to stepping inside a gigantic soap bubble. Each floor brings something new and interesting and you can easily spend the best part of a day there.

My suggested visit to Anne Frank’s house was voted down so we took a boat trip through the canals and harbour. The tugboats and locks were much admired but exploring on foot frankly worked better for the boys. Down by the waterfront, we saw antique sailing ships and obten’s by navigating the workaday old tubs. Eccentric houseboats were adorned with strange artworks, including life-sized model cows grazing aboard one boat and a mysterious pair of legs sticking provocatively from the water by another.

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Heading back towards the ferry port next day, we stopped at the seaside resort of Scheveningen, where we liked Sea Life and its underwater viewing tunnel, seahorse nursery, sharks and dragonfish. We explored a Dutch toy shop, visited a pirate play area, tramped along the wide sands and bought a final batch of waffles and chips. As we sat eating on the seawall, a large thuggish seagull dived on the chips, knocked them over and gobbled them up at top speed — a decisive end to our junk food fiesta.

So the verdict? Holland is nice for a short break with kids and the ferry is a good, relaxing way to go. But look out for marauding seagulls, consider renting some bikes and don’t forget to pack some healthy snacks!