

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

I 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, Sid and Arthur raced around exploring the café, 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 in 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 model 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 the model chocolate factory deliver a genuine Mars Bar. We marvelled at the accurate detail of Utrecht cathedral, the Dutch Houses of Parliament, the lovingly tended bonsai landscapes and the teeny windmills and bulbfields.

In fact, we liked it so much that we considered returning the next day. But, in the end, we headed for Efteling, Holland's largest theme park. Efteling's low-key, mostly low-tech attractions are set in landscaped woodlands and gardens. There are peaceful boat rides on a big lake, an enchanted fairy-tale forest, a dark roller coaster, a monorail, steam locomotive rides, a ride-through fairy



■ Arthur and Sid in Efteling, Holland's largest theme park, which offers landscaped woodlands and gardens, peaceful boat rides, a roller coaster, steam locomotive rides, a ride-through fairy panorama and elaborate playgrounds



panorama and elaborate playgrounds – not to mention pancakes, ice creams, chips and candyfloss.

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 lurching 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 Dr Who games heaven. They'd have sat zapping Weeping Angels all day, except that we were very near the NEMO Science museum and the newly renovated maritime museum and the zoo and the museums and everything...

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 lying alongside billionaires' yachts, and smart little sailboats jostling 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.

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, sea-horse nursery, sharks and

dragonfish. We explored a Dutch toy shop, visited a pirate ship play area, tramped along the wide sands and bought a final batch of waffles and chips. As we sat eating on the seafront, 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!

FACTFILE

■ **Stena Ferries** run twice daily from Harwich to the Hook of Holland from £59 for car and driver. www.stenaline.co.uk, 08447 70 70 70.
 ■ **Bel Air Hotel**, the Hague, www.belairhotel.nl, Johan de Wittlaan 30 2517 JR The Hague.

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 ■ **MintHotel Amsterdam**, www.minthotel.com/our-hotels.amsterdam, Oosterdokseiland 4 1001 RD Amsterdam. Tel: +31(0) 20 26 21 003
 ■ **Efteling Park and Hotel**, www.efteling.co.uk

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