

Sailing Along the Dutch Coast

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[THIJSS BROER]

The North Sea was unwrinkled satin, the estuary of the Westerschelde deserted in the early morning light. In the distance, on the beach at Cadzand, a couple walked, small and dark against the white of the dunes. Behind them rose the apartment buildings of Breskens, like a monkey rock above the coast of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. On the other side of the estuary the glowing dune landscape of the island of Walcheren turned into the serrated silhouette of Vlissingen, the first port city on the Dutch coast. A languid swell rolled past under the ship, the motor rumbled beneath my feet.

In spring 2013, I had cast off for a months-long trip over the North Sea, from Zeeuws-Vlaanderen in the south to Delfzijl in Northeast Groningen. By sailing my own yacht along the coast, I thought, I could investigate the relationship of the Dutch with the sea. The perspective would be different from everything I had read so far about the Netherlands and the sea. I would approach it from the water; become a tourist in my own country.

From the island of Marken, my home at the former Zuiderzee, I had set off through the inland waterways to Zeeland. On my way along the canals I saw the rusting cranes of abandoned shipyards, the silent remains of a disappearing culture, and, right beside them on the waterfront, brand new homes and senior citizens' flats, invariably with a gleaming sloop edged with rope in front of the door. Older couples in nautical striped jumpers drank coffee in the pale spring sunshine, contented behind the sliding glass doors. The waterfront had been taken over by the affluent middle class, Holland as a maritime nation seemed to be no more than a cultivated memory.

Early one morning I sailed through the Hansweert lock into the Westerschelde, alone at sea for the first time. A colossal container ship glided by, belching brown clouds, steaming in the direction of Antwerp. From the west a slow swell rolled towards me, the salt water foamed under the bow. A couple of weeks later I was bobbing about on the North Sea, close to Vlissingen. The journey had begun.



Sailing is outsourced

In the Vlissingen lock the metres-high walls were covered with rugged, razor-sharp oysters, dripping with seawater. I secured the ropes to the rusty chains hanging down from the lock walls. Gratingly the gates opened and the inland harbour appeared. From the Schelde, Vlissingen was a lively sight: town houses and holiday flats along the boulevard, the white-plastered nautical school, pilot boats on their way to the cargo ships on the anchorage. But the inland harbour was a dilapidated void. In the inner harbour fishing boats and old coasters lay rusting in the stagnant water. Immediately opposite the lock, weeds grew on a barren wasteland. The bankruptcy of the De Schelde shipyard in the nineteen-eighties had left a gaping hole in the city.

The monumental building of the former nautical college on the boulevard was deserted. A poster beside the door announced that the Maritiem Instituut De Ruyter, as it is called these days, would evacuate the building completely at the end of the week. In the last four decades the number of students wanting to qualify as maritime officers at the college had dropped from 1400 to fewer than 250. For reasons of efficiency the management had recently decided to dispose of the old building. It was sold to an investment club wanting to set up a care hotel there, an annex to a rehabilitation clinic. How ironic, I thought, as I stepped inside: the place where, for over a century, young Dutch men were educated for Dutch glory is being turned into a convalescent home for the elderly.

Julien Berthier,
Love-love, 2007.

Photo on paper.

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In the fifties, my Uncle Han raised here as a seaman. He sailed over all the seas of the world and went to live in South Africa. In those days the sea was an enticing prospect for a whole generation. The merchant navy grew tempestuously. But by the seventies and eighties there was little left of the romance of sailing, said Uncle Han, home on leave in the Netherlands. The ships were getting bigger, the crews smaller, and Dutch seamen were being replaced by cheaper sailors from China or the Philippines. Countless shipping companies went to the wall. According to the Dutch shipowners' association, KVNR, in 2013 there were fewer than 7500 registered Dutch mariners, including those working in sea fishing and hydraulic engineering. In half a century the percentage of seamen in the Netherlands had dropped by 90 percent. Seamanship was steadily seeping out of the public's experience.

The Netherlands is still considered internationally to be a leading maritime nation. Rotterdam is one of the largest and most efficient transshipment ports in Europe, Boskalis and Van Oord are among the biggest dredging companies in the world and the Netherlands still has maritime expertise. Yet the Dutch have outsourced seamanship; they rarely go to sea themselves.

Uncle Han retired in 1991, after nearly forty years of maritime service. When I spoke to him on the phone, just before my trip along the coast, he said from South Africa: 'Thijs, my boy, have a good trip and take care.' It was as if his voice came from the nineteen-fifties, from a ship somewhere on the ocean.



The Netherlands in 1574:
a realm of islands
(from: Sebastian Münster,
Cosmographia)

The literary sea

In the meantime the sea has gradually seeped out of literature too. On board I had a book that whole generations of Dutchmen read before they went to sea and that was more influential in determining the Netherlands' image of itself as a seafaring nation than any other novel in the twentieth century, if only for its title, *Hollands Glorie* by Jan de Hartog. It was translated into English as *Captain Jan*, but a literal translation of the Dutch title would be 'Dutch Glory'. I opened it on one of those evenings in Vlissingen by the light of a petrol lamp. The novel, a thoroughly Dutch story about a stubborn seaman who manages to wrest himself from the yoke of a profit-hungry shipowner, was published in September 1940 but is still read today. Jan de Hartog's work was part of a long tradition of Dutch sea stories, like Herman Heijermans' *Op hoop van zegen* (*The Good Hope*), Arthur van Schendel's *Het fregatschip Johanna Maria* (*The Frigate Johanna Maria*) and the work of Jan Jacob Slauerhoff, the seafaring poet from Harlingen.

Part of the Dutch's relationship with saltwater was a sacred awe of the sea. Perhaps that was at the core of Dutch glory, I thought that evening in Vlissingen: the sea is the symbol of freedom, but it is also the natural power that sweeps pride from the deck.

After the nineteen-fifties, though, seafaring in literature increasingly slipped into the background. In the seventies there was only one seafaring writer of any significance in the Netherlands, Maarten Biesheuvel. I had read his best-known tales of the sea as a schoolboy: *Opstapper* (Passage worker), for example, *In de bovenkooi* (In the top berth) and *Brommer op zee* (Motorcycle at sea), in which, with great imagination and self-mockery, he told the story of his saltwater adventures.

After Maarten Biesheuvel few Dutch writers chose the sea as their subject. Typical of those who did was Thomas Rosenboom. His *De nieuwe man* (The new man, 2003) tells the story of the taciturn Groninger Niesten who, early in the twentieth century, builds a ship in a water-logged meadow at the Damsterdiep but fails, despite his desperate toil, to succeed in launching the iron colossus on the sea. Rosenboom based his novel on a true story, but chose a different ending. The change is telling. In historical fact the ship went to sea, a hundred years later in literature it remained stuck in a water-logged meadow.

What to do if the water comes?

In the weeks following my visit to Vlissingen I sailed around the former island of Walcheren. Since the Delta works were built, after the great flood of 1953, Zeeland has become a mecca for water sports. Nearly all the gaps between the islands, which used to be filled with swirling sea currents, were closed with heavy dams and a storm surge barrier. Nowhere in the Netherlands could you sail on salt water as light-heartedly as between the islands of Zeeland. That is how it was on that afternoon on the Veerse Meer, too. With wind force 6 from the northwest it was bedlam on the North Sea, but on the inside of the dam scores of sailing boats and surfers skimmed over the smooth water. Festive flags flapped in the wind above the beaches, where in early June the summer seemed to have begun already.

It was difficult to imagine that almost the whole island was still under water in the first year after the war. In October 1944 the Allies had bombarded the dykes to cut off the German bunkers at the coast from the hinterland. The sea surged in twice a day, month in month out, over a disconsolate, sodden landscape full of the rotting corpses of drowned horses and cows. Walcheren was very nearly surrendered to the sea. Heavy storms and the strong currents wore deep channels in the breaches in the dyke, so that it became increasingly urgent to act. With courage born of despair the dyke workers heaved the steel torpedo nets left from the war into the breaches, hurled stones and sandbags on top of them, and then lumps of concrete, clay and mud. The holes were closed just in time for the winter storms of 1946.

When I sailed round the former island, Walcheren was peaceful and prosperous, like the rest of the Netherlands. After the construction of the Delta works the sea stayed put behind the dykes, apparently for good. Dyke monitoring was subsequently professionalised and ceased to be of interest to the public. The Department of Waterways and Public Works, which was still spoken of with awe in the nineteen-fifties, was gutted by cost-cutting. No one was concerned about it. In 2010 'Waterways' even disappeared from the name of the ministry, which was to become 'Infrastructure and Environment'. The danger posed by the water was gradually forgotten.

Now and then someone did pull the alarm bell. Like Minister Melanie Schultz van Haegen, who had discovered in recent years how badly prepared the Netherlands was for a new flood. 'The chances of something going wrong sometime are increasing,' said the Minister, when I spoke to her in her office. 'The sea level is rising, and so is the water in the rivers, while the Netherlands itself is receding. We only need one hole to develop in the dunes with a springtide and a northwesterly storm and a large part of the Netherlands will be under water. But the wider public is barely aware of the threat.'

That is why the Minister was busy with a programme to increase people's ability to help themselves and a campaign to raise awareness, including via the internet. Soon everyone should be able to click on the postcode of their home in a special app to find out what they should do if the water comes.

A thirteen-year-old girl sails solo round the world

On nice summer days at the beach I had often seen little white sails, slowly gliding along the horizon. They had evoked a great feeling of freedom and a vague longing for what lay beyond the horizon. Now I, too, was one of these sails and could see the coast of Holland pass by slowly in the distance. The low line of dunes was interrupted here and there by buildings. I could identify the coastal villages with map and binoculars: Katwijk with the Old Church on the seafront, the white flats of Zandvoort, the beach huts of Bloemendaal.

In front and behind me I could see white triangles in the infinite space: other sailing boats, on their way to the south or the north, like me. In the summer thousands of pleasure boats sail along the Dutch coast, often heading for destinations further afield, in Belgium, France or Scandinavia.

In recent decades water sport has grown explosively in the Netherlands.

Dozens of large marinas have been built along the coast, some of them outside the dykes in salt water, like the marina at IJmuiden, which I was heading for on this summer day.

In 1978 Eilco Kasemier sailed in here with his *Bylgia*, after a round-the-world sailing trip lasting two years. He was the first Dutch solo sailor to round Cape Horn from east to west, against the current and the storms. Fifteen thousand people stood along the banks of the North Sea Canal cheering him, the Queen congratulated him by telegram. After Kasemier there were countless other Dutch sailors who undertook similar dangerous journeys on the seas of the world. But something strange happened. As the number of marine yachtsmen defying death rose, so media interest in marine yachting fell.

When a thirteen-year-old girl, Laura Dekker, announced in 2009 that she wanted to sail solo around the world – with her father's consent – she hit the news all over the planet. Yet in the Netherlands people were interested not in the extraordinary adventure awaiting her at sea, but in the question of whether such a long, dangerous journey would be bad for her development. After months of legal tussles with the youth and family service the judge ruled that she could go after all. Two years later Laura arrived back safe and sound, and radiant with health. As the youngest round-the-world sailor ever she once again hit the news worldwide. But in the Dutch media the news about her journey and arrival were completely obliterated by all the fuss with the youth and family service that had preceded her departure. In the Netherlands we were much more interested in the anxious objections beforehand than in the adventure itself.

Protocol for stranded whales

The waves foamed around the Razende Bol, the sandbank in the sea between Den Helder and Texel. As it lay deserted under the clear sky, just a couple of seals splashed about in the surf at the tide line. But six months earlier the Razende Bol had been the scene of great consternation when a whale was stranded on the sandbar. The twelve-metre-long humpback was even given a name, Johannes. After four days of media commotion Johannes died of natural causes, to the fury of various nature organisations, who felt excluded. On the seafront in Den Helder a silent lamp-lit procession was held for the whale after dark. 'He was my friend,' said emotional participants. 'We are determined this should never happen again.' In the Lower House the animal rights party demanded that there should be a special whale protocol, to prevent there being any more such tragic cases in the future.

When I sailed past the Razende Bol a protocol on beached live great whales had just been made public: eighteen pages of instructions, from the appointment of a stranding coordinator to palliative care if the animal should prove impossible to save. A few days later in the port of Oudeschild on the island of Texel I spoke to Hans Eelman, former deep-water seaman, wreck diver and assistant wreck master on the Razende Bol. 'Sometimes I think we've all gone completely crazy,' he said. 'When I was ten, in the nineteen-fifties, and we found a young seal, we beat it to death and got five guilders for the skin. Now the secretary of state has made a protocol for beached whales.' He tapped his forehead.

A realm of islands

A rolling landscape with traditional Dutch farmhouses and fields full of sheep stretched out from the Hoge Berg, near Oudeschild. On the other side of the Marsdiep I could see the head of North Holland and to the east, in the hazy distance, lay Vlieland. Up on the Hoge Berg I suddenly realised that, from the point of view of the coastal inhabitants, the Netherlands was more a realm of islands than a unitary state. On old maps from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not only the Wadden Islands and the Zeeland Delta but large parts of Holland, too, formed a rugged group of islands on the edge of the continent. As a result of the impoldering in subsequent centuries the Netherlands is now largely joined together. But the realm of islands can still be found in the deeper layers of our culture.

You do not need to dig very deep to find it. The inhabitants of the islands of Zeeland still take very little notice of the provincial government in Middelburg, on the other side of the water. And on Wieringen, which has not been an island since 1924, melancholic songs about island life are still being sung. On the mainland this island feeling is sometimes scorned as being conservative and out of date. But in recent years the number of initiatives that have been rolled out reflecting the singularity of the islands is striking. EVT, Terschelling's own ferry service, crossed swords with the Doeksen shipping company, which had had a monopoly of the ferry service as long as people could remember. And on all the Wadden Islands sustainable energy co-ops have been set up by the inhabitants themselves to allow them to be independent of the big energy companies. The island culture has acquired a new dimension, in the middle of the twenty-first century.

Insignificant at sea

For many Dutch people the sea has faded into the background, but during my trip along the coast I met several coastal inhabitants who were rediscovering it. In Den Helder I spoke to the young skippers of the Tres Hombres who, under the motto 'From A to B without CO2', have been transporting cargo over the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean on their engine-less sailing ship since 2009. In Lauwersoog I went fishing for grey mullet with Jan Geertsema. With his wife Barbara he is breathing new life into small-scale, traditional fishing. They fish with gillnets, a centuries-old, sustainable fishing method in the channels on the Wadden Sea, and have opened a small restaurant in the fishing port where, at the weekend, they serve the fish they have caught. In the same harbour I met Nienke Dijkstra, a theatre maker, who sails over the Wadden Sea in her old fishing boat with overstrung managers and executive secretaries to let them feel how insignificant they are at sea and how chastening that realisation is. 'The sea has largely disappeared from our culture and our everyday experiences,' she said. 'We think we can have anything at any time, and can always control everything ourselves. The sea shows you that that is not so. The tides, the weather - they are all things over which you have no control and to which you have to adjust. Sometimes the sea forces you to carry on and sometimes to take it really easy. The sea is never still. In a storm whole dunes and entire sandbanks can be swept away. It is good to realise that growth and progress are not always certain.'

A flight of loudly cackling geese

In late summer I sailed through the mist over the Dollard, a bay in the Eems Estuary in Northeast Groningen, at the end of the Dutch coast. The sandbars on the two sides crept closer and seemed to float above the mirroring water. Slowly the ship glided through the channel. In front the green of the bank was suddenly visible. The fringe of reeds opened and there lay the Nieuwe Statenzijl lock, solitary between the green dykes. I moored the ship to a couple of large mooring posts with long ropes, because the water would drop three metres with the ebb tide. There was not a human being in sight. Cows grazed on the distant mud flats. A flock of hundreds of geese flew over, cackling loudly, high in the sky.

Late in the evening I heard a door slam in the silence and saw the bent figure of the lockmaster crossing the bridge on his way home. ■

FURTHER READING

Thijs Broer, *Langs de kust. De Nederlanders en de zee*,
Uitgeverij Prometheus/Bert Bakker, Amsterdam, 2014

Thierry De Cordier, *Mer Du Nord, Étude n°1*, 2011

Oil paint and enamel on canvas, 120 x 150 cm

Courtesy the Artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels. Photography © Dirk Pauwels, Gent

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