

FUN IN FRIESLAND



Friesland: home to the Frisian Islands and – during the harshest of winters – the famous Elfstedentocht, is considered to be the most beautiful and peaceful province in the Netherlands. The wide green vistas, the sea, the islands and the old canal-ridden cities and villages all make for a destination quite easy on the eyes. The Frisian people fit their landscape well: hospitable, loyal and with both feet firmly on the ground. On the MICE market Friesland is a relatively new player. That's why Congressbureau Friesland started organising an annual famtrip a few years ago, every edition attracting more interest. This year BBT Online decided to join in on the fun, discovering Leeuwarden and the island of Vlieland.

Text and pictures by Jonathan Ramael

I decided to take the train from Antwerp to the Frisian capital of Leeuwarden. I can safely say it takes a while. No worries though, when I finally arrived at the Westcord WTC Hotel where we would spend the night (www.wtc-hotel-leeuwarden.nl), dinner was just about to be served. It's a big place, with a casino, 143 rooms and 11 meeting rooms (800 pax). The restaurant was an exceptionally beautiful venue: located on the 11th floor with glass all around. While dusk was approaching, all the lights switched on in the city around us, making for a very metropolitan feeling. I would have a good night's sleep.

Leeuwarden by boat

After a tasty breakfast, we stood ready to venture into the city. Sadly, a quick look outside taught us the weather wasn't on our side. Grey and misty it was, with a light rain drizzling on our heads. But what kind of people would we be if we'd let a bit of drizzle keep us inside? No, we would explore Leeuwarden the way it's meant to be explored: on the water of its canals. We grabbed a little bottle of Berenburg (the local liquor) and jumped on a *praam*

(the local vessel) and before we knew it, we were looking at the old town gently pass by. I must say, it's a nice looking city. Lots of old buildings, lots of shops, narrow little tunnels you can take the boats through and several terraces on or near the water, which would no doubt have been busier given nicer weather. Before my group would separate from two others with different programmes, we would take a look at some of the city's nicer venues: Hotel Paleis Het Stadhouders Hof (www.hotelstadhouderlijkhof.nl), Natuurmuseum Fryslân (www.natuurmuseumfryslan.nl), and het Fries Museum (www.friesmuseum.nl): a brand new regional museum with various meeting facilities and a collection of 180,000 objects.

Off to the Islands

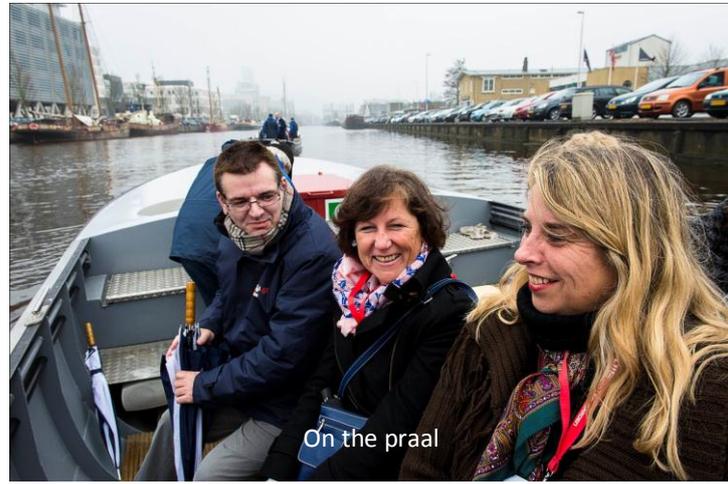
Our journey across the Waddenzee was a comfortable one. The ferry we used was quite spectacular, with an outside upper deck, and a lower one filled with a bar, a restaurant, a shop and entertainment (www.rederij-doeksen.nl). The entire crossing took no more than 90 minutes. Vlieland is a long and narrow island, with a surface area of 36

km². Only 1,116 people live here. Oost-Vlieland, the only village on the island, is little more than one main street with some shops, bars and places to rent a bicycle. Yes, bicycles come in very handy, since 'outlanders' are forbidden to drive cars. After some healthy pedalling, we reached the place where we would spend the night. WestCord Hotel Seeduyn (www.hotel-seeduyn-vlieland.nl) is a big venue right on the beach, boasting 95 rooms and 56 apartments, a brand new wellness centre, seven meeting rooms and a beach pavilion. Before we would start another delicious dinner, we went for an active beach visit, kiting and practising our bow and arrow skills. Not enough wind to use the kite buggies though, which was not so bad in hindsight, since I prefer my bones to remain intact.

The world's smallest museum

Another grey morning greeted us (which is quite odd, since Vlieland normally is one of the sunniest places in the Netherlands). Today's pre-lunch activity involved driving all the way to the other end of the island, to what is called 'the Sahara of the North'. Vlieland, few people know it, is home to one of Europe's only military domains where live ammo is still used. Vliehors, the official name of this place, is a completely deserted stretch of empty beach, with the occasional burnt-out tank used as a target for heavy bombs. Some nights in Oost-Vlieland can be shaky indeed, but the village is well-compensated by the army for this inconvenience. We would not ride our bikes through the sand of course; instead we would hop on a weird combination of a tractor, a tank and a yellow submarine called the Vliehors Expres (www.vliehorsexpres.nl), off to visit the world's smallest museum and hopefully spot one of the island's 500 seals getting there.

No seals in sight though. We'd been very lucky if we saw one, since the mist got even thicker, giving the empty landscape an impressive eerie, hollow feel. The 'museum' in question was a real treat. It's no more than a little cabin, previously built for sailors washed ashore, giving them a place to rest and stay warm until rescue workers reached them. Now it serves as a museum for beachcombers (*strandjutters*) showcasing an exceptional collection of weird objects found on the beach. False teeth, jarred-up dead animals, toys, pacifiers, and a lot of messages in bottles



On the praal



Our city guide, disguised as a Dutch king of yore



Vliehors Expres



Beachcombers Museum

(which are, by the way, always answered). The person driving the *Expres*, *Aant van der Veen*, is a beachcomber himself, and he will tell you a story or two if given the chance. Normally, if you find something on the beach, it's yours by law. Things are somewhat different if the stuff washed ashore is an entire industrial container filled with hard disks or cigarettes. Exactly what happened in January of 1993, when thousands and thousands of cigarettes filled the beach and mysteriously disappeared. Even now, whole packages are still being found during renovation projects in old buildings. The hut can also be used as a wedding venue: perfect for those who want to keep it small or don't have a lot of friends. You can carve your name on the wooden beam in the ceiling, as a testimony to your eternal love.

A high-speed race back to shore

Our second boat-trip back to the mainland would prove somewhat faster. We took the 'Ocean King' back to shore, one of several rescue boats reaching a speed of up to 60 km/h. And lo and behold, while we were soaring past the coastline, we spotted a sandbank where a couple of seals were enjoying a rest, seemingly waving at us with their floppy tails: a perfect end to a short but interesting first impression of Friesland.

Friesland surely is something different. It's a new destination for the MICE market, but it already has more than enough facilities and venues to host the larger events. The islands and the countryside should provide organisers with enough possibilities for several surprising and active incentives. On the other hand: for a 'close by' destination, it's pretty far away – more than 4 hours by intercity train, and a good 3 by car. That might deter some Belgian incentive organisers planning a bus trip.

Once arrived though, you get a real feeling of 'being out there'. Whether it's the good honest people, the wide panoramas, the sea wind messing up your hair or the feeling of space you get when you're on one of the islands. Friesland gets to you, and makes you think you're much further away than you actually are. We will be back, for sure.

For more info on Friesland, visit:
www.congresbureau friesland.nl.



Crossing the Waddenzee



On the rescue boat