

Friesland: Destination Report

Being Dutch doesn't mean you know your whole country. When the invitation came for a famtrip to Friesland, I did not hesitate. I've seen all five continents, but Friesland I must admit with a blush of embarrassment, only superficial and slightly. Okay, one of the most beautiful women on the planet, model Doutzen Kroes is from there, and Olympic hero Epke Zonderland* as well. The province has its own pastry and herb booze Beerenburg and when the ice is thick enough they organize this supermega-event called Elfstedentocht within 24 hours, attracting zillions of skaters, but that's about all I know. Oops, and they speak a different language... There was one name in the offered program though, that instantly influenced my decision to say yes. *Lauswolt*. Just keep on reading and you will understand why!

Text by Ellen van Ree

Friesland is a versatile destination, especially for those looking for a more active programme or incentive. The islands that belong to Friesland, like Vlieland en Ameland, offer a magical decor for walking, biking and activities like looking for oysters, blowkarting and boat trips. A good asset is that it takes only a relatively short ride, max 30 minutes, to find gems of venues and business opportunities on the province's mainland. The natural environment is at times simply stunning – all that water! – and houses a number of interesting venues of all types. Combine all of this with proximity and accessibility and you have a great destination for both sophisticated meeting venues and outdoor facilities for sporty or relaxing teambuilding sessions. At the kick-off at the Westcord WTC (www.wtc-hotel-leeuwarden.nl), the Commissioner of our newly appointed King, Mr. Jorritsma, spoke enthusiastically about his province, of course mentioning the famous annual cultural festival Oerol, The XXL event, and stressed out those typical Frisian DNA phenomena like



purity, authenticity, hospitality and the down-to-earth mentality of hard work. Okay, let's experience all of this or at least get a glimpse of it!

First, after a short bus ride from Leeuwarden, we visited a stunning, photogenic small village, called Grou. We hopped on a praam, a local boat, to join the company of an excellent storyteller and fisherman called Ale de Jager. He took us around the Pikmeer, roughly translated as 'Dicklake'. Another nice concept was to 'Go with the eel fisher' (www.metdepalingvissermee.nl). We learned about all sorts and sizes of fish and inspected his nets, although there wasn't much of a catch. We embarked at Friesland's oldest hotel (over 150 years old). Hotel-restaurant Oostergoo (www.oostergoo.nl) is a cute, curiously decorated small hotel, offering a nice informal ambiance for small meeting groups. Here we had eel for lunch, which was very thoughtful because we were wet-wet-wet, and tasted a small glass of homebrewed lemongenever that warmed our frozen toes. Also nice for small groups is the art gallery of painter



Gosse Koopmans (www.galeriekoopmans.nl) in Earnewâld. In this typical building you can have painting workshops, surrounded by the typical smell of wood, because wood artist Wester uses this creative hub as well.

For bigger groups there is in the heart of Friesland, in the triangle between Leeuwarden, Heerenveen and Drachten, the nearly 4,000-acre fenland of National Parc The Alde Feanen. (www.np-aldefeanen.nl) The natural beauty here is amazing, with about 450 plant species and over 100 sorts of birds. An inspiring place for meetings. The fresh air will make for fresh ideas in one of several meeting rooms. Accommodation here is in bungalows.

Another typical incentive hotel, used by lots of international and national football clubs, is Tjaarda Oranjewoud! a Golden Tulip member. (www.tjaarda.nl) They offer a separate complex in a calm, leafy, wooded area, with a maximum capacity of 500 people, for all sorts of business activities like meetings, presentations, conferences, seminars, training and anniversaries. It's all possible.

When you think of Friesland what is the first thing that pops up in your mind? Yep. Water. Second: Lakes. Watersport. But also the distinctive culture, history and traditions. And believe me, they are blessed, over there in the north. We went back in time with a nice competitive activity. Typical for Friesland, are the enormous black horses they have. We had the joy and fun, after an explanation about all the layers of traditional costume cloths, hat, lace and jewelry she was wearing, to climb up on an antique coach and go for an old-fashioned game of ringsteken; 'ring stabbing'. Sitting next to the man with the high hat who managed the horses, holding a sort of a lance in my hand concentrating on trying to squeeze it in a ring turned out to be quite 'modern fun' for us spoiled

meeting planners. But the main attraction is Friesland is to indulge yourself in all the possibilities the water offers. A Highlight was our short visit to the Skûtsjemuseum 'De Stripe'. (www.houtenskutsje.nl). Welcomed by music, an accordionist playing melancholic songs, the strong Beerenburg offered instantly cheered us all up. Inside this interesting small museum you taste, smell and feel the old skipper life around 1900, when daily skûtsjes transported peat mound mud, manure and sand. Cycling through the lovely landscape and boarding on a real wooden 'skutsje' where we all had a duty on board, crisscross sailing on the rippling water, was a soothing experience.



It was on my bucket list for ages, and this time I grasped the opportunity to spend, regretfully only one night, at this exceptionally beautiful venue: stately mansion Lauswolt. (www.bilderberg.nl/hotels/landgoed-lauswolt/) Dating back to the 17th century, the estate is currently being used as a hotel. The restaurant, called De Heeren van Harinxma, had a Michelin star between 2001 and 2006. Lauswolt, a name that tickles my imagination.

Didn't our government hold secret negotiations here because of the privacy in Lauswolt's Koetshuis/coach house? Doesn't movie star Rutger Hauer also live in Beetsterzwaag so you can - if he is there - make eye contact? Doesn't the chopper of our Royal family use their heli-platform and is their enormous front garden not a gorgeous 18 hole golf course? Yes! This heaven-on-earth-place lies only 140 km from Amsterdam, my hometown! Utter luxury and style in a serene setting. The combination of facilities makes this hotel one of the finest in the Netherlands and for a fact: the

best of Friesland. Juicy details: every morning the newspaper lies under your suite door, breakfast is served out and there is also a buffet. They cook delightful dishes with regional products and the staff has an amazing eye and ear for... service. Also not bad at all: they use La Prairie products in the spa. With 59 very comfortable rooms and 6 well equipped day-lit meeting rooms, groups can have stylish fun, like a lunch in a cowshed, a picnic with the forester and for more dramatic scenes: servants and entertainment in an opera atmosphere during dinner.

For two full and busy days I had the opportunity to explore Friesland and I felt like I was in a completely different world, sort of abroad. A tourist in my homeland, a newish experience. What a lot of diverse possibilities for the MICE-market they offer. First I wanted to keep that a secret, but I changed my mind. I generously share them here with you. My first proper official visit and impression begs for a lot more in the near future. Opportunity knocks. Recently Leeuwarden beat the town of Maastricht, and was elected as European Capital of Culture in 2018. I am sure the Frisians will cook up a nice program for visitors. So MICE-market, keep your ears and eyes open.

* Top athlete and Dutch Lord of the Rings Epke Zonderland can be booked for a clinic at the Abe Lenstra stadium in Heerenveen.

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