

Harriet's Spa (solo travel test) Report

January 29, 2001

Dear Friends and some Family, but not all the family that's fit to print:

I went, I saw, I definitely didn't conquer. I enjoyed and rested and was fine by myself and don't need to go to any more spas for a while. I strode calmly and sometimes a little limply, around the halls, pools, co-ed locker rooms, and garden paths of the spa in Nieuweschaans. The limpness came from high relaxation levels due to two massages and three ventures into the thermal baths.

The best part: the dessert buffet at Friday's complimentary dinner. About eight choices and all with wonderful Dutch whipped cream (slagroom). The worst part: opening the door onto the Sauna Plein world and boldly strolling in before realizing this world was not MY world and I should get the hell out of there!

The inbetween parts: the massage, the baths, the reading, the watching TV, the buffet meals, I love a buffet. Life is always a range of enjoyment, right? I really enjoyed my walk in the nature behind the hotel, nestled against the cardboard factory next door, even though it was raining and 34 degrees.

Let me elaborate, using some notes I took during the weekend.

The Kuurhotel Fontana is run by Golden Tulip, which seems kind of like a nice European version of Hyatt only much smaller and with European taste which means the plastic wood furniture really seems like wood and the deluxe sheets really are deluxe. But it does not mean the spa bathrobes are large enough for me. But it does mean the towels are large enough for me. But it does not mean the room is non-smoking. But it does mean you get a balcony and you can go out on it and have all the fresh air you want. But it does not mean there are 50 channels on the TV, but it does mean you can use the minibar and not get price gouged. And there was real art on the walls and it was pleasant. But there were no other Americans anywhere, and English only overheard once out of about 200 people observed in the spa and hotel over the weekend.

This Kuurhotel is not in Groningen. It's one hour east in Nieuweschaans, a town of about 200 people, fifty meters from Germany on the far north of Holland. But I had to change trains in Groningen, so I took a pause there. Groningen is a big city, the capital of the province where Holland gets all its natural gas. There's a large and ancient university and a five year old monster of a modern art museum, luckily directly across from the train station.

I went there, to the Groninger (museum) and in 45 minutes I saw everything on display! I saw the three buildings which were designed by four or more different architects, they each got a level or section. The architects designed the displays

and interiors also, including dictating some disturbing paint combinations for the interior walls. Colored gallery walls reminded me of Cynthia and her colors at the Arts Center. She's so cutting edge.

There was this fashion display, in the dark, with mannequins wearing floor length tunic tents with some superstructure underneath so the tunic shoulders started above their ears and just their forehead and eyes peaked out the neck. These were in odd stiff fabrics, including glitter which I loved, but they looked like traveling, wearable, closets. One tunic was sheer fabric and filled with helium balloons so it bloussoned around the mannequins ears. That was an interesting silhouette. I think Becky Weeks would have loved it.

There were lots of strange angles and outside had elevated ramps and round buildings and lots of use of one inch ceramic tile in 1960's psychedelic vibrating colors. I met a friendly guard who willingly answered my questions, so kind! I commented that the most interesting parts by far were the weird display systems and weird buildings. "Everyone says that" he replied with pride?!

Looking back from the supposed-to-be stunning Groninger (museum) to the real life stunning train station, I wondered why so many Dutch train stations are so elaborately handsome and so similar, with almost victorian colored brick detailing and charming little onion domes. Tada! They were probably built at the same time! When trains first came along as public transport! In the 1800's sometime probably! Feels like a puzzle piece fitting, but of course it's just my guess.

My first evening at the spa, I did the thermal bath and then had my 30 minute massage. After laying on the bed reading a while, I went to dinner and enjoyed the aforementioned dessert buffet. For dinner I had choice one: salmon on sauteed leeks with one huge side pan of mashed potato puffs and one huge side pan of brocolli with hollandaise. I've never seen mashed potato puffs before, maybe it's a German thing. They were like potato cream puffs? Hard to describe. Pretty good though!

Back to the thermal baths late in the evening to relax for sleep, but it didn't work, so I watched a few hours of TV. I'd already finished my first and by far best book just before I went to the baths that night.

At the breakfast buffet in the morning I realized there was this very subtle muzak, almost unhearable, and if you could hear it, you would be sorry. It was like hypnosis, conveying calm unless you noticed it and then you would be troubled to realize someone was purposefully hypnotizing you with embarrassing sentimentality that even Burt Baccarach would be ashamed of. Once I noticed, I actually laughed out loud at this one tacky piano arpeggio. This was seriously secretive torture, with the subtle quietness of the muzak.

Decisions, decisions. Should I lay in bed some more? Go for a bike ride in the rain? Walk? Watch TV? Go to the baths? Read the not-absorbing book for study group at Church?

You can guess what I picked, yep, I'm not embarrassed. I watched TV. THEN I went for a walk when it appeared to have stopped raining. Wrong, it was still raining, just less drops per minute, but each one was heavy and full of water! Imagine that! I wasn't soaked though after my 40 minutes out there, just pleasantly refrigerated on all my exterior surfaces, my roomy thighs, my cheerful cheeks. And I got to walk on the earth!

I'm so used to being in Delft center entirely paved in bricks or in Delftse Houd (the park) on a paved bike path on my bike. It was great to walk on the earth, but I got a substantial amount of mud on my white nurses shoes which I kindly transferred to the bedspread the next day, accidentally.

The earth I walked on was over the river, a small path through dried grass taller than me, but not super thick, so not claustrophobic. There were ditches of water (of course, it's Holland) and trees, but all planted in the last 30 years.

First I walked through formal lawns and pond on wavy brick patterned path. Then I saw a huge wooden guillotine on a rise through the spindly clusters of bare trees with no undergrowth that pass for woods. Curious, I went to see. Up some steps, I realized I was way below sea level.

There was a dyke with a single cantilevered bridge, completely in wood! What an elegant sight. So potentially traditional. The guillotine was a very tall wood post doorway supporting the high cantilever, a square "U" of huge wood beams with a wooden closet built into the bottom of the square "U", high over my head and probably full of rocks to provide the cantilever weight. There were cute wooden doors latched shut clearly and they faced the ground while at rest. Course, I didn't have to stand directly under the weight box, so I moved.

The wide river below was deep and pale golden brown. It was across the river that I had the walking on earth treat, and thought to myself how convenient for naturists visiting the spa that this tall grass grew out here, one could be private outdoors, probably rare in such a populated, flat, and un-wooded country as Holland. Maybe they marketed the spa specially for that? But no one was naked in the tall grass that day, probably because it was freezing raining. Humm.

The spa does seem to have a good bit of lover traffic. Everywhere there are cuddly couples, as well as a smattering of children!? surprise to me, and old people. Hard to tell if there are many solo visitors since it's hard to see in the steam of the thermal bath and the minerals cause incredible floating and the waters are moving around so for me and probably the others it's hard to stay in one place including next to your travel companion if you had one. I offer as proof

to this the FACT that there are hand railings along the edges of the pools and one can and does hold on!

Notable is the entrance to the thermal bath. There's one huge bath, made out of connecting rectangles, each rectangle easily the size of a nice country club swimming pool. The entrance to the pool is inside the co-ed locker room. There are matching wide shallow steps leading down into the water and once you're into the neck deep water, the pool immediately exits the building threw a hole in the wall. This is the ONLY way to exit the building, to swim through the hole, through those plastic hanging down curtains like they have on the freezer section at the grocery store. I felt like a gallon of milk being shelved as I walk/paddled through the curtain to the freezing outside air. And you know what? Those plastic strips are surprisingly heavy!

I quickly realized I needed to hold the handrails lining the inside edge of the pool surface, or I would float away. Interspersed throughout the connecting pools were a variety of fountains, showers, and spray sculptures that could be lounged in or near if one wanted.

Since it was freezing out, the pool steamed and the ensuing fog made for an interesting experience. Not only was I traveling alone for the first time, I was having a recreational experience alone, with no one near me speaking a language I could eavesdrop on, and it was foggy and warm and relaxing, and oddly solitary in the crowds in the meandering links of pools.

I found the co-ed locker room particularly "european" and outside my comfort zone. But I could put on my hotel robe and hold it as close to closed as it went as I walked the long corridors to my cozy room. And of course my TV.

So, my spa vacation.