

## Of Windmills and Tulips

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### Windmills

While the windmill, a device used to harness the power of wind, was not invented by the Dutch, it was used by these people to power the water pumps that have literally created their homeland since the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries-----by building dykes and pumping



water from the inland marshes over them to the sea or river beyond. Since only about 50% of the land is more than one metre above sea-level ( and one-third of the total land below it), half of the land of the Netherlands will be theoretically under water during high tide. Since windmills were so closely related to the very existence of its people, there is no wonder that they have become an iconic sight in the landscape of this country. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there were as many as 10,000 windmills in the Netherlands, and the figure has now dwindled to 1,000. Perhaps the best place to see these water-pumping windmills is a place called Kinderdijk which, with its 19 windmills( all still functioning), was declared a UNESCO heritage site in 1997. In the old days, these mills helped to keep the land around the area dry. These days, their function has been replaced by a modern electric pumping station(which, incidentally, still use huge cock-screw pumps working on principles first described by Archimedes over 2000 years ago).|



Visiting Kinderdijk is a good day trip from Rotterdam as it is only 16 km from there. The best way to explore the area is by foot or bike travelling a 7 km round trip along the main-path. The first windmill you encounter has in fact been converted into a museum and it is working all year round ( well, for the sake of the tourists, no doubt). It can be quite crowded on weekends, but if you walk past the first 2 windmills, you would have left 90% of the tourists behind, leaving you to enjoy the serene scenery with its wild-flowers and the occasional bird-calls. On a sunny day, it makes a very pleasant walk.

## Tulips

Tulips in fact originated as a wildflower in Turkey ( “tulip” is Turkish for turban) , and was imported to Europe in the mid-1500s. The Dutch subsequently caught the “fever” as the flower flourished in the Netherlands with its cool climate and fertile delta soil. What follows is the first “bubble” of commodity-trading in the world’s economic history --- the Tulipmania . Between 1636 and 1637 , speculation in tulip bulbs hit such a feverish pitch that a single bulb of some rare variety fetched more than 10 years’ worth of the average worker’s wages. The inevitable crash that came in February 1637 should not be too unfamiliar to the modern stock-traders in Hongkong who witnessed the spectacular crash in 1973 ( and several more since then !!). These days, the Dutch is the most important player in the world of tulip cultivation . Each year, the Netherlands exports some 3 billion tulip dry bulbs and 2 billion cut flowers to all over the world, cornering over 80% of the market in Europe and North America . During spring time, tulips in a myriad of colours burst in sight all over the country . There is no better place to see the flowers than the Keukenhof Garden ( 45 minutes car ride from Amsterdam) . With its 32 hectares showcasing some 7 million bulbs with a total of 800 varieties of tulips plus other flowers daffodils, iris, chrysanthemums and hyacinths, Keukenhof Garden is simply an all-out assault on the visual senses. Words simply would not be enough to describe the explosion of colours . I will just let some photos do it for me .





### **Travel tips to the Keukenhof Garden**

1. The garden is only open for 8 weeks each year, usually from the middle of March to the middle of May . The best time to see tulips in full-bloom is from the last 2 weeks in April to the first week of May . One can watch the progress of the tulip bloom on the garden official website.
2. With over 0.8 million visitors packed in these 2 weeks, one really needs some good strategy to allow one a reasonably enjoyable visit. First, do pick a day when the sun is shining. Secondly, avoid the weekends. Thirdly, buy your ticket on line and print it out and go there half an hour before opening time. Upon entry, make you way quickly to the lake area(while resisting the temptation to click your camera at the beautiful flower patches along the way) , find a bench to sit on and just enjoy the flowers, the pond and the swans in tranquility for half an hour before finding some flower patches with myriad of colors to take your photos.
3. Make sure you have enough memories in your camera and a back- up battery.
4. Bring a picnic if possible so as not to waste your time queuing up for some barely edible junk food in the garden.

