

Tiptoeing through tulips on a cruise in the Netherlands and Belgium



Keukenhof Gardens is a popular excursion on Tulip Time cruises. The annual flower show features more than seven million tulips and other spring bulbs. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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By Katherine Rodeghier

In Northern Europe, the river cruise season begins in spring with one of the most popular itineraries focused on Holland's favorite flower, the tulip. From mid-March into early May,

cruise lines send their ships to the Low Countries of Belgium and the Netherlands to catch the wave of bright blooms chasing away the dark days of winter.

“I always wanted to see the tulips,” said Naperville resident Kay Grossmann. “It’s been on my bucket list.”

Grossmann was aboard the AmaSerena on a weeklong Tulip Time cruise last spring, her third voyage with AmaWaterways. Unlike her previous cruises on the Danube and Rhine, this voyage didn’t stick to one or two major rivers. Instead, ships in the Low Countries navigate a web of waterways as the Rhine splits into a delta on its way to the North Sea.

On AmaWaterways, excursions are included in the fare, a perk Grossmann said makes it a good value. Several choices are offered in each port covering a range of interests and activity levels. Among the most popular trips is a visit to Keukenhof Gardens. Seven million flowering bulbs cover its 80 acres, most of them tulips in a rainbow of hues. Founded in 1949 as a flower show allowing growers to show off their bulbs, it now draws 1.4 million visitors from around the world for its limited run. In 2025 it will be open March 20 to May 11.

In most of the Netherlands, bloom season begins in mid-March with daffodils and other spring bulbs before tulips poke their heads above ground in backyard flower beds. Tulips usually reach peak bloom around mid-April depending on the weather and the effects of climate change. At Keukenhof, however, visitors see tulips every day it’s open. Its 40 gardeners plant three layers of bulbs in flower beds, a technique called “lasagna planting,” to ensure some are always in bloom.



Bruges, Belgium, has a high number of buildings dating back to medieval times. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Tour guides pass along the fun fact that tulips are not native to the Netherlands. They first grew in Central Asia, what is now Kazakhstan, and spread to Turkey where the flower was named for the shape of Turkish turbans. In the 1500s, the bulbs made it to the Habsburg court in Vienna, then to Holland where the Dutch went crazy. The bulbs were in such demand by the 17th century, some people sold their homes to buy them. When the tulip mania bubble burst, fortunes were lost and tulip farming did not resume in the Netherlands until the early 1900s.

On its 2025 Tulip Time cruises, AmaWaterways offers an excursion to Flevoland’s vibrant tulip fields to see how tulips are grown. The Netherlands produces 10 billion tulip bulbs annually, 70% of the world’s output, with most going to the U.S. and Japan.

Tulip cultivation, and the growing of most crops, wouldn’t be possible without the Dutch genius of reclaiming land from the North Sea. More than half of this country, about the size of

Maryland, lies below sea level. In 1954, 1,836 people died when a winter storm breached the dams and dikes holding back the sea. Their story is told in an excursion to a flood museum. Exhibits explain how the Delta Works construction project was created to prevent such disasters through a system of new dams, dikes, levees, locks and storm-surge barriers. Begun in 1954 and completed in 1997, Delta Works was named one of the seven wonders of the modern world by the American Society of Civil Engineers. An excursion includes a photo stop at the Oosterschelde Kering, the largest storm surge barrier.



Nineteen windmills are preserved in Kinderdijk, a UNESCO World Heritage site. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Along with tulips, windmills are an iconic feature of the Netherlands. The country once had 13,000 windmills. Just 1,100 remain, including 19 preserved at Kinderdijk, a UNESCO World Heritage site and another popular stop on Tulip Time cruises. Guides share the old saying: “God built the Earth, but the Dutch built the Netherlands” and explain how farmers drained land by using windmills to pump water out of ditches into canals. Most of Kinderdijk’s 18th-century windmills still function, thanks to volunteer millers who let visitors peek inside.

Tulip Time cruises include several city tours. In Amsterdam, where cruises begin and end, canal boats take visitors down a labyrinth of houseboat-lined canals, under some of the historic area’s 1,281 bridges and past 1,550 monumental buildings, including the Anne Frank house (hard-to-get admission tickets not included).

On a guided walk in Rotterdam, passengers learn this major European port was heavily bombed during World War II. Much of its architecture is modern, such as the 58 bright yellow Cube Houses, the work of architect Piet Blom, and Market Hall, shaped like an upside-down “U.” At a food court inside, passengers can sample one of the Netherlands’ major exports: cheese.



AmaSerena passengers visit and taste samples in a chocolate shop in Antwerp, Belgium. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

More tastings await in Belgium. In Antwerp passengers sample three of the country's famous foods: chocolates, beer and waffles. In Ghent, AmaWaterways passengers may choose to visit a chocolate maker's shop and try their hand at making a praline. In all Belgian ports, there are ample opportunities to buy a paper cone full of its famous French fries, though the locals insist they be called Belgian fries.

Walking tours in Belgian cities are a whirlwind of castles, cathedrals and medieval architecture. Antwerp's Het Steen Castle, dating from 1200, rises on the riverfront. Brabo Statue in Grote Markt Square depicts a Roman centurion slaying a giant, a legend dear to the city. Ghent's canal-side architecture includes the Castle of the Counts and St. Bavo's Cathedral. Bruges delights visitors with horse-drawn carriages, cobblestone streets, churches and canals. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Bruges was not bombed during World War II, so many buildings from the Middle Ages still stand.



The bronze statue of a towering giant stands outside Het Steen Castle in Antwerp, Belgium. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

AmaWaterways ships carry bikes for guided tours, but passengers are free to check one out to tour on their own while in port. On board, they can attend fitness classes in the lounge and on the sundeck, which on AmaSerena has a putting green, lounge chairs, walking track, giant chess set and heated pool. The ship also has a fitness room, library, gift shop, hairstyling salon and massage facilities.

As on most river cruises, meals are included. AmaWaterways throws in complimentary wine, beer and soft drinks at lunch and dinner, an hour of pre-dinner cocktails and sparkling wine at breakfast. Meals are a mix of continental cuisine and local fare in the main restaurant.

Reservations are required for dinners in The Chef's Table, a private dining room where chef prepares a complimentary seven-course tasting menu paired with wine.

AmaWaterways will have five ships accommodating from 156 to 162 passengers on Tulip Time cruises in 2025. AmaSerena's decks have eight categories of staterooms. All are outside staterooms (balconies in most) with mini-fridge, internet access, movies and TV.

If you go

AmaWaterways seven-night Tulip Time cruises depart Amsterdam from March 13 to May 5, 2025. Fares start at \$2,560 per person on discounted early-season departures. A two-night pre-cruise land package in Amsterdam costs an additional \$830 per person, but during WAVE Season, ending March 31, the package is complimentary on six March departures with promo code FREELAND-PRE. The free package can be combined with AmaWaterways' fixed-price airfare offer. Guests unable to extend their vacation may take up to a \$2,000 per stateroom discount depending on departure date. Terms and conditions apply. (800) 626-0126 or amawaterways.com/freeland/2025#holland-belgium.

• *Information for this article was gathered during a media cruise sponsored by AmaWaterways.*

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