

Grand Circle Cruise Line®

THE LEADER IN VALUE AND WORLDWIDE DISCOVERY SINCE 1958

Your Grand Circle Travel Planning Guide



Holland & Belgium in Springtime
2026

Grand Circle Cruise Line®

347 Congress Street, Boston, MA 02210

Dear Traveler,

I am thrilled that you are considering exploring the world with Grand Circle Cruise Line. There are so many wonderful destinations to discover, and the itinerary described inside is a perfect way to fulfill a travel dream.

When you cruise with us, you can expect an award-winning experience aboard our privately owned river ship. In addition to the convenience of unpacking just once, you will also enjoy the warm hospitality provided by our friendly, English-speaking crew, coupled with camaraderie of your fellow American travelers.

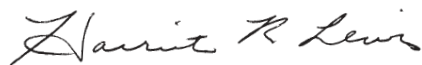
In addition, up to four **expert, local Program Directors** will accompany you from the beginning of your trip to the end. Assigned to a group of 38 travelers on average, these passionate leaders are ready and eager to share their homeland and insights as only a local can. Whether it is recommending their favorite restaurant, connecting travelers with people and culture, or providing the best ways to enhance your leisure time, your Program Director will be available to take care of all the details and ensure that you have a fun and carefree travel experience. You can also rely on the seasoned team at our regional office, who are ready to help 24/7 in case any unexpected circumstances arise.

Throughout your journey, you will experience Exclusive Discovery Series events designed to connect you with local people and culture. From sharing traditional fare and lively conversation during Home-Hosted Visits, to discussing Controversial Topics impacting everyday life, you will gain an intimate understanding of your destination, not just a superficial view. And if you choose to travel solo, you will enjoy all these cultural experiences at an unmatched value, with our low-cost Single Supplements—just one of the reasons we continue to be the leader in solo travel.

Plus, you can put your own personal stamp on your trip, like the **87% of our travelers who customize their experience**. Perhaps you will choose to see more of your destination by adding an optional trip extension to your itinerary. You can also arrive a few days early to explore independently and get acclimated, customize your air itinerary, and more.

I hope you find this Travel Planning Guide helpful. If you have any further questions, do not hesitate to contact one of our Travel Counselors at **1-800-221-2610**.

Warm regards,



Harriet R. Lewis
Chair
Grand Circle Cruise Line

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Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Holland & Belgium in Springtime

Belgium: Antwerp, Ghent | **The Netherlands:** Veere, Kinderdijk, Dordrecht, Rotterdam, Enkhuizen, Amsterdam

12 days starting from \$3,595

including airfare

Single Supplement: \$995

For departure dates & prices, visit
www.gct.com/shh2026pricing

Celebrate the vivid beauty and renewed energy of the springtime season of the Low Countries on this enchanting Belgium and Holland River Cruise, with 10 nights onboard the **162-passenger M/S/ River Aria** or **140-passenger M/S River Harmony**. From the manicured lanes of the world-famous Keukenhof Flower Park, to the Windmills of Kinderdijk—a UNESCO World Heritage Site—you'll experience all the springtime splendor this region has to offer at an unbeatable value.

IT'S INCLUDED

- International airfare, airport transfers, government taxes, fees, and airline fuel surcharges, unless you choose to make your own air arrangements
- **Accommodations** for 10 nights aboard a private river ship with wireless Internet access in all common areas and cabins
- **ALL meals:** 10 breakfasts, 9 lunches, 10 dinners—plus all onboard house beer, wine, and soft drinks
- **10 included tours** with personal headsets and **2 Exclusive Discovery Series events**—Home-Hosted *Op de Koffie* • Tulip farm visit
- **Local Program Directors, a Grand Circle Cruise Line exclusive:** Our dedicated experts are with you and your group of 38-45 travelers from beginning to end to provide an insider's knowledge and perspective
- **Gratuities** for local guides and motorcoach drivers
- **All port charges**
- **Baggage handling** for 1 piece of luggage per person, including tips
- **5% Frequent Traveler Credit** toward your next trip

Prices are accurate as of the date of this publishing and are subject to change.



ITINERARY SUMMARY

1 • Depart U.S.

2-3 • Antwerp, Belgium

Embark ship
Port Antwerp

4 • Ghent

Port Ghent

5-8 • The Netherlands

Ports Veere • Kinderdijk • Dordrecht •
Rotterdam • Enkhuizen

9-11 • Amsterdam

Port Amsterdam

12 • Amsterdam • Return to U.S.

Disembark ship

WHAT TO EXPECT

1 2 3 4 5 Easy

Group Size

- This trip has a group size of 38-45 travelers with our local Program Director exclusive to Grand Circle

Pacing

- 11 days, with 10 nights aboard our privately owned 140-passenger M/S *River Harmony* or 162-passenger M/S *River Aria*

Physical Requirements

- Participate in 3-4 hours of physical activities each day (additional optional activities may be offered)
- Walk 1-3 miles unassisted within a time frame of 1-2 hours, including stairs and cobblestones
- Agility and balance for boarding small canal boats, often involving steep, slippery stairs
- Not accessible for travelers using wheelchairs or scooters
- Travelers using walkers, crutches, or other mobility aids must travel with a companion who can assist them throughout the trip

- We reserve the right for Program Directors to restrict participation, or in some circumstances send travelers home, if their limitations impact the group's experience

Terrain & Transportation

- Uneven walking surfaces, including unpaved paths, hills, stairs, and cobblestones
- Travel by 140- to 162-passenger river ship, 47-seat coach, and canal boat
- Changes in water-level depths may require adjustments to your itinerary, including the Amsterdam canal cruise

Climate

- Spring daytime temperatures range from 48-70°F
- March weather can be unpredictable and change quickly
- Brisk breezes should be anticipated in Holland

MAXIMIZE YOUR DISCOVERIES & VALUE

OPTIONAL EXTENSIONS

all with FREE Single Supplements

Bruges, Belgium

PRE-TRIP: 3 nights from \$995

Amsterdam, the Netherlands

POST-TRIP: 3 nights from \$1,245

Holland & Belgium in Springtime

YOUR DETAILED ITINERARY

BEGIN YOUR TRIP WITH AN OPTIONAL PRE-TRIP EXTENSION

3 nights in *Bruges, Belgium*

Day 1 Depart U.S.

Day 2 Brussels, Belgium • Bruges

Day 3 Bruges

Day 4 Bruges • Optional Flanders Fields tour

Day 5 Bruges • Atlantic Wall Optional Tour • Antwerp

Day 1 Depart U.S.

Depart the U.S. today on your flight to Brussels, Belgium. Please refer to your personal air itinerary for exact departure and arrival times.

Day 2 Brussels, Belgium • Antwerp • Embark ship

- Destination: Brussels
- Included Meals: Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria* or M/S *River Harmony*

Activity Note: Changes in water-level depths may require adjustments to your itinerary, including the Amsterdam canal cruise on Day 10.

Afternoon: Arrive in Brussels, where you'll be met at the airport and assisted with the transfer to your ship in Antwerp. There, you'll join passengers who took the *Bruges, Belgium* pre-trip extension.

You may choose to relax and settle in or take a stroll around the neighborhood where your ship is docked. Early arrivals will enjoy a light lunch

served onboard. Back on board, gather for our first Port Talk: During your Holland & Belgium cruise, you'll receive daily briefings about the next day's discoveries, so that you can make the best use of your free time there.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 3 Antwerp

- Destination: Antwerp
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria* or M/S *River Harmony*

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Disembark this morning and board our private motorcoach for the 15-minute drive into town. Then, set off on a walking tour of Antwerp. Located on the banks of the Schelde River, Antwerp is Belgium's major port and has been commercially important in

European trade since the eleventh century. Like Amsterdam, it is one of the world centers for diamond trading. In spite of damage suffered during both World Wars, Antwerp remains a city full of beautiful historic architecture dating back to the 16th century.

You'll explore Antwerp's well-preserved Old Town, built around the *Grote Markt* (Town Square), and graced by the lovely Old Town Hall and guild houses, then stroll along the *Meir* (Antwerp's main shopping street), lined with wonderfully elaborate historic buildings.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: Free for your own discoveries in Antwerp—ask your Program Director for recommendations. Later this afternoon, return to the ship for an **Exclusive Discovery Series** conversation about the complicated history of Belgian colonialism and the effects of racism today.

Afterwards, meet the crew over a Welcome Drink in the lounge before dinner.

Dinner: Enjoy a Captain's Welcome Dinner onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 4 Ghent

- Destination: Ghent
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria* or M/S *River Harmony*

Activity Note: The ship is docked outside Ghent, and it will take around 15 minutes to reach the city center by bus. In the rare instance

where the ship is unable to dock outside Ghent, we will depart from Antwerp to visit Ghent, a drive of about 1.15 hours.

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Visit one of Belgium's oldest cities and its fourth largest, Ghent, known as "the Jewel of Flanders." Enjoy an included walking tour here that will immerse you in the city's rich history.

Medieval and Renaissance buildings tell the story of Ghent's past reign as a textile capital from the eleventh century onward, both more populous and wealthier than London for several centuries. When the people of Ghent were under Spanish rule and rose up against Charles V to protest taxes, he punished the city by making its nobles parade before him wearing nooses around their necks. This led to the term *stroppendragers* (noose-wearers) becoming the nickname for Ghent-dwellers ever since. Enjoy free time in this Flemish treasure before returning to the ship.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: Free for your own discoveries—ask your Program Director for recommendations.

Return to the ship late this afternoon for another onboard **Exclusive Discovery Series** conversation—"Belgium Today."

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 5 Province of Zeeland, the Netherlands • Optional Delta Works tour

- Destination: Veere/Zierikzee
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria* or M/S *River Harmony*

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Disembark then transfer by motorcoach to visit one of two villages in the Province of Zeeland. Depending on our docking location, we will explore artist-friendly Veere or the medieval town of Zierikzee. Your Program Director will share information about the town as you stroll, each one charming and rich with over a thousand years of history.

Enjoy free time here before returning to the ship—ask your Program Director for recommendations.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: Relax aboard the ship or explore at your own pace. Onboard, your Program Director will lead a “Welcome to the Netherlands” conversation to give you a more in-depth understanding of the country.

Or, you may choose to join us on our optional tour. Discover the Delta Works to see a restoration project known worldwide for its hydro engineering, begun after flooding had devastated Holland. Originally, the province was a collection of islands—easy prey to the sea. Now the islands are connected and protected by a series of dams, dikes, and bridges.

The destructive tides that flooded the islands in 1953 and claimed the lives of 1,800 people are still remembered by the inhabitants of Zeeland. Since then, the gigantic Delta Works have prevented a recurrence. During an informative film and a guided tour, you'll see

several of the ingenious technical achievements designed over the past 35 years, and get a sense of how the Dutch have claimed, reclaimed, and protected their homeland from the threat of the sea.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 6 Kinderdijk

- Destination: Kinderdijk
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria* or M/S *River Harmony*

Activity Note: Disembark and board a private motorcoach for our visit to Kinderdijk today. Depending on our docking location, the drive may take from 25 minutes up to one hour.

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Explore Kinderdijk, discovering its famed 19 windmills. These well-preserved, historic structures became protected by UNESCO in 1997. Stroll around the site and take photos of these nostalgic, yet pragmatic creations.

Kinderdijk takes its name from a 16th-century legend involving a baby (or *kinder*), a cradle, and a cat that all survived being tossed into raging waters. For centuries, the Dutch were at the mercy of frequent floods. Around 1740, 19 windmills were built in the village of Kinderdijk, innovative structures that drain the excess water from polders—the reclaimed land that is situated below sea level—and pump it into nearby rivers and canals. This helps to evenly distribute water levels and lessen the threat of devastating floods. Nowadays, modern engines do the job of turning the paddle wheels,

forcing them to scoop up the water, yet the country still has a unique bond with, and affection for, its many windmills.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: This afternoon, we will dock in either the medieval town of Schoonhoven or Dordrecht, depending on docking availability. Upon arrival, you'll set off on a brief walking tour with your Program Director. The rest of the afternoon is yours to explore at your leisure—ask your Program Director for recommendations.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: After dinner, head to the lounge to enjoy live entertainment from local musicians.

Day 7 Rotterdam • Optional Delft tour

- Destination: Rotterdam
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria* or M/S *River Harmony*

Activity Note: The ship will be docked in Dordrecht; it will take around an hour to reach Rotterdam by bus to begin today's activities.

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Set off on a walking tour of Rotterdam, which was almost completely destroyed during World War II. The reconstructed city is now known for its crisp, modern architecture.

Or, you may choose to join us on an optional tour of Delft's famous porcelain factory. One of the member cities of the Dutch East India Company, Delft is known for its blue-and-white pottery (called Delftware). Visit a local porcelain factory and enjoy a short walking tour of Delft.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room. Or, for those who have chosen our optional tour, enjoy lunch in a local restaurant.

Afternoon: Enjoy the rest of the afternoon to pursue your own interests in Rotterdam.

If you've opted for our optional tour of Delft, take advantage of some free time to continue your explorations before transferring back to the ship.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 8 Enkhuizen

- Destination: Enkhuizen
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria* or M/S *River Harmony*

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Enjoy a walking tour of Enkhuizen (pronounced "enk-HOW-zen")—a striking, magnificently preserved town established between AD 1000 and 1200. Enkhuizen became a city in 1355, prospering due to its herring fishing industry and trade from the East and West India companies. Enkhuizen reached its peak in the 17th century when it boasted the largest herring fleet in Holland.

The thriving port sat on the edge of the Zuiderzee, an inlet of the North Sea, until it was enclosed in 1932. Now, Enkhuizen sits on the IJsselmeer, the large inland lake created by the damming of the sea outlet. With a population of about 16,000, this historic city retains its old charms, and its harbors attract thousands of pleasure boats. You'll also see the *Drommedaris*,

an old defense tower at the entrance to the harbor, and the many warehouses originally used by both the East and West India Company.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: Delve deeper into this city's rich maritime history during an included ferry ride and visit to the Zuiderzee Museum, which depicts life in this region in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 9 Enkhuizen • Home-Hosted *Op de Koffie*

- Destination: Enkhuizen
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria* or M/S *River Harmony*

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Enjoy a visit with a local family, an **Exclusive Discovery Series** event. They'll be your hosts for coffee, cake, and conversation, during a Home-Hosted *Op de Koffie*. Along with a friendly intercultural exchange, you might enjoy tasting a *stroopwafel*—a thin, waffle-like sandwich cookie with a sweet, chewy center.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: We begin sailing to our next destination later today.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: After dinner this evening, join us in the lounge for a fascinating **Exclusive Discovery Series** conversation: "Dutch Royals."

Day 10 Keukenhof Flower Park • Tulip farm visit

- Destination: Amsterdam
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria* or M/S *River Harmony*

Activity Note: Weather conditions and seasonal fluctuations may affect flower-blooming season. The lush blooming of the park and farm usually peaks in mid-April. Not all blooms will be visible in early March or mid to late May. Drive time to Keukenhof will be up to 1.15 hours, depending where our ship is docked.

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Enjoy a quintessential Netherlands in springtime experience this morning—the Keukenhof Flower Park. Set in the heart of the western Netherlands' tulip-growing region, and once the kitchen garden of a medieval castle, today it is known as the "greatest flower show on Earth," featuring more than seven million tulips and a variety of other flowers in both indoor and outdoor exhibits. You'll have the opportunity to stroll through the park's 70 acres of lovely, tree-shaded grounds with ponds, winding paths, streams, and fountains.

Lunch: Enjoy a boxed lunch at Keukenhof Flower Park.

Afternoon: Continue your springtime explorations with a visit to a tulip farm. The Netherlands have more than 23,000 acres set aside for the cultivation of their famous blooms, and throughout the peak season, farmers are kept busy as they prepare tulips to be picked and sold. Learn about the daily life of modern tulip farmers as you meet with a local family during this Exclusive Discovery Series event.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 11 Amsterdam • Captain's Farewell Dinner

- Destination: Amsterdam
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria* or M/S *River Harmony*

Activity Note: The ship is docked outside the city center. It will take around 30 minutes to reach the city by bus. For departures where the ship is docked in Lelystad, driving time to reach the city will be approximately one hour.

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: This morning, transfer from the ship to the city's center to get acquainted with the Netherlands' capital on an Amsterdam canal cruise. While traversing these 400-year-old canals—a UNESCO World Heritage Site—you'll view such landmarks as the 17th-century Royal Palace and the Mint Tower, which has retained its name even though gold and silver coins were minted here for only a couple of years. You'll also see the wooden double drawbridge, known as the "Skinny Bridge," that may remind you of Van Gogh's paintings.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: Free for your own discoveries—ask your Program Director for recommendations. Or, you may wish to join a local guide for a guided walk of the city.

Dinner: Captain's Farewell Dinner onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 12 Amsterdam • Disembark ship • Return to U.S.

- Destination: Amsterdam
- Included Meals: Breakfast

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Disembark the ship and transfer to the airport for your flight home. Or, experience more of this region on our optional *Amsterdam, the Netherlands* post-trip extension.

Day 1 Depart U.S.

Depart the U.S. today on your flight to Brussels, Belgium. Please refer to your personal air itinerary for exact departure and arrival times.

Day 2 Brussels, Belgium • Antwerp • Embark ship

- Destination: Brussels
- Included Meals: Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria*

Activity Note: Changes in water-level depths may require adjustments to your itinerary, including the Amsterdam canal cruise on Day 10.

Afternoon: Arrive in Brussels, where you'll be met at the airport and assisted with the transfer to your ship in Antwerp. There, you'll join passengers who took the *Bruges, Belgium* pre-trip extension.

You may choose to relax and settle in or take a stroll around the neighborhood where your ship is docked on an optional orientation walk. Back on board, gather for our first Port Talk: During your Holland & Belgium cruise, you'll receive

daily briefings about the next day's discoveries, so that you can make the best use of your free time there.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 3 Antwerp • Exclusive Activity: View Rubens' paintings

- Destination: Antwerp
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria*

Exclusive Activity: View a display of paintings by Flemish artist Sir Peter Paul Rubens. Learn more below.

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Disembark this morning and board our private motorcoach for the 15-minute drive into town. Then, set off on a walking tour of Antwerp. Located on the banks of the Schelde River, Antwerp is Belgium's major port and has been commercially important in European trade since the eleventh century. Like Amsterdam, it is one of the world centers for diamond trading. In spite of damage suffered during both World Wars, Antwerp remains a city full of beautiful historic architecture dating back to the 16th century.

You'll explore Antwerp's well-preserved Old Town, built around the *Grote Markt* (Town Square), and graced by the lovely Old Town Hall and guild houses, then stroll along the *Meir* (Antwerp's main shopping street), lined with wonderfully elaborate historic buildings.

Next, you'll marvel at the elegant spires of the Cathedral of Our Lady where you'll experience our first **Exclusive Activity** of the cruise. Inside

the majestic Cathedral, you'll view a display of four baroque paintings by Flemish artist Sir Peter Paul Rubens. These exquisite paintings adorn four altarpieces, the earliest of which was painted in 1610 depicting a triptych of the Raising of the Cross.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: Free for your own discoveries in Antwerp—ask your Program Director for recommendations. Later this afternoon, return to the ship for an **Exclusive Discovery Series** conversation about the complicated history of Belgian colonialism and the effects of racism today.

Afterwards, meet the crew over a Welcome Drink in the lounge before dinner.

Dinner: Enjoy a Captain's Welcome Dinner onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 4 Ghent • Exclusive Activity: View the Ghent Altarpiece

- Destination: Ghent
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria*

Exclusive Activity: You'll have the opportunity today to witness the famed Ghent Altarpiece, also known as *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*. More below.

Activity Note: The ship is docked outside Ghent, and it will take around 15 minutes to reach the city center by bus. In the rare instance where the ship is unable to dock outside Ghent, we will depart from Antwerp to visit Ghent, a drive of about 1.15 hours.

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Visit one of Belgium's oldest cities and its fourth largest, Ghent, known as "the Jewel of Flanders." Enjoy an included walking tour here that will immerse you in the city's rich history.

Medieval and Renaissance buildings tell the story of Ghent's past reign as a textile capital from the eleventh century onward, both more populous and wealthier than London for several centuries. When the people of Ghent were under Spanish rule and rose up against Charles V to protest taxes, he punished the city by making its nobles parade before him wearing nooses around their necks. This led to the term *stroppendragers* (noose-wearers) becoming the nickname for Ghent-dwellers ever since.

After our walking tour, you'll head to St. Bavo's Cathedral to witness the famed Ghent Altarpiece during today's **Exclusive Activity**. Also known as *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, this 15th century polyptych altarpiece is large, intricate, and marks the transition from medieval to Renaissance art with its use of oil paints. The impressive piece is also known as the world's most stolen painting, reportedly taken at least seven times. It was one of the many cultural treasures raided by the Nazis during World War II and was famously recovered by the Monuments Men.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: Free for your own discoveries—ask your Program Director for recommendations.

Return to the ship late this afternoon for another onboard **Exclusive Discovery Series** conversation, "Belgium Today."

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 5 Province of Zeeland, the Netherlands • Optional Delta Works tour

- Destination: Veere/Zierikzee
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria*

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Disembark then transfer by motorcoach to visit one of two villages in the Province of Zeeland. Depending on our docking location, we will explore artist-friendly Veere or the medieval town of Zierikzee. Your Program Director will share information about the town as you stroll, each one charming and rich with over a thousand years of history.

Enjoy free time here before returning to the ship—ask your Program Director for recommendations.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: Relax aboard the ship or explore at your own pace.

Or, you may choose to join us on our optional tour. Discover the Delta Works to see a restoration project known worldwide for its hydro engineering, begun after flooding had devastated Holland. Originally, the province was a collection of islands—easy prey to the sea. Now the islands are connected and protected by a series of dams, dikes, and bridges.

The destructive tides that flooded the islands in 1953 and claimed the lives of 1,800 people are still remembered by the inhabitants of Zeeland. Since then, the gigantic Delta Works have prevented a recurrence. During an informative film and a guided tour, you'll see several of the ingenious technical achievements designed over the past 35 years, and get a sense

of how the Dutch have claimed, reclaimed, and protected their homeland from the threat of the sea.

Later this afternoon, join your fellow travelers onboard as your Program Director leads a “Welcome to the Netherlands” conversation to give you a more in-depth understanding of the country.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship’s dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you’ll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 6 Kinderdijk

- Destination: Kinderdijk
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria*

Activity Note: Disembark and board a private motorcoach for our visit to Kinderdijk today. Depending on our docking location, the drive may take from 25 minutes up to one hour.

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship’s dining room.

Morning: Explore Kinderdijk, discovering its famed 19 windmills. These well-preserved, historic structures became protected by UNESCO in 1997. Stroll around the site and take photos of these nostalgic, yet pragmatic creations.

Kinderdijk takes its name from a 16th-century legend involving a baby (or *kinder*), a cradle, and a cat that all survived being tossed into raging waters. For centuries, the Dutch were at the mercy of frequent floods. Around 1740, 19 windmills were built in the village of Kinderdijk, innovative structures that drain the excess water from polders—the reclaimed land that is situated below sea level—and pump it into nearby rivers and canals. This helps to

evenly distribute water levels and lessen the threat of devastating floods. Nowadays, modern engines do the job of turning the paddle wheels, forcing them to scoop up the water, yet the country still has a unique bond with, and affection for, its many windmills.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship’s dining room.

Afternoon: This afternoon, we will dock in either the medieval town of Schoonhoven or Dordrecht, depending on docking availability. Upon arrival, you’ll set off on a brief walking tour with your Program Director. The rest of the afternoon is yours to explore at your leisure—ask your Program Director for recommendations.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship’s dining room.

Evening: After dinner, head to the lounge to enjoy live entertainment from local musicians.

Day 7 Dordrecht • Exclusive Activities: Delft factory tour and Mauritshuis Museum visit

- Destination: Dordrecht
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria*

Exclusive Activities: Today you’ll witness two different mediums of Dutch art—Delft porcelain and oil paintings of the Dutch Golden Age. See more below.

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship’s dining room.

Morning: After breakfast, join us for today’s first **Exclusive Activity:** an included tour of Delft’s famous porcelain factory, usually offered as an optional tour. One of the member cities of the Dutch East India Company, Delft is known for its iconic blue-and-white pottery (called Delftware). Visit a local porcelain factory to learn more about this delicate craft, then enjoy a short walking tour of Delft itself.

Lunch: At a local restaurant in Delft.

Afternoon: After lunch, we'll head to our second **Exclusive Activity** of the day: a visit to Mauritshuis Museum in The Hague. Known as one of the best museums in Europe to view the works of Dutch and Flemish Old Masters, Mauritshuis is home to masterpieces such as Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* by Rembrandt.

After plenty of time to appreciate this impressive collection, you'll drive back to the ship just in time for cocktail hour.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: After dinner, head to the lounge to enjoy live entertainment from local musicians.

Day 8 Enkhuizen

- Destination: Enkhuizen
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria*

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Enjoy a walking tour of Enkhuizen (pronounced "enk-HOW-zen")—a striking, magnificently preserved town established between AD 1000 and 1200. Enkhuizen became a city in 1355, prospering due to its herring fishing industry and trade from the East and West India companies. Enkhuizen reached its peak in the 17th century when it boasted the largest herring fleet in Holland.

The thriving port sat on the edge of the Zuiderzee, an inlet of the North Sea, until it was enclosed in 1932. Now, Enkhuizen sits on the IJsselmeer, the large inland lake created by the damming of the sea outlet. With a population of about 16,000, this historic city retains its old charms, and its harbors attract thousands of pleasure boats. You'll also see the *Drommedaris*,

an old defense tower at the entrance to the harbor, and the many warehouses originally used by both the East and West India Company.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: Free to spend as you wish. You may choose to delve deeper into this city's rich maritime history during an optional ferry ride and visit to the Zuiderzee Museum, which depicts life in this region in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 9 Enkhuizen • Home-Hosted Op de Koffie

- Destination: Enkhuizen
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria*

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Enjoy a visit with a local family, an **Exclusive Discovery Series** event. They'll be your hosts for coffee, cake, and conversation, during a Home-Hosted *Op de Koffie*. Along with a friendly intercultural exchange, you might enjoy tasting a *stroopwafel*—a thin, waffle-like sandwich cookie with a sweet, chewy center.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: We begin sailing to our next destination later today. As we cruise, we will pass through the floating naviduct lock complex.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: After dinner this evening, join us in the lounge for a fascinating **Exclusive Discovery Series** conversation: "Dutch Royals."

Day 10 Keukenhof Flower Park • Tulip farm visit

- Destination: Amsterdam
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria*

Activity Note: Weather conditions and seasonal fluctuations may affect flower-blooming season. The lush blooming of the park and farm usually peaks in mid-April. Not all blooms will be visible in early March or mid to late May. Drive time to Keukenhof will be up to 1.15 hours, depending where our ship is docked. Depending on the departure, the order of our activities may be swapped. Your Program Director will inform you of any changes.

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Enjoy a quintessential Netherlands in springtime experience this morning—the Keukenhof Flower Park. Set in the heart of the western Netherlands' tulip-growing region, and once the kitchen garden of a medieval castle, today it is known as the “greatest flower show on Earth,” featuring more than seven million tulips and a variety of other flowers in both indoor and outdoor exhibits. You'll have the opportunity to stroll through the park's 70 acres of lovely, tree-shaded grounds with ponds, winding paths, streams, and fountains.

Lunch: Enjoy a boxed lunch at Keukenhof Flower Park.

Afternoon: Continue your springtime explorations with a visit to a tulip farm. The Netherlands have more than 23,000 acres set aside for the cultivation of their famous blooms, and throughout the peak season, farmers are kept busy as they prepare tulips to be picked and sold.

Dinner: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 11 Amsterdam • Exclusive

Activity: Visit *Rijksmuseum* • Captain's Farewell Dinner

- Destination: Amsterdam
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
- Accommodations: M/S *River Aria*

Exclusive Activity: Visit the famed *Rijksmuseum* today. Details below.

Activity Note: The ship is docked outside the city center. It will take around 30 minutes to reach the city by bus. For departures where the ship is docked in Lelystad, driving time to reach the city will be approximately one hour.

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: This morning, set off on today's **Exclusive Activity:** a visit to Amsterdam's world renown *Rijksmuseum*—the Netherlands' national museum. Here you can find over 800 years of Dutch art and history, including works by famous Dutch masters such as Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Van Gogh.

You'll also view Amsterdam from another perspective during a boat cruise along its famous canals.

Lunch: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Afternoon: Free for your own discoveries—ask your Program Director for recommendations. Or, you may wish to join a local guide for a guided walk of the city.

Dinner: Captain's Farewell Dinner onboard in the ship's dining room.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish. Perhaps you'll enjoy a nightcap at the bar or relax in the lounge.

Day 12 Amsterdam • Disembark ship • Return to U.S.

- Destination: Amsterdam
- Included Meals: Breakfast

Breakfast: Onboard in the ship's dining room.

Morning: Disembark the ship and transfer to the airport for your flight home. Or, experience more of this region on our optional *Amsterdam, the Netherlands* post-trip extension.

END YOUR TRIP WITH AN OPTIONAL POST-TRIP EXTENSION

3 nights in *Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

Day 1 Amsterdam, the Netherlands • Haarlem

Day 2 Amsterdam

Day 3 Amsterdam • Optional Hague & Mauritshuis tour • Farewell Dinner

Day 4 Amsterdam • Return to U.S.

OPTIONAL TOURS

During your trip you will be able to book optional tours directly with us. We will ask you to confirm the payment for these tours by filling out a payment form and swiping your credit card at the ship's front desk. Optional tours can only be purchased with a credit or debit card. We accept MasterCard and Visa on all trips, and Discover on all trips except river cruises in France. We also accept Visa and MasterCard debit cards, but it must be a debit card that allows you to sign for purchases.

In order to correctly process these charges, there can be a delay of 2–3 months from the date of your return for the charges to be posted to your account. Therefore we ask that you use a card that will not expire in the 2–3 months following your return.

Please note: Optional tour prices are listed in U.S. dollar estimates determined at the time of publication and are subject to change. Optional tours may vary.

Delta Works

(Day 5 \$95 per person)

Discover the Delta Works to see a restoration project known worldwide for its hydro engineering, begun after flooding had devastated Holland. Originally, the province was a collection of islands—easy prey to the sea. Now the islands are connected and protected by a series of dams, dikes, and bridges. The destructive tides that flooded the islands in 1953 and claimed the lives of 1,800 people are still remembered by the inhabitants of Zeeland. Since then, the gigantic Delta Works have prevented a recurrence. During an informative film and a guided tour, you'll see several of the ingenious technical achievements designed over the past 35 years, and get a sense of how the Dutch have claimed, reclaimed, and protected their homeland from the threat of the sea.

Delft

(Day 7 \$145 per person)

Dating back to the 13th century, Delft was a longtime home port to the Dutch East India Company. It is well known for its

blue-and-white pottery called Delftware, which was first produced in the 17th century and styled after imported Chinese porcelain. You'll learn more about the unique pottery during a visit to a local porcelain factory. You'll also enjoy a walking tour of the city and lunch at a local restaurant.

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PRE-TRIP

Bruges, Belgium

INCLUDED IN YOUR PRICE

- » **Accommodations** for 3 nights
- » **4 meals:** 3 breakfasts and 1 dinner
- » **Included tour** with personal headsets: Bruges
- » Dedicated services of a local Program Director
- » **Gratuities** for local guides and motorcoach drivers
- » All transfers

PRE-TRIP EXTENSION ITINERARY

Originally a ninth-century fortress built to protect the Flemish coast from marauding Vikings, Bruges today retains its reputation as one of Europe's best-preserved Old-World cities. Bruges's centuries-old canal system, which was essential to its once thriving textile industry, has beckoned tourists to meander its narrow, winding streets in search of art, history, and fine chocolates for nearly two centuries.

Day 1 Depart U.S.

Leave the U.S. today on your flight to Brussels, Belgium. Please refer to your personal air itinerary for exact departure and arrival times.

Day 2 Brussels, Belgium • Bruges

- Destination: Brussels
- Accommodations: NH Bruges or similar

Afternoon: A Grand Circle representative will meet you at the airport and assist with the transfer to your hotel in Bruges.

The balance of the day is at leisure to relax after your overseas flight. You are invited to join an orientation walk that will acquaint you with both the neighborhood around your hotel and your travel companions.

Join your fellow travelers and Program Director this evening for a Welcome Drink and briefing.

Dinner/Evening: Continue making independent discoveries this evening, with dinner on your own. Ask your Program Director for restaurant recommendations.

Day 3 Bruges

- Destination: Bruges
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner
- Accommodations: NH Bruges or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: Set off on a walking tour of this city of canals, the former capital of West Flanders and Europe's best-preserved medieval city. From the 13th to the 15th centuries (until the Zwin River silted over), Bruges was northern Europe's leading trade center, owing its prominence largely to thriving wool and textile industries. You'll see signs of this mercantile history in the beautiful houses built by the wealthy textile merchants.

Your walking tour takes you to the Church of Our Lady and to Market Square, with its distinctive belfry tower and carillon of 47 bells. The charming structure is also home to Michelangelo's *Madonna of Bruges* statue, notable for the artist's treatment of the subject matter, as well as for being the only one of his works to leave Italy during his lifetime. You'll also see the Holy Blood Chapel, containing relics from the Crusades. You then have a chance to see Bruges from another perspective—aboard a boat navigating the city's winding canals.

Lunch/Afternoon: Yours to do as you please. Your Program Director will be happy to recommend a spot for lunch and free time activities.

Dinner: Savor an included dinner with your fellow travelers.

Evening: Continue making independent discoveries this evening.

Day 4 Bruges • Optional Flanders Fields tour

- Destination: Bruges
- Included Meals: Breakfast
- Accommodations: NH Bruges or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: Free for your own discoveries—ask your Program Director for recommendations. No other European city has the medieval look and feel of Bruges. Even its 19th-century neo-Gothic restorations add to the ambiance of the Middle Ages. Perhaps you'll visit the city's 14th-century Town Hall or peruse *Markt*, the bustling main square and home to Bruges' most iconic landmark—Belfry and Halle.

Lunch: On your own. Your Program Director will be happy to recommend a spot for lunch.

Afternoon: Yours to do as you please.

Or, you may choose to join an optional Flanders Fields tour to visit Ypres, the site of three great battles of World War I, and the World War I Memorial Museum.

Dinner/Evening: Continue making independent discoveries this evening, with dinner on your own. Ask your Program Director for restaurant recommendations.

Day 5 Bruges • Atlantic Wall Optional Tour • Antwerp

- Destination: Bruges
- Included Meals: Breakfast

Activity Note: The Atlantic Wall is closed to visitors on Mondays.

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: Free for your own discoveries—ask your Program Director for recommendations.

Or, embark an optional half-day tour of the Atlantic Wall of Belgium, featuring an excursion to the Flanders countryside where you'll enjoy an included tour (with audio guide) of the Atlantic Wall.

Lunch: On your own—ask your Program Director for local restaurant recommendations.

Afternoon: Transfer to Antwerp where you'll board your ship on Day 2 of your *Holland & Belgium in Springtime* River Cruise.

OPTIONAL TOURS

Flanders Fields

(Day 4 \$165 per person)

Join us this afternoon and evening for an optional excursion to Flanders Fields, a museum commemorating World War I. You will travel to the city of Ypres, now known as the “City of Peace,” and visit the interactive Flanders Fields Museum, where you’ll learn about the Great War and then tour the battlefields. After dinner at a local restaurant, you’ll visit the Menin Gate Memorial and listen to the buglers from the local fire brigade who play there every night in remembrance of those lost in the war. The cost of this optional excursion includes dinner.

Atlantic Wall Optional Tour

(Day 5 \$110 per person)

First you’ll travel to the coastal region and the town of Raversijde, where you’ll tour the remnants of the Atlantic Wall the fortifications Germany set up to protect it’s western front. The Atlantic Wall ran effectively from coastal France to Norway’s most northernmost city. You’ll find some of the best-preserved examples of bunkers and buildings here, often restored with period furniture and equipment. Continue by bus through Western Flanders’ flat fields and low-lying canals, past villages nestled among clusters of poplars. You arrive in the former fishing village of Damme. In the 13th century this was the region’s busiest port; but like Bruges, its fate was sealed when the Zwin silted up. Along *Kerkstraat*, you’ll find the main sights of this medieval town: the Gothic Town Hall and the 12th-century Our Lady’s Church.

Please note: *The Atlantic Wall is closed to visitors on Mondays.*

POST-TRIP

Amsterdam, the Netherlands

INCLUDED IN YOUR PRICE

- » **Accommodations** for 3 nights
- » **5 meals:** 3 breakfasts, 2 dinners
- » **Included tour** with personal headsets: Haarlem and Amsterdam
- » Dedicated services of a local Program Director
- » **Gratuities** for local guides and motorcoach drivers
- » All transfers

POST-TRIP EXTENSION ITINERARY

Whether you admire Van Gogh originals, browse an amazing variety of markets, or simply stroll along narrow canals, you'll find something enriching in Amsterdam. Included tours introduce you to the culturally rich Haarlem.

Day 1 Amsterdam, the Netherlands • Haarlem

- Destination: Amsterdam
- Included Meals: Dinner
- Accommodations: Eden Hotel Amsterdam or similar

Morning: You'll head for the city of Haarlem. Upon arrival, enjoy a guided walking tour that showcases Haarlem's rich history and features notable sights like the 14th-century City Hall and *Amsterdamse Poort*, the former gateway to the city of Amsterdam. Learn about Haarlem's proud tradition of beer brewing, as well as its present-day prominence as a major trading center for tulips.

Lunch: On your own—ask your Program Director for local restaurant recommendations.

Afternoon: Free for your own discoveries—ask your Program Director for recommendations. If you wish, you can join a guided walk in mid-afternoon to get acquainted with the vicinity around the hotel.

Dinner: At a local restaurant.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish—ask your Program Director for recommendations.

Day 2 Amsterdam

- Destination: Amsterdam
- Included Meals: Breakfast
- Accommodations: Eden Hotel Amsterdam or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: A local guide will lead a comprehensive tour of Amsterdam this morning. After the tour concludes, the balance of the day is yours to explore the city as you wish.

Lunch/Afternoon: Yours to do as you please. Your Program Director will be happy to recommend a spot for lunch and free time activities.

Dinner/Evening: Continue making independent discoveries this evening, with dinner on your own. Ask your Program Director for restaurant recommendations.

Day 3 Amsterdam • Optional Hague & Mauritshuis tour • Farewell Dinner

- Destination: Amsterdam
- Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner
- Accommodations: Eden Hotel Amsterdam or similar

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: Enjoy a final day to explore Amsterdam. Stroll along the iconic winding canals and soak in sights like the colorful row houses that line the storied cobblestone streets.

Perhaps you'll visit one of the famed museums, like the Anne Frank House, or take in the local culture at one of the many bustling cafes.

Or, you may choose to visit the Mauritshuis Museum in The Hague, home to such masterpieces as Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* by Rembrandt on an optional tour.

Lunch: On your own—ask your Program Director for local restaurant recommendations.

Afternoon: Free for your own discoveries—ask your Program Director for recommendations.

Dinner: Gather for a Farewell Dinner with your fellow travelers.

Evening: You have the freedom to spend the rest of your evening as you wish—ask your Program Director for recommendations.

Day 4 Amsterdam • Return to U.S.

- Included Meals: Breakfast

Breakfast: At the hotel.

Morning: Transfer to the airport for your flight home.

OPTIONAL TOUR

Hague & Mauritshuis

(Day 3 \$150 per person)

Just a 90-minute drive from Amsterdam, The Hague enchants with an 18th-century elegance befitting its role as a center of diplomacy and the site of the International Court of Justice. Upon arrival, we'll visit Mauritshuis, the Royal Picture Gallery, home to such masterpieces as Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* by Rembrandt.

Later on, we'll discover its highlights on an included walking tour, featuring the imposing Peace Palace, built a century ago and furnished with objects donated by nations around the globe, as well as the red-brick Parliament building and the historic Old Town. Wrap up the day with some free time to explore independently.

YOUR RHINE, MOSEL, MAIN, AND DANUBE RIVER SHIPS

Sail aboard our privately owned 140- to 162-passenger vessels

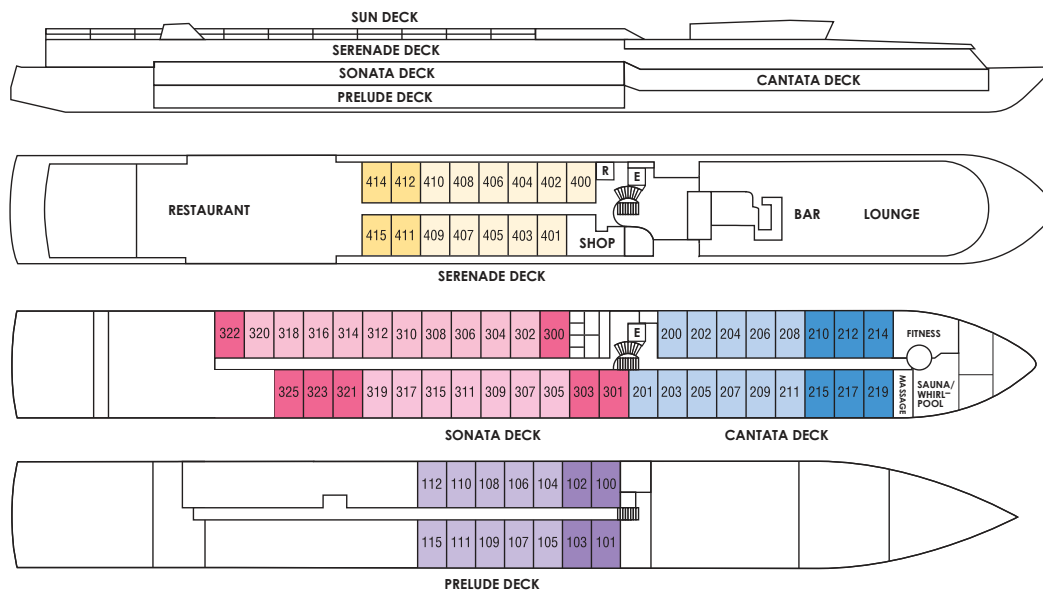
Grand Circle Cruise Line's Rhine, Mosel, Main, and Danube ships were designed specifically to create an unforgettable European river cruise experience for American travelers. Explore storybook landscapes with up to four groups of no more than 38-45 travelers, each with one of our dedicated, local Grand Circle Program Directors, and enjoy the attentive onboard service of our top-notch English-speaking ship crew.



SHIPBOARD FEATURES

- **Dining room with single, open seating:** Enjoy regionally-inspired cuisine in your ship's dining room.
- **Bar & lounge:** Relax with friends old and new.
- **Complimentary beverages:** Enjoy house beer and house wine—as well as soft drinks—at any time of day while onboard.
- **Complimentary wireless Internet access:** Connect online in cabins and common areas.
Please note: Wireless Internet access may be limited at certain points throughout your River Cruise.
- **Sun Deck:** Sit outside and enjoy the view as your ship glides past the European countryside.
- **English-speaking crew:** Our staff is dedicated to your comfort, and all shipboard announcements are made in English.
- **Smoking/non-smoking:** Smoking is not permitted indoors, but is permitted on the Sun Deck.
- **Shipboard security:** State-of-the-art shipboard radar ensures safe navigation at night and in low visibility; safe docking space; onboard security staff; state-of-the-art fire safety system; and secured entryway doors.

M/S RIVER HARMONY



Registry: Malta

Width: 38 ft.

Length: 366 ft.

Passenger capacity: 140

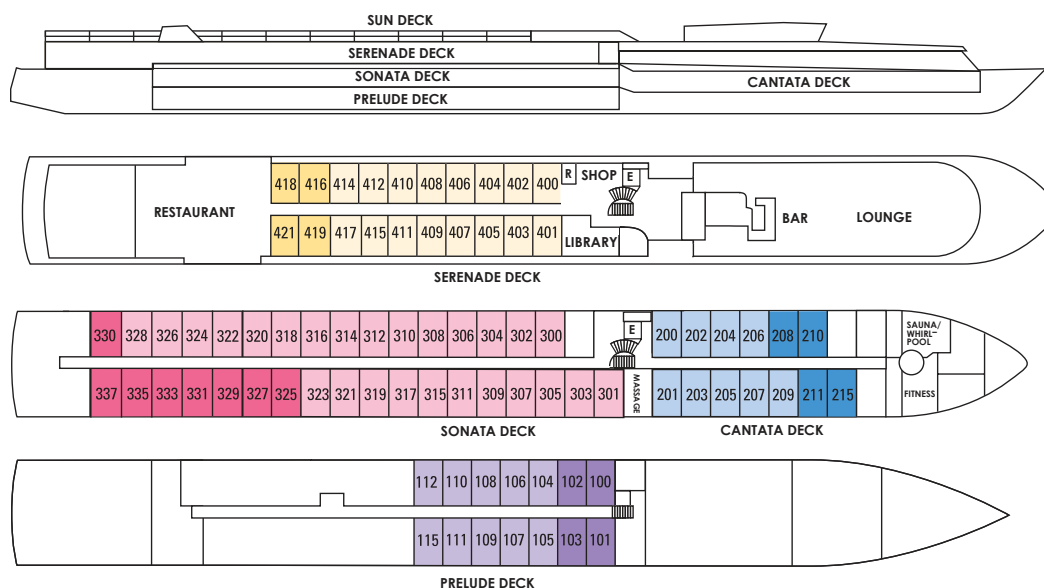
International crew: 34

Decks: 4

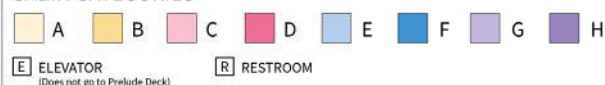
Number of cabins: 70—all outside

Elevator: Yes (no elevator access to Prelude Deck)

M/S RIVER ARIA & M/S RIVER ADAGIO



CABIN CATEGORIES



Registry: Malta

Width: 38 ft.

Length: 418 ft.

Passenger capacity: 162

International crew: 38

Decks: 4

Number of cabins: 82—all outside

Elevator: Yes (no elevator access to Prelude Deck)

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS & ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Your Passport

- Must be in good condition
- Must be valid for at least 6 months after your scheduled return to the U.S.
- Must have the required number of blank pages (details below)
- The blank pages must be labeled “Visas” at the top. Pages labeled “Amendments and Endorsements” are not acceptable

Need to Renew Your Passport?

Contact the National Passport Information Center (NPIC) at **1-877-487-2778**, or visit the U.S. Department of State’s official website at **www.travel.state.gov** for information on obtaining a new passport or renewing your existing passport. The U.S. Department of State allows for passport renewal by mail or, for applicable citizens, renewal online. We advise you review the process and requirements for online passport renewal on the official website.

You may also contact our recommended visa service company, PVS International, at **1-800-556-9990** for help with your passport.

Recommended Blank Pages

Please confirm that your passport has enough blank pages for this vacation.

- **Main trip only:** You will need 2 blank passport pages.
- **Pre- and/or post-trip extension:** No additional blank pages are needed for any of the extensions.

No Visas Required

Travelers with a U.S. passport do not need any visas for this vacation, including the optional trip extensions.

Traveling Without a U.S. Passport?

If you are not a U.S. citizen, or if your passport is from any country other than the U.S., it is your responsibility to check with your local consulate, embassy, or a visa services company about visa requirements. We recommend the services of PVS International, a national visa service located in Washington D.C.; they can be reached at **1-800-556-9990** or **www.pvsinternational.org**.

Traveling With a Minor?

Some governments may require certain documentation for minors to enter and depart the country or to obtain a visa (if applicable). For further detail on the required documentation, please contact your local embassy or consulate.

Emergency Photocopies of Key Documents

We recommend you carry color photocopies of key documents including the photo page of your passport plus any applicable visas, air itinerary, credit cards (front and back), and an alternative form of ID. Add emergency phone numbers like your credit card company and the number for your travel protection plan. Store copies separate from the originals.

If you plan to email this information to yourself, please keep in mind that email is not always secure; consider using password protection or encryption. Also email is not always available worldwide. As an alternative, you could load these documents onto a flash drive instead, which can do double-duty as a place to backup photos during your trip.

Overseas Taxes & Fees

This tour may have taxes and fees that cannot be included in your airline ticket price because you are required to pay them in person onsite. All taxes are subject to change without notice and can be paid in cash (either U.S. or local currency).

RIGORS, VACCINES & GENERAL HEALTH

Keep Your Abilities in Mind

Please review the information below prior to departing on this vacation. *We reserve the right for our Program Directors to modify participation, or in some circumstances send travelers home if their limitations are impacting the group's experience.*

GROUP SIZE

- This trip has a group size of 38–45 travelers (with approximately 3–4 groups onboard) each with a local Program Director exclusive to Grand Circle

PACING

- 11 days, with 10 nights aboard our privately owned 140–passenger M/S *River Harmony* or 162–passenger M/S *River Aria*

PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS

- Participate in 3–4 hours of physical activities each day (additional optional activities may be offered)
- Walk 1–3 miles unassisted within a time frame of 1–2 hours, including stairs and cobblestones
- Agility and balance for boarding small canal boats, often involving steep, slippery stairs
- Not accessible for travelers using wheelchairs or scooters
- Travelers using walkers, crutches, or other mobility aids must travel with a companion who can assist them throughout the trip
- We reserve the right for Program Directors to restrict participation, or in some circumstances send travelers home, if their limitations impact the group's experience

TERRAIN & TRANSPORTATION

- Uneven walking surfaces, including unpaved paths, hills, stairs, and cobblestones
- Travel by 140– to 162–passenger river ship, 47–seat coach, and canal boat
- Changes in water–level depths may require adjustments to your itinerary, including the Amsterdam canal cruise
- Docking for the following locations may be up to 1 hour outside of the city center, with transportation to and from the ship by motorcoach: Brussels, Belgium; Ghent, Belgium; Antwerp, Belgium; Kinderdijk, the Netherlands; Keukenhof, the Netherlands; Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Rotterdam, the Netherlands

CLIMATE

- Spring daytime temperatures range from 48–70°F
- March weather can be unpredictable and change quickly
- Brisk breezes should be anticipated in Holland

Health Check

Feeling healthy and confident of your mobility is essential to fully enjoy your trip abroad. If you have ongoing medical conditions or concerns about your health, we highly recommend that you schedule a checkup with your personal physician at least six weeks in advance of your departure date.

- Discuss with your doctor any aspects of your itinerary that may affect your health and be guided by his or her advice. (You can use the “Keep Your Abilities in Mind” on the previous page as a guideline to discuss with him or her.)
- You may want to have a dental exam before your trip. A loose filling or developing cavity would be difficult to remedy while you are traveling.
- If you have a condition that requires special equipment or treatment, you must bring and be responsible for all necessary items related to your condition.

No Vaccines Required

Recommended Vaccines

At the time of writing there were no required vaccines for this trip. The CDC recommends that all travelers be up to date on their routine vaccinations and on basic travel vaccines like Hepatitis A and Typhoid, but these are suggestions only. However, this could change in future so we encourage you to check with the CDC yourself before meeting with your doctor.

Traveling with Medications

- **Pack medications in your carry-on bag** to avoid loss and to have them handy.
- **Keep medicines in their original, labeled containers** for a quicker security screen at the airport and a better experience if you get stopped by customs while overseas.
- **Bring copies of your prescriptions**, written using the generic drug name rather than a brand name to be prepared for any unforeseen loss of your medications.

We recommend checking with the State Department for medication restrictions by country: **travel.state.gov** (Select “Find International Travel Information” then select “Country Information”; if you don’t see any medications specifically mentioned under the “Your Health Abroad” section, then you can presume major U.S. brands should be OK).

Staying Healthy on Your Trip

Jet Lag Tips

- Start your trip well-rested.
- Begin a gradual transition to your new time zone before you leave or switch to your destination time zone when you get on the plane.
- Attempt to sleep and eat according to the new schedule.
- Avoid heavy eating and drinking caffeine or alcoholic beverages right before—and during—your flight.
- Drink plenty of water and/or fruit juice while flying
- Stretch your legs, neck, and back periodically while seated on the plane.
- After arrival, avoid the temptation to nap.
- Don't push yourself to see a lot on your first day.
- Try to stay awake your first day until after dinner.

Allergies

If you have any serious allergies or dietary restrictions, we advise you to notify us at least 30 days prior to your departure. Please call our Travel Counselors at **1-800-321-2835**, and we will communicate them to our regional office. Every effort will be made to accommodate you.

Water

- Tap water aboard ship and in the countries you visit is perfectly safe for drinking.
- Bottled water is usually for sale in hotels, food shops, and restaurants.

MONEY MATTERS: LOCAL CURRENCY & TIPPING GUIDELINES

Top Three Tips

- **Carry a mix of different types of payments, such as local currency, an ATM card, and a credit card**
- **Traveler's checks are not recommended.** They can be difficult to exchange and the commission fee for cashing them is quite high. It's more practical to view them as a last resort in the event of a special situation.
- **You will not be able to pay with U.S. dollars on this trip;** you will need euros instead.

Local Currency

For current exchange rates, please refer to an online converter tool like www.xe.com/currencyconverter, your bank, or the financial section of your newspaper.

Euro Countries: European Euro (€)

How to Exchange Money

If you want to exchange money before your trip, you can usually do so through your bank or at an exchange office. Your departure airport in the U.S., a travel agent, or an AAA office are also possible outlets. Or you can wait and change money on the trip instead—but it might be helpful to arrive with some local currency in case you run into a bank holiday or an “out of order” ATM.

On your trip, the easiest way is to withdraw funds from a local ATM. The ATM will give you local money and your bank at home will convert that into U.S. dollars.

You can also exchange cash at some hotels, large post offices, and money exchange offices. To exchange cash, you'll usually need your passport and bills in good condition (not worn, torn, or dirty). New bills (post 2004) are best.

Please note that many banks in Europe will only exchange money for their own customers. Never exchange money on the street. All exchange methods involve fees, which may be built into the conversion rate; ask beforehand.

ATMs

When using the ATM, keep in mind that it may only accept cards from local banks, and may not allow cash advances on credit cards; you might need to try more than one ATM or more than one card. Many banks will charge a set fee or a percentage fee each time you use a foreign ATM. We recommend that you check with your bank before you depart. Don't forget to memorize the actual digits of your card's PIN number (many keypads at foreign ATMs do not include letters on their keys—they only display numbers.)

In most countries, ATMs are widely available in major cities. If you are in a rural location, it will likely be harder to find an ATM. If you are visiting a country that has different expectation for ATMs, they will be listed below.

Netherlands: International ATM networks are widely available in the Netherlands.

Belgium: ATMs are widely available in large cities, but are less common in smaller towns.

Credit & Debit Cards

While traveling, most countries and major cities will accept credit cards. We suggest that you bring one or two, especially if you are planning a large purchase (artwork, jewelry). We also suggest that you bring more than one brand of card (i.e. Visa, MasterCard, American Express) if possible, as not all are accepted around the world.. If you are visiting a country that does not commonly accept credit cards, they will be listed below.

Using Your Credit Card in Europe

Most of us are used to credit cards with the embedded computer chip (the ones you insert instead of swiping). In Europe—where they’ve had this type of card longer than us—these credit cards usually require a PIN (personal identification number) to make a purchase. And in contrast, most U.S. credit cards either do not require a PIN or don’t have one. So what do you do if you want make a purchase with your credit card in Europe?

Don’t worry. 90% of the time you won’t need to do anything special. You’ll insert your card and the purchase will go through as normal. Often you won’t even be asked to sign anything.

But bring more than one form of payment with you. For those rare cases when your credit card doesn’t work, the best plan is to already have a backup form of payment with you. Debit cards are a good alternative as they have a PIN. And there’s always cash.

Consider asking your credit card company. You can try contacting your credit card company before you leave to see if they will issue you a PIN. Many won’t—but at least you’ll know. You could also try looking at their website to see if they have guidance about getting a PIN.

Notify Card Providers of Upcoming Travel

Many credit card companies and banks have fraud alert departments that will freeze your card if they see suspicious charges—such as charges or withdrawals from another country. To avoid an accidental security block, it is a good idea to notify your credit card company and/or bank you will be using your cards abroad. You can do this by calling their customer service number a week or two before your departure. Some banks or credit card companies will also let you do this online.

You should also double-check what phone number you could call if you have a problem with a card while you are abroad. Don’t assume you can use the 1-800 number printed on the back of your card—most 1 800 numbers don’t work outside of the U.S.!

Onboard Ship

Two Separate Bills Will be Issued

- **Shipboard account:** This bill is for any on board purchases (drinks, souvenirs, etc.) and is calculated in Euros. The bill is payable at the ship's front desk; we accept cash or credit/debit card only. For cash we accept Euros. For credit/debit cards, we accept MasterCard and Visa. Other forms of payment, such as checks, American Express, and Discover Card are not accepted for this bill.
- **Optional tour account:** This bill is for any optional tours taken during the trip and is calculated in U.S. dollars. The bill is paid at the ship's front desk (they will have you fill out a form) by credit/debit card only; other forms of payments such as cash and checks are not accepted. For more information on optional tours—including which cards we accept for payment—see the “Preparing for Your Trip” chapter.

Please note: Payments made by credit card may take up to three months to process. We ask that you use a credit card that will not expire until three months after your trip ends. Because our headquarters are in Boston, the charges may appear to be from Boston or might be labeled as “OPT Boston” (depending on your credit card company).

Exchange Services: Policy Update

Due to international banking laws, we are not able to exchange money onboard the ship. If you need to obtain local currency, please see the “How to Exchange Money” section for helpful tips and information.

Tipping Guidelines

Of course, whether you tip, and how much, is always at your own discretion. For those of you who have asked for tipping suggestions, we offer these guidelines. All tips below are quoted in U.S. dollars; tips can be converted and paid in local currency (this is usually preferred) or in U.S. dollars. Do not use personal or traveler's check for tips.

- **GCCL Program Director:** It is customary to express a personal “thank you” to your Grand Circle Program Director at the end of your trip. As a guideline, many travelers give \$7–\$10 USD (or equivalent in local currency) per person for each day their Program Director is with them. *Please note that tips for your Program Director can only be in the form of cash. If you are taking any of the optional extensions, your Program Director during the extension(s) may not be the same as the one on your main trip.*
- **Shipboard:** Shipboard gratuities to the cruise personnel are not included in the cost of your cruise. The ship's tipping guidelines recommend a flat tip of \$10–\$12 U.S. per traveler, per day, which will be pooled among all cruise staff. Crew tips can only be in the form of cash.
- **Included in Your Trip Price:** Gratuities are included for local guides and motorcoach drivers on your main trip, extensions, and all optional tours.

Time at Leisure

When you are exploring on your own, it's useful to know when to tip and how much, because local customs often differ from the U.S. Here are a few helpful guidelines for the most common services a traveler might use:

- **Taxis:** Tipping is not customary, but many locals will round up the fare and let the driver keep the change. If the driver helps you with heavy luggage, then 10% is a nice gesture.
- **Restaurants, cafes, and bars:** Throughout Europe, the tip for the waiter or bartender is usually included in the prices or added on as a service fee. Look for a statement on the menu like *servicekosten zijn inclusief* or *service compris*—which mean “service is included”, or for a service charge on the bill. If you would like to leave a tip on top of the service fee (or in the rare case when the service is not included) then 10% would be considered generous.
- **Public restrooms:** It is very common to be charged a small use fee (not a tip) for restroom access. Typical amounts are about 0.50–0.70 euros. U.S. dollars are not accepted for this fee, so bring small change in the local currency with you. You might pay the fee to the attendant on duty, or there might be a turnstile to drop the coins into.

AIR, OPTIONAL TOURS & STAYING IN TOUCH

Land Only Travelers & Customized Air

Quick Definitions

- **Land Only:** You will be booking your own international flights. Airport transfers are not included.
- **Air-Inclusive:** You booked international air with us. Airport transfers are included as long as you didn't customize your trip's dates (see next bullet).
- **Customized Air:** You booked international air with us, and have customized it in some way. If you have customized your trip's dates to arrive early, stay longer, or stop on your own in a connecting city, airport transfers will NOT be included. You must also arrange your own accommodations for any additional nights. For your convenience, a preliminary list of your included hotels is available on your My Planner at www.gct.com/myplanner under "My Reservations".

Air Inclusive Travelers

If you have purchased international air with Grand Circle Cruise Line, there are some points that may be helpful for you to know.

- **Overseas Arrival:** Once you arrive overseas, you'll need to collect your luggage and clear customs. A Grand Circle representative will meet you outside of customs and assist you with your transfer to the hotel or ship. Important note on porters: Airport porters are NOT allowed in the baggage claim area. On arrival, you must take your luggage off the baggage carousel and load it onto a cart, which you will then move through customs. When you exit customs, you'll handle your cart until reaching your transfer vehicle. Your driver will load your luggage into the transfer vehicle.
- **Flying with a Travel Companion:** If you're traveling with a companion from a different household, and both of you are beginning and ending your trip at the same airport on the same dates, let us know you'd like to travel together and we'll make every effort to arrange this (please note, however, that this is not always possible). If you request any changes to your flights, please be sure that both you and your companion tell us that you still want to fly together.
- **Selecting Your Seats:** If your airline allows pre-assigned seats, you will be able to select and view them directly from the airline's website after booking. Some airlines will not allow seat confirmation until your reservation is ticketed 45-30 days prior to departure, and/or they may charge a nominal fee. You may locate your itinerary on an airline's website utilizing the Record Locator Number found on the Air Itinerary in your My Planner.

Arrival Time

If you are booking your own international airfare or have personalized your flights, we recommend that you choose flights that arrive by 2pm on Day 2 of your trip (or pre-trip extension, if you are taking one) if you are interested in joining your Program Director for an orientation walk in the vicinity of your hotel.

Airport Transfers Can Be Purchased

For eligible flights, airport transfers may be purchased separately as an optional add-on, subject to availability. To be eligible, your flight(s) must meet the following requirements:

- You must fly into or fly home from the same airport as GCCL travelers who purchased included airfare.
- Your flight(s) must arrive/depart on the same day that the group arrives or departs.

Airport transfers can be purchased up to 45 days prior to your departure; they are not available for purchase onsite. To learn more, or purchase airport transfers, please call our Travel Counselors at **1-800-321-2835**.

If you don't meet the requirements above, you'll need to make your own transfer arrangements. We suggest the Rome to Rio website as a handy resource: **www.rome2rio.com**

Optional Tours

Optional tours are additional add-on tours that allow you to personalize your vacation by tailoring it to your tastes and needs. And if you decide not to join an optional tour? Then you'll have free time to relax or explore on your own—it's about options, not obligations.

What You Need to Know

- All optional tours are subject to change and availability.
- Optional tours that are reserved onsite can be paid for using credit/debit cards only. We accept MasterCard and Visa on all trips, and Discover on all trips except river cruises in France. We can also take MasterCard or Visa debit cards as long as the card allows you to sign for purchases. (You won't be able to enter a PIN.) We do not take Amex, cash, or checks for optional tours.
- To ensure that you are charged in U.S. dollars, your payment will be processed by our U.S. headquarters in Boston. This process can take up to three months, so we ask that you only use a card that will still be valid three months after your trip is over. The charge may appear on your credit card statement as being from Boston, MA or may be labeled as "OPT Boston".
- We will give you details on the optional tours while you're on the trip. But if you'd like to look over descriptions of them earlier, you can do so at any time by referring to your Day-to-Day Itinerary (available online by signing into My Planner at **www.gct.com/myplanner**).

Communicating with Home from Abroad

Cell Phones

If you want to use your cell phone on the trip, check with your phone provider to see if your phone and service will work outside of the U.S. It may turn out to be cheaper to rent an international phone or buy a SIM card onsite. If you want to use a local SIM, just make certain your phone is “unlocked”, meaning it can accept a local SIM card. If your cell is “unlocked” then you will be able to purchase a local SIM for it and then buy minutes with “Pay as You Go” cards, so that you have a local contact number for your friends and family.

Calling Apps

Another option is to use a smartphone app like Skype or FaceTime. These services are usually less expensive than making a traditional call, but you’ll need a Wi-Fi connection and the calls may count towards your phone plan’s data allowance. Many smartphones—and some tablets or laptops—come with one of these apps pre-installed or you can download them for free from the appropriate apps store.

Calling Cards & 1-800 Numbers

When calling the U.S. from a foreign country, a prepaid calling card can be useful because it circumvents unexpected charges from the hotel. Calling cards purchased locally are typically the best (less expensive, more likely to work with the local phones, etc.). One reminder: Do not call U.S. 1-800 numbers outside the continental United States. This can result in costly long distance fees, since 1-800 numbers do not work outside the country.

Receiving Calls from Home

To ensure you are available during your trip to friends and relatives at home, you will receive two copies of your hotel list, including phone numbers, with your Final Documents. One copy is for you to bring, and one is to leave behind with friends or relatives in case they need to contact you during the trip.

How to Call Overseas

When calling overseas from the U.S., dial 011 for international exchange, then the country code (indicated by a plus sign: +), and then the number. Note that foreign phone numbers may not have the same number of digits as U.S. numbers; even within a country the number of digits can vary depending on the city and if the phone is a land line or cell phone.

Netherlands: +31

Belgium: +32

PACKING: WHAT TO BRING & LUGGAGE LIMITS

Luggage Limits

MAIN TRIP LIMITS	
Pieces per person	One checked bag and one carry-on bag per person.
Weight restrictions	Varies by airline. The current standard is 50 lbs for checked bags and 15 lbs for carry-on bags .
Size Restrictions	Varies by airline. Measured in linear inches (length+width+depth). Generally, 62 linear inches is the checked bag limit; carry-on limit is 45 linear inches .
Luggage Type	A sturdy, fabric-sided suitcase with built-in wheels and lockable zippers is recommended.
TRIP EXTENSION(S) LIMITS	
Same as the main trip.	
REMARKS/SUGGESTIONS	
One suitcase and one carry-on bag per person: Due to the space limitations on bus transfers, you'll be restricted to one suitcase and one carry-on bag per person. This is to ensure that we have room for everyone's luggage. We ask that you abide by this limit to avoid inconveniencing your fellow travelers and prevent additional airlines luggage fees (which are your responsibility). Most airlines now charge to check more than one suitcase per person for flights to Europe and other international flights. Luggage rules: Luggage rules and limits are set by governmental and airline policy. Enforcement of the rules may include spot checks or may be inconsistent. However one thing is the same across the board: If you are found to have oversized or overweight luggage, you will be subject to additional fees, to be assessed by—and paid to—the airline in question.	

Don't Forget:

- **These luggage limits may change.** If the airline(s) notify us of any changes, we will include an update in your Final Documents booklet.

- It's a good idea to reconfirm baggage restrictions and fees directly with the airline a week or so prior to departure. For your convenience, we maintain a list of the toll-free numbers for the most common airlines on our website in the FAQ section.
- **Baggage fees are not included in your trip price;** they are payable directly to the airlines.

Your Luggage

- **Checked Luggage:** Consider a duffel bag or soft-sided suitcase. Look for one with heavy nylon fabric, wrap-around handles, built-in wheels, and a heavy duty lockable zipper. Due to space limitations on our motorcoaches, you are allowed one piece of checked luggage per person. Portage at airports and hotels is provided for **one** bag per person. All bags should have luggage tags.
- **Carry-on Bag:** You are allowed one carry-on bag per person. We suggest a tote or small backpack that can be used as both a carry-on bag for your flight and to carry your daily necessities—water bottle, camera, etc—during your daily activities.
- **Locks:** For flights that originate in the U.S., you can either use a TSA-approved lock or leave your luggage unlocked. Outside of the U.S. we strongly recommend locking your luggage as a theft-prevention measure.

Clothing Suggestions: Functional Tips

- **Travel light:** A good rule of thumb is to gather together everything you want to bring; then take half of that. Eliminate all but the essentials and start packing a few days before you leave. That way, you'll have time to think—not fret—about what you might be forgetting. To have a varied travel wardrobe, yet keep your luggage light, we recommend you select a color scheme and pack color-coordinated clothing items that can be mixed to create different outfits.
- **Consider clothing designed for travel, sports, or camping:** With modern fabrics, lightweight packing for comfort and protection through a wide range of weather is easy. A visit to any online or local sporting goods/outdoor stores (L.L. Bean, REI, EMS, etc.) will yield a treasure trove of lightweight, specialized, and fashionable clothing and gear that is readily adaptable to your itinerary.
- **Pack casual clothes:** In today's age of informality, comfortable and informal apparel is perfectly acceptable at each of your destinations. Basic pants, shirts, walking shorts, sportswear, everyday dresses/skirts, supportive shoes, and functional outdoor clothes that are relatively easy to care for are recommended. Men do not need jackets or ties and women do not need fancy dresses.
- **Bring rain gear:** Regardless of your month of travel, rainfall is certainly a possibility. We suggest you bring a folding umbrella and waterproof shell. Water-resistant walking shoes are advantageous in case heavy downpours pass through.

- **Good walking shoes are critical:** This program features many included tours that follow steep, unpaved or cobbled routes; and even an average day of light sightseeing or shopping can put great demands on your feet. If you prefer more ankle support, take light hiking boots. In case you get caught in the rain, we suggest you bring an extra pair of walking shoes, and rain boots or galoshes. Aboard ship, you'll want non-slip shoes with rubber soles.
- **Plan to dress in layers on shore excursions.** Be prepared for a variety of weather conditions: warm days with sun, chilly temperatures with showers, and evenings that could dip into the 40s or 50s, depending on your travel season.

What to Bring

We have included suggestions from former travelers to help you pack. These packing lists are only jumping-off points—they offer recommendations based on experience, but not requirements. We recommend using www.weather.com and consulting the “Climate” chapter of this handbook.

Your cabin already has: Shampoo, conditioner, hair dryer, soap, body lotion, shower cap, and towels. **And don't forget a reusable water bottle**—you'll need it to take advantage of any refills we offer as we are working to eliminate single-use plastic bottles on all of our trips.

Recommended Clothing

- ☐ Shirts: A mixture of short and long-sleeved shirts to layer
- ☐ Trousers, jeans, or skirts
- ☐ Comfortable walking shoes and/or water resistant shoes
- ☐ Light rain jacket/windbreaker with hood
- ☐ Sleepwear
- ☐ Socks and undergarments
- ☐ A jacket or sweater, depending on the time of year

Essential Items

- ☐ Daily essentials: toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, hairbrush or comb, shaving items, deodorant, etc.
- ☐ Spare eyeglasses/contact lenses and your prescription
- ☐ Sunglasses with a neck strap
- ☐ Sunscreen, SPF 15 or stronger

- ☐ Travel money bag or money belt
- ☐ Moisturizer, lip balm
- ☐ Wide-brim sun hat or visor
- ☐ Pocket-size tissues
- ☐ Moist towelettes (packets) and/or anti-bacterial hand lotion
- ☐ Light folding umbrella
- ☐ Photocopies of passport, air ticket, credit cards
- ☐ Camera, spare batteries, and memory cards

Medicines

- ☐ Your own prescription medicines
- ☐ Vitamins
- ☐ Cold remedies: Sudafed/Dristan
- ☐ Pain relievers: Ibuprofen/naproxen/aspirin
- ☐ Laxatives: Senokot/Ex-Lax
- ☐ Stomach upset: Pepto-Bismol/Mylanta
- ☐ Anti-diarrheal: Imodium
- ☐ Band-Aids, Moleskin foot pads
- ☐ Antibiotics: Neosporin/Bacitracin

Optional Gear

- ☐ Travel alarm
- ☐ Compact binoculars
- ☐ Hanging toiletry bag with pockets
- ☐ Washcloth
- ☐ Travel-size tissues

- ☐ Basic sewing kit
- ☐ Hand-wash laundry soap (Woolite), clothespins/travel clothesline/stopper
- ☐ Electrical transformer and plug adapter—see “Regional Electricity” section.
- ☐ Reading materials
- ☐ Travel journal/note pad
- ☐ Swimsuit, if your ship/hotel has a pool or whirlpool
- ☐ Addresses for postcards
- ☐ Photos, small gift for Home-Hosted visit
- ☐ Phrase book
- ☐ Pocket-size calculator for exchange rates
- ☐ Insect repellant
- ☐ For hotel stays: Many hotels will provide hair dryers, but not all. If a hair dryer is essential to you consider a travel-size version. Hair dryers are provided on your ship.

Electricity

When traveling overseas, the voltage is usually different and the plugs might not be the same shape.

Voltage

Aboard the ship, cabins are equipped with 220-volt outlets. In your bathroom you will find a 110-volt outlet; this outlet is only for low-voltage appliances, like electric shavers. (Your bathroom also comes equipped with a hair dryer).

Electricity in Belgium and the Netherlands is 220–240 volts. In the U.S. it is 110 volts. Most of the things a traveler will want to plug in—battery chargers, smartphones, tablets or computers—can run off both 110 and 220–240. But you should check the item or the owner’s guide first to confirm this before you plug it in. If you have something that needs 110 volts—like a shaver or a hairdryer—you can bring a transformer to change the current. (But transformers tend to burn out, so it might be better to leave whatever it is at home.)

Plugs

The shape of plugs will vary from country to country. To plug something from the U.S. into a local socket you'll need an adapter that fits between the plug and the socket. Different plug shapes are named by letters of the alphabet. Standard U.S. plugs are Type A and Type B; standard European plugs are Type C, E, and F. **Of the three, a Type C adapter is the most useful as it fits into Type E and F sockets.** Type C is usually what is sold in stores as a European adapter.

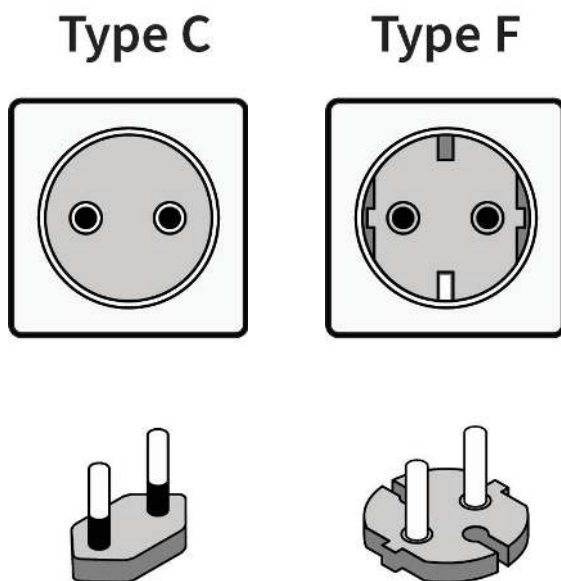
Aboard ship, the plugs in your cabin bedroom are Type F. The 110V socket in your cabin bathroom takes U.S. plugs, but not polarized ones (where one prong is bigger than the other). *Previous travelers have mentioned this because some small appliances, like Waterpiks, have polarized plugs.*

Note that even though you'll only need the European plug adapter on this trip, it may be easier to purchase an all-in-one, universal adapter/converter combo. Versatile and lightweight, these can usually be found at your local electronics goods or hardware stores. Sometimes you can buy them at large retailers too, like Target or Walmart. If you forget to bring an adapter, you might also find them for sale at the airport when you arrive at your destination.

For your reference, here is the list of plugs for the countries on this trip:

Netherlands: C

Belgium: C



CLIMATE & AVERAGE TEMPERATURES

Netherlands: As in most areas of northwest Europe, the weather in the Netherlands is frequently rainy and can be very changeable from day to day all through the year. During spring, a fine, warm spell may last for weeks, or a stretch of cool, unsettled weather may prevail. Daytime temperatures are generally mild, averaging in the upper 50s and low 60s, but weather shifts do occur on a regular basis. In summer, fine warm periods may last for weeks on occasions; but then again, the weather could also be cool and unsettled. By autumn, overcast skies occur more frequently, and the overall weather pattern consists of longer, heavier, rains and colder temperatures. Generally, the flat countryside of the Netherlands makes it a rather windy place in all seasons. In the past, the Dutch relied on this weather element to run the windmills that pumped the seawater from the low-lying lands.

Belgium: The northern part of Belgium is low-lying, with a climate that is almost identical to that of the Netherlands, its adjoining neighbor. Showers are common—Bruges, in particular, gets a lot of rain—but the sprinkles rarely turn into heavy downpours. The weather can change quite frequently from day to day throughout the year. Though generally the daytime temperatures are mild, summer may bring a warm spell for a few weeks. Fall brings overcast and rainy days and the temperature will start to drop.

Weather Conditions and River Depths: Throughout the river cruise season, weather conditions affect river depths, and water levels may require adjustments to your itinerary. When river depths rise or fall during your River Cruise, Grand Circle Cruise Line will be required to adjust your itinerary for your safety and to adhere to the current governmental and nautical requirements. Though we strive to adhere to our planned itinerary, we may not always be able to follow it exactly as planned. Therefore the sequence of ports visited and the days on which included features and optional tours occur may vary.

Climate Averages & Online Forecast

The following charts reflect the **average** climate as opposed to exact weather conditions. This means they serve only as general indicators of what can reasonably be expected. An extreme heat wave or cold snap could fall outside these ranges. As your departure approaches, we encourage you to use **www.weather.com** for a more accurate forecast of the locations you visit.

Average Daily High/Low Temperatures (°F), Humidity & Monthly Rainfall

MONTH	AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS			ANTWERP, BELGIUM		
	Temp. High-Low	% Relative Humidity (am-pm)	Average # of Days with Rainfall	Temp. High-Low	% Relative Humidity (am-pm)	Average # of Days with Rainfall
JAN	41 to 34	91 to 86	8	42 to 33	89 to 81	22
FEB	42 to 32	91 to 79	11	43 to 33	89 to 73	16
MAR	48 to 37	92 to 74	9	49 to 37	89 to 70	20
APR	53 to 40	90 to 66	12	55 to 40	89 to 62	19
MAY	61 to 46	87 to 62	12	63 to 47	89 to 62	19
JUN	66 to 52	89 to 66	9	68 to 53	90 to 63	18
JUL	69 to 55	90 to 68	12	71 to 56	90 to 64	18
AUG	70 to 55	91 to 65	11	72 to 55	92 to 61	16
SEP	64 to 51	93 to 72	10	66 to 51	93 to 68	17
OCT	57 to 46	93 to 78	9	58 to 45	92 to 73	18
NOV	48 to 39	92 to 85	7	49 to 39	90 to 79	20
DEC	44 to 39	92 to 88	7	44 to 36	90 to 82	21

MONTH	BRUGES, BELGIUM		
	Temp. High-Low	% Relative Humidity (avg)	Average # of Days with Rainfall
JAN	39 to 35	87	18
FEB	39 to 34	88	16
MAR	45 to 38	86	17
APR	51 to 44	82	16
MAY	58 to 49	79	14
JUN	63 to 54	81	14
JUL	66 to 58	82	15
AUG	68 to 59	81	14
SEP	64 to 55	78	15
OCT	58 to 51	82	16
NOV	48 to 43	86	19
DEC	45 to 41	89	20

ABOARD YOUR SHIP: CABIN FEATURES, DINING & SERVICES ON BOARD

Our River Ships

Our private fleet of custom-built river ships—with designs incorporating suggestions from Grand Circle Cruise Line travelers—offers a host of amenities to make you feel right at home. Each ship is designed to carry a moderate number of travelers, ensuring an intimate shipboard atmosphere, plus the ease of maneuverability that's so important when entering small river ports. Amenities on each ship include a restaurant with panoramic windows and wraparound promenade, sun deck with lounge chairs, a whirlpool, library, sauna, bar, lounge, dance floor, and small souvenir shop.

By owning our ships, we can assure that you'll be sharing this unique travel experience with only like-minded Grand Circle Cruise Line travelers. You'll find your ship to be an intimate haven that's especially conducive to camaraderie. We'll all be together for the joint celebrations, such as the Welcome Cocktail Party, where you'll experience the gala ambiance of a larger group. At other times, such as when we venture ashore, we'll break into smaller groups with individual Program Directors to allow for more intimate and personal discoveries.

Included features of all Grand Circle Cruise Line European river ship cabins:

- A layout of at least 150 square feet
- All outside cabins
- Individual climate control (heat and air conditioning)
- Twin beds that ship staff convert into a daytime couch
- Storage space under beds of 57 inches x 22.8 inches x 11.8 inches (length + width + height)
- Sufficient closet and dresser space
- Color TV, including CNN programming and a bow camera for ship-front views
- Direct-dial international telephone
- Hair dryer
- Desk
- Private bath with shower

Cabins on the Serenade deck have small balconies with sliding doors; those on the Sonata deck have large picture windows; cabins on the Cantata deck have two picture windows, and Prelude Deck cabins have a square window, placed high in the cabin. For safety reasons, cabin windows do not open.

An important word: While our fleet features larger-than-usual riverboat cabins, please keep in mind that these ships are river vessels, not large ocean cruise ships. Riverboat cabins, in comparison, are relatively small, and ship amenities, in general, are comfortable but not lavish.

Cabin Assignments

You will receive confirmation of your deck and/or cabin category upfront in writing; it will be on your invoice and online in My Planner at **www.gct.com/myplanner**. However, your cabin number may not be assigned until you arrive onboard the ship. (This is normal procedure for ships in many parts of the world, including Europe.) If there's no cabin number on your invoice or online, you can presume it will be assigned later and communicated to you when you board.

Dining

You'll enjoy fine cuisine and excellent views in your ship's dining room, featuring a warm decor of dark woods, rich carpeting, and white-linen and china table settings. Your ship's daily service includes breakfast and lunch buffets, and a more formal dinner. Our professional chefs will create unique menus for you that feature regional specialties. Complimentary house wine, draft beer, and a selection of soft drinks are included with both lunch and dinner. In addition, a selection of other fine wines and beer is available for purchase, starting at approximately \$20–35 per bottle (prices vary according to vintage). Travelers may also bring a bottle of their own favorite wine to dinner to enjoy at their table. Should you care to avail yourself of this service, there will be a corkage fee of approximately \$10 per bottle, charged to your cabin account.

Please note that if you bring your own alcohol aboard, it can only be consumed in the dining room as described above, or in your cabin. Consumption of alcohol purchased outside the ship is not permitted in the lounge or public areas. We also offer complimentary coffee and tea throughout the day, available at meals and from the machine in the reception area.

Open-table, single seating for all meals: Each meal is open seating—reservations of any kind are not accepted. Dinner has only one designated time for its open seating.

Dining times: Dining times for all meals may vary depending on the day's sightseeing and sailing schedule, but in general, meal times are as follows:

- Early bird breakfast: 6:00–7:00 am
- Breakfast: 7:00–9:00 am
- Lunch: 1:00–2:00 pm
- Dinner: 7:00–9:00 pm

Celebrations: Recognition of an anniversary or birthday can be accommodated. Please call Grand Circle Cruise Line to submit your request no later than 45 days prior to departure.

Dress code: The dining-room dress code is casual, though most travelers dress nicely for the Captain's Welcome Reception and Farewell Dinner.

Electricity

Cabin bathrooms are equipped with a 110V outlet for electric shavers. The rest of the cabin has 220V, with Type C/F “Europlug” outlets. See the electricity section of the packing chapter for more details.

Embarkation/Disembarkation

On the day you board ship, your cabin will be available at around noon. The restaurant will open at 12:30 pm and serve a light lunch. On the day of disembarkation, your cabin will no longer be available after 8:00am. You may sit in the ship’s lounge or on the sun deck until disembarkation.

Dock and Landing Etiquette

River waterways are simply not big enough to support large landing docks such as those built on ocean shorelines. It is common for river ships to tie up alongside each other at some piers—particularly in ports where docking area is restricted. While we try to arrange the most convenient mooring available in each port of call, other boats may occasionally obstruct views, and you may have to step across other ships when you want to go ashore. On some rivers influenced by the tide, the ship might get below the level of the shore. It might be more difficult to see the ship from the riverbank, and the view from the cabins might be obstructed by the docking wall.

Docking Accessibility

For certain cities along your trip, your ship may be docked up to 1 hour outside the city center. Transportation to and from the city proper will be done via motorcoach.

Headsets

During your trip, complimentary headsets, or *Whispers* receivers, are provided on our guided tours through the cities we visit. These receivers and headsets allow you to hear your Program Director and our local guides better. If you use a hearing aid or have strong preferences for headphones, we highly encourage you to bring your own headsets/ear buds with you. The plug size is usually the same as that used by iPods, computer jacks, etc.

Wireless Internet Access

Limited Wireless Internet service is available for free in the cabins and common areas on board your Grand Circle Cruise Line ship. If you want to use the WiFi connection you’ll need to bring your own device (laptop/tablet/netbook) — ships do not rent or loan these devices. To use the WiFi, please visit Reception after you board for access information. Shipboard access is subject to the challenges of travel: ship location, signal availability, and usage volume on board will affect connectivity and speed. The ship’s Internet connection demands a strong 3G cell phone signal, which is unavailable in many of the areas we visit. You can expect disruptions of both long and short duration.

Laundry and Linen Service

Laundry service is available for a fee. Please note that neither self-service laundry facilities nor dry cleaning services are available. Bed linens are changed at the start of your cruise and then once a week (i.e. twice during a 14-night cruise); towels are changed daily.

Medical Care

Our entire fleet adheres to stringent European safety standards. In addition to an emergency call button in all cabins, ships also feature fully staffed reception desks, 24 hours a day.

Onboard Activities

During your cruise you'll enjoy exclusive Discovery Series events, organized discussions, group activities that relate to the region (may include a language lesson), and talks on upcoming ports of call.

Recreational Facilities

These include a fitness center, sun deck with lounge, library, and lounge with bar and dance floor. The bar is open from 9:30 am to 1 am, and features both complimentary drinks (soft drinks, house beer, house wine, and non-alcoholic cocktails/beer) and drinks for purchase (spirits, alcoholic cocktails, bottled beers, and a selection of wines). Prices are in Euros. The fitness center has an exercise bike and walking/running treadmill. A massage therapist is available as well (prices listed on board).

Bicycles

We're pleased to offer complimentary bicycle rentals onboard your ship for use during free time, including all of the necessary safety gear, such as a helmet, brightly-colored safety vest, and a lock. Because there is a limited supply of bicycles available, they will be offered on a first-come first-served basis. For more information or if you are interested in using one of the bicycles, please speak to the Front Desk staff or Hotel Manager onboard your ship.

Smoking/Non-Smoking Policy

Smoking is not allowed anywhere inside our Grand Circle Cruise Line European River Ships, including in individual cabins or balconies. The only area on the ship where smoking is permitted is outside on the sun deck.

Elevator/Chairlift

Each ship has an elevator and chairlift service to the sun deck from the deck below (or you can use the staircase to the sun deck, which has one flight of ten to twelve steps). The elevator does not provide service to or from the Prelude Deck. The staircase to/from the Prelude Deck features about six stairs, with a banister to hold on to. The chairlift is a single-seat transport that slides up the staircase banister.

Passport Procedures

For your convenience, your passport will be held by the hotel manager after embarkation and returned to you on disembarkation day. This is standard ship's procedure, and is designed to speed up border crossings and to ensure the crew has all the necessary documents on hand during potential controls in our ports of call.

Lost & Found

Any lost or forgotten items found on board the ship will be held for 90 days from disembarkation. After 90 days, all unclaimed items will be discarded or donated.

Ship Specifications

M/S River Adagio

- **History:** Built in 2003
- **Size:** 410x38 ft
- **Capacity:** 163 passengers, 38 crew members
- **Layout:** 82 cabins, 4 decks; Elevator-yes (no elevator access to Prelude Deck)

M/S River Aria

- **History:** Built in 2001
- **Size:** 410x38 ft
- **Capacity:** 163 passengers, 40 crew members
- **Layout:** 82 cabins, 4 decks; Elevator-yes (no elevator access to Prelude Deck)

M/S River Harmony

- **History:** Built in 1999
- **Size:** 361x38 ft
- **Capacity:** 140 passengers, 32 crew members
- **Layout:** 70 cabins, 4 decks; Elevator-yes (no elevator access to Prelude Deck)

ABOUT YOUR DESTINATIONS: CULTURE, ETIQUETTE & MORE

Your Program Director

Grand Circle Cruise Line is committed to showing you a destination through the perspective of those who live, work, and play there. How better to do that than to have a resident with you every step of the way? We are proud to be the only cruise line to provide you the dedicated services of an expert Program Director, a resident or native of the country who is delighted to share their in-depth knowledge of local history, culture, and hidden gems.

Fluent in English and skilled in fostering camaraderie among travelers, our Program Directors are constantly cited by our travelers as the main reason they continue to travel with us. During your cruise, you'll enjoy multiple Program Directors aboard your ship, who will each be with you and your group of 25-47 travelers throughout your journey—both on ship and on land. And with personal headsets on every included and optional tour, you'll be able to enjoy their perspective and enthusiasm as you explore at a level deeper than most Americans go.

Dutch Culture

There is a saying that “God created the earth, but the Dutch created the Netherlands.” It refers to the fact that more than half of the Netherlands's physical area are lowlands (called *polder*) that were literally reclaimed from the sea. The story of this amazing engineering feat begins in the 12th century, and it is a testament to the Dutch people's pragmatism, industriousness, ingenuity, and sheer determination. These are traits that the Dutch are still proud of today.

That pragmatic streak informs another trait the Dutch are known for: *verdraagzaamheid* or tolerance. Since the 16th century, the Netherlands has been a humanitarian haven for immigrants, asylum seekers, and religious refugees (such as the English Puritans who settled here before continuing on to America as Pilgrims). The Dutch have always been interested in new ideas, and today this open-mindedness has led to permissive policies on women's rights, free speech, drugs, sex, LGBTQ rights, and more. For example, prostitution, euthanasia, and recreational marijuana use (in coffeeshops) are legal here (albeit, with restrictions).

This does not mean that the Dutch are libertines. Many have very strong views on what constitutes “right” behavior. But even the pragmatists, the Dutch simply prioritize policies based on doing the least amount of harm, that is, minimizing the negative social and economic costs of various human behaviors, whether legal or not.

The most liberal enclaves here, as elsewhere, tend to be urban. And they tend to lie within a U-shaped region called the *Randstadt* which means “rim city” or “edge city.” The *Randstadt* is a densely-populated megalopolis that includes the country's four largest cities—Amsterdam, the Hague, Utrecht, and Rotterdam—plus all their associated suburbs. It is the country's economic powerhouse, and it dominates the national culture. The *Randstadt* covers the provinces of North Holland, South Holland, and Utrecht, so its people are called “Hollanders.” Given the term's geographic and social connotations, people *outside* the *Randstadt* resent being lumped into that group. That's why it is proper to call the country “the Netherlands” and not “Holland.”

In the past, the more significant social distinction was a matter of *verzuiling* or “pillarization.” This was the *de facto* segregation of society based on religious, social and political affinities. People would self-identify among the various pillars which had their own schools, hospitals, newspapers, social clubs, and mutual aid systems. Since the 1960s, when the Dutch social welfare system became more comprehensive, people no longer need to rely on their pillar groups for support, as there is less of an economic imperative for belonging to one.

Today, pillarization has been replaced by a broader middle class that enjoys access to free or subsidized healthcare, education, retirement, housing, and unemployment benefits—and contributes to the hefty tax system that pays for them. This is available to Dutch people who are *autochtoon* (indigenous or native-born) and for the most part also to *allochtoon* (non-indigenous residents). That being said, the Netherlands’ famous tolerance has been tested over the past few decades by an increase in Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa. There has been a concomitant rise in far-right populism that blames immigration for a rise in religious extremism and terrorism; and a perceived loss of prosperity and Dutch identity. So far, this is still a minority opinion.

Meanwhile, the majority of Dutch people you meet will be notable for their unpretentiousness and good humor. They like to poke fun at themselves and others—especially those who flaunt their wealth or are otherwise showoffs. Most Dutch people are quite fastidious, a trait reflected in the spotless streets and tidy homes. They are equally meticulous about time, so if you are late for something, you’d better have a good excuse. The Dutch are considered quite individualistic so it is difficult to generalize. But perhaps the most common Dutch trait is directness: they are honest, forthright, and even blunt in their speech—so don’t expect a Dutch person to mince words. They tend to eschew sarcasm, and prefer that you deliver your opinion straightforwardly. Don’t worry: they can take it, and do not hold grudges.

Belgian Culture

Consider this: Belgium’s brewing heritage dates back at least to the 12th century. And while many connoisseurs proclaim Belgian beer to be the best on the planet, with the greatest diversity of original beer styles, more people have heard of brands from Germany, Denmark, and Ireland than Belgium. The fact that Belgian brewers have never aggressively marketed their products on an international scale is a clue to the national character: Belgians loathe self-promotion, and are genuinely modest about their achievements. They are also self-critical, to a fault. This is striking, considering that Belgium has much to be proud of.

Since the Middle Ages, tiny Belgium has been one of the richest and most developed regions in the world. During the Renaissance, only northern Italy could rival the splendor of cities such as Brussels, Ghent, Bruges, and Antwerp. (Even today, Belgium has the world’s greatest number of castles per square meter.) Prior to World War I, Belgium was the world’s fourth mightiest economic power, despite the fact that the populations of its industrial rivals were five to ten times larger. Belgium’s wealth derived not from natural resources, which were scant, but from the sheer productivity and trade-savvy of its people. Even today, many studies cite the Belgian worker as the most productive in the world.

This has paid off for Belgium's highly skilled workforce. Though they work hard, they enjoy liberal vacation and free time, and a comprehensive social security system. There is very little crime, very little poverty, and a fairly even distribution of wealth. The wage differential between men and women is the lowest in the European Union, with female workers earning on average 91 percent of a man's salary. Most Belgians own their own homes, and have access to free or low-cost post-secondary education. There is a well-developed infrastructure, good healthcare, and excellent, affordable cuisine. By almost any standard, the quality of life here is high. So it's no wonder that in poll after poll, Belgians consistently rank high among those who say they are most satisfied with their lives.

But Belgians take nothing for granted, and have a reputation for being skeptical of government, thumbing their noses at authority, and being *laissez-faire* when it comes to following rules. This may be attributable to a 2,000-year history of nearly continuous occupation by foreign powers. But not all of Belgium's discontent has arisen from outside sources. The biggest social divide is the ethnocultural one between Flemish (Dutch) speakers and French (Walloon) ones. In the past, this further fragmented Belgian society into so-called "pillars" based on language, religion, and political leanings. It manifested itself in the community's schools, hospitals, sports and leisure clubs, civic organizations, newspapers, and political representation. Though the influence of these pillars has drastically diminished, it still lingers.

As a visitor, you will find the Belgians to be friendly and welcoming, if a little formal at first. They are proud of their tidy homes and local cuisine, and though they would never boast about either, they would warmly appreciate your praise. Though flexible and tolerant of others, Belgians reserve their harshest judgments for themselves, and will be candid about their own country's faults. Somewhere between their pragmatic and rebellious poles lies the Belgian genius for creativity and invention. Belgium gave us the Flemish Masters, the surrealism of Magritte, the guitar brilliance of Django Reinhardt, the Art Nouveau whimsy of Victor Horta, the charm of Audrey Hepburn, and more comic book makers per square kilometer than any other country. And let's not forget the French, that is, *Belgian*, fries.

Language

Nestled between France and the Netherlands, and frequently overrun by foreign invaders, **Belgium** has historically been a polyglot nation. Today there are three official languages here. About 59% of Belgians speak Flemish (the Belgian form of Dutch), especially in northern Flanders which encompasses Antwerp, Bruges and Ghent. In southern Wallonia, French is the main language. Brussels and the surrounding 19 municipalities of the Capital Region have both French and Flemish as official languages. Overall, about 33% of Belgians speak French. Fewer than 1% speak German, and they are largely concentrated in the eastern province of Liege. Plus, there are the languages of Belgium's large immigrant community, which include Berber, Turkish, Greek, and Arabic speakers.

Most people speak at least two languages but which ones, and why, are matters of social and political significance. In the 19th century, French was the language of the elite and those who spoke it had the most social mobility. This created resentment among Flemish speakers, who became more militant about promoting their linguistic roots. It's a divide that persists today.

The good news is that about 52% of Belgian people speak English. This is especially true in major cities and among young people. In fact, Belgians are more inclined to answer you in English than they are in Dutch if their preferred language is French, or vice versa. Your Program Director can advise you on what the *lingua franca* happens to be in the specific area you are visiting. Otherwise, remember that in Belgium as everywhere, everything is best said with a smile.

The official language of **the Netherlands** is Dutch, whose roots (like those of English) are West Germanic. It was called Duutsc in the Middle Ages, which morphed into the English “Dutch.” But officially, the language is called Nederlands (Netherlandic) or Hollands, a reference to the historic provinces of North and South Holland upon whose dialect standard Dutch is based. For a small country, the Netherlands has many regional dialects, three of which are protected: South-Eastern Limburgish, West Frisian, and Dutch Low Saxon.

Nearly 93% of Dutch people speak English. In fact, the municipality of Amsterdam recognizes English as an official language. In and around town you may find signs and advertisement in Dutch and English (and even in English only.)

Dutch Idiomatic Expressions

The Dutch sense of humor comes out in the many colorful idioms used in everyday speech. Even if they have no English equivalents, the literal translations can be funny in and of themselves. By the way, these are all safe to use in polite company:

For some reason, the Dutch have a slew of expressions where monkeys are a prime reference. For instance, there’s “*nu komt de aap uit de mouw*” (now the monkey comes out of the sleeve.) It’s the Dutch equivalent to “now the cat is out of the bag.” When someone does something wonderful, you might say “*Ik ben apetrots op je*” (I am monkey proud on you). On the other hand, if something you say is met with the rejoinder “*een broodje aap verhaal*” (a monkey sandwich story), your tale sounds dubious, like an urban legend.

Not all expressions have a simian sensibility. If a Dutch person wants to tease you about your haircut, they’ll ask “*ben je van de trap gevallen?*” (did you fall down the stairs?) It’s shorthand for “*he fell down the stairs and broke his hair.*” The Dutch are well-known for being direct, but oddly, a favorite way to express this is obtuse, as in “*met de deur in huis vallen.*” It literally means to “fall into the house with the door,” but it’s not about barging in or making a clumsy entrance. It just means getting straight to the point.

If you are complimenting the chef on a delicious meal, you might say it tasted “*alsof er een engeltje over je tong piest*” (as if a small angel peed on the tongue.) Conversely, if you are offered something distasteful or risky-looking, you could say “*Ik ga liever gewoon dood*” (I’d rather die the regular way.)

Finally, when you are flabbergasted by something that really takes the cake, you might say “*nou breekt m’n klomp*” (now that breaks my clog.)

Religion and Religious Observances

The Netherlands is a highly secular country. Nearly half of the population (50.7%) does not identify with any organized religion. Some 23.6% identify as Roman Catholic; 14.9% identify as Protestant, 5.1% are Muslim; and 5.6% practice other faiths such as Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Even so, spirituality continues to be respected, and many Dutch people profess to *ietsisme* (“somethingism”), being spiritual but not religious.

Though religious practice has declined over the past 50 years, an exception is Islam, which has grown with increased immigration to the Netherlands. There is also a so-called “Dutch Bible Belt” or *Bijbelgordel*, a strip of rural communities stretching from the southwest to the northeast. Comprised mostly of orthodox Calvinists, they espouse traditional family values and gender roles, dress conservatively, and are opposed to the policies of mainstream Dutch society on issues such as gay rights, euthanasia, and recently, state-run vaccination programs.

The Constitution of the Netherlands guarantees freedom of religion and freedom of education for all. This means that all schools, including religious ones, receive government funding as long as they adhere to state quality standards.

Belgium has historically been a Catholic country and today, about 54% of the people identify as such. Another 6% are Protestant or other Christian denominations; 5% are Muslim; 4% practice other religions; 10% are atheists; and 21% are agnostics or non-believers. Prior to World War II, there were about 70,000 Jews here, including 22,000 Jewish refugees from Germany. But their safety was short-lived: about 45% of the Jews living in Belgium were deported to Nazi concentration camps. Today there are about 30,000 Jews living in Belgium, mostly in Antwerp.

All these numbers represent in a decline in religious practice since the 20th century. But even those who are not devout still take part in religious rituals for major life events such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. The government guarantees freedom of religion, and though there is separation of church and state, the government provides financial support for all churches, and stipends for clergy. The Catholic church controls an important network of schools with 70 percent of the pupils in secondary education and two main universities.

Waterways of the Netherlands

Nearly half of this small country—it measures just over 16,000 square miles—is below sea level, making the famous Dutch dikes a requisite for the use of a lot of the land. As early as 100 years ago, as much as 1,000 square miles of the Netherlands were still under water. Over the 20th century, however, it was a never-ending Dutch pursuit to extract more and more land from the sea. With the completion of ingenious water-control designs like the Zeeland Delta Project—a massive system of dikes, storm-surge barriers, and sluice gates—the Netherlands now has working solutions to its centuries-old problem of recurrent flooding by the North Sea.

Even so, the country still contains a lot of water, at least 1,100 square miles of it. That water, however, due to Dutch ingenuity and modern technology, is now mostly channeled into manageable canals, lakes, and rerouted rivers that were once open sea. It is the Netherlands’ waterways, which, despite being a hazard when flooded, have long enabled the commercial

success of the country. Throughout history, the rivers' strategic positions have given the Netherlands a prominent role in world shipping and trading. Essentially, the Netherlands is Europe's delta. Here three of Europe's major waterways—the Rhine, the Maas, the Waal, and their tributaries (including the Kil and the Merwede Rivers)—come to empty into the North Sea. Since the earliest seafaring days, products from the rest of Europe have come to this point on their way to the Atlantic Ocean for shipment to markets around the world.

The rivers also serve as natural boundaries that dissect the country into several different topographical regions. The land to the north of the rivers is relatively low; south of the rivers, elevations are somewhat higher, but no spot in the Netherlands would ever be considered mountainous. There is just one modest hilltop peak—only 1,093 feet high—among the rolling hills in the southeast province of Limburg. The central provinces of Gelderland and Utrecht are forested; otherwise most of the countryside is flat green fields. In addition to natural geographical divisions, the rivers also designate religious boundaries. Above the rivers, the population is predominantly Calvinist; below the rivers, most of the people are Catholic.

Dutch Cuisine

Until the first half of the last century, the cuisine of the Netherlands had a reputation for being bland. Today, it is surprisingly diverse, thanks to a bounty of ingredients and influences. The modern Netherlands is one of Europe's largest exporters of produce and dairy goods, both of which figure prominently (and freshly) in the national cuisine. Along with continental favorites, dishes from former Dutch colonies, particularly Indonesia, have entered the Dutch diet. And every town has its favorite place for Turkish and Middle Eastern **kebabs**, **shawarma**, and **falafel**.

For truly patriotic fare, nothing beats **hollandse nieuw haring** or “Holland new herring.” Every May or June, pop-up shops fly the red, white, and blue Dutch flag to say that Holland “new” herring are here. It's the lead-up to **Vlaggetjestdag** (Flag Day) on June 15th. The traditional way to eat herring is to grab the tail, toss your head back, and pop the fish in your mouth. Or try **broodje haring**: cut-up herring and onions, tucked in a bun with a Dutch flag toothpick.

Right off the bat, you'll notice that Dutch city streets abound with food stalls, kiosks, trucks, and automat-style snack bars called **raampje** (where you select your food from a wall of tiny glass windows.) You might encounter dishes like these:

- **Stamppot**: Which is hot mashed potatoes mixed with veggies such as kale, carrots, leeks, turnips, or sauerkraut. There are even versions made with fruit such as apples (called *hete bliksem* or “hot lightning”). Sometimes stamppot is served with gravy and a side of smoked **rookworst** sausage, or simply with gherkin pickles.
- **Snert**: Or pea soup is the quintessential Dutch comfort food—a thick stew of split peas, bacon, celery, onions, carrots, potato, and slices of smoked **rookworst** sausage. What sets it apart from other pea soups are the spices—ginger, allspice and cloves.
- **Hachee**: A hearty stew of beef and caramelized onions.

- **Hutspot met klapstuk:** (“hotpotch”) A mix of potatoes, onions, and **winterpeen** (a sweet, winter carrot), served with braised beef. It’s as close to a Dutch national dish as it gets, eaten every October 3 to honor the 1574 siege of Leiden.
- **Stroopwafel:** Two wafer-thin waffles sandwiched with caramel or syrup. They come in convenient discs to top your cup of coffee and keep it warm.
- **Poffertjes:** Tiny, yeasty buckwheat pancakes dusted with sugar and smeared with butter. You can also get toppings like **stroop** (syrup), **slagroom** (whipped cream), or **aardbein** (berries).

Belgian Cuisine

It’s said that in Belgium one can savor food that has the quality of French cuisine, in German portion sizes. Belgians have cosmopolitan tastes, so in addition to dishes that borrow from their neighbors (France, Germany, and the Netherlands), you’ll find many ethnic eateries. But there is also an inherently Belgian gastronomy that goes well beyond the famous chocolate and beer.

Perhaps the most iconic Belgian dish is one you may not recognize as Belgian at all: **pommes frites** (fried potatoes) or *frites* for short. Don’t call them French fries, because they were invented in Belgium, where they are a national obsession. City streets abound with fry carts (*freitkot*) and fry shops (*friteries* or *fritures*) that serve up paper cones filled with hot, crispy fries, and a dazzling array of toppings. Mayo, ketchup, and curry sauces are common, but the most popular sauce is called **andalous**, a purée of red peppers, tomatoes, shallots and garlic.

- **Moules frites:** Belgium’s national dish made of plump and sweet North Sea mussels are steamed in a savory broth of white wine, shallots, parsley, and butter (or sometimes, cream) that you can soak up with your fries.
- **Chicon au gratin:** These endive heads are braised, wrapped in ham slices, and smothered with a Gruyère sauce. It’s usually served with mashed potatoes.
- **Waterzooï:** A flavorful fish stew or thick soup with vegetables, herbs, and cream. It can also be based on chicken.
- **Tomates aux crevettes:** Grey shrimp stuffed inside a tomato.
- **Garnaalkroketten:** Grey shrimp that is formed into breaded, cylindrical croquettes served with lemon and parsley.
- **Paling in’t groen:** Also known as “eels in the green” in which delicate chunks of (sometimes smoked) eel are simmered in a sauce made of herbs fresh from the riverbanks: usually sorrel, chervil, parsley, and watercress.
- **Carbonnade flamande:** A rich beef stew simmered in Belgian beer with bacon, carrots, and herbs.
- **Vol-au-vent:** This means “windblown,” in reference to the light, flaky pastry that tops this deconstructed chicken pot pie, which sometimes also comes with meatballs.

- **Frikadellen met krieken:** Meatballs in a sour cherry sauce. It's a favorite at town fairs or family gatherings as either a main course or dessert.
- **Spekuloos:** These crispy caramel-y cookies are perfect for dessert.
- **Gauffres:** Also known as waffles. Belgian waffles are here called Brussels waffles, and they are large and rectangular.
- **Liège waffles:** These waffles have rounded edges and are flecked with pearls of sugar that caramelize into chewy goodness. You can have *gauffres* with syrup, whipped cream, jam, drizzled chocolate, fruits, and more. Or satisfy your sweet tooth with world-famous, hand-made Belgian chocolate. It shouldn't be hard, since Belgium boasts more than 2,000 chocolatiers.

The only thing more prolific is Belgian beer: there are more than 450 varieties. Trappist beers are strictly regulated and must be brewed in Trappist monasteries. Abbey beers are brewed in the monastic style, but can be made anywhere. In general, Belgian beer is a bit yeastier and higher in alcoholic content than other beers. In 2016, UNESCO added Belgian beer culture to its list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. To that, we say, “*Op uw gezondheid.*” Cheers!

Amsterdam in Brief

City Layout & Details

At the center of Amsterdam, Dam Square is the best place to begin exploring the oldest part of the city, which lies between the Singel and Kloveniersburgwal canals. Dam Square is also next to two of the city's main shopping streets (both of which are pedestrian malls). Amsterdam's 17th-century canal belt extends in concentric rings outward from the city center, lined with narrow canal houses that reflect the prosperity that Dutch merchants enjoyed in past centuries. This entire historic area of the city is compact enough to be explored on foot.

Cultural Insight

Apart from being the largest renaissance city with lots of great architecture from the last 400 years, world class museums and fantastic sights along the canals, contemporary Amsterdam offers an insight in how a modern Dutch society deals with issues like gay communities, drug abuse and prostitution. Based on a 400 year old tradition of openness and tolerance towards different religious denominations and life choices, the Dutch government took a leading role in legalizing cannabis to a certain extent, legalizing window prostitution and recognizing gay marriage. Understanding the pragmatic Dutch approach to controversial issues in their society will form a part of a learning and discovery experience during your stay in Amsterdam.

Safety

Amsterdam attracts visitors for different purposes. These visitors attract pick pockets, as in any other grand city. Please be cautious and leave your valuables in the hotels' or ship cabins' safe. Generally it is safe to stroll around in Amsterdam—the biggest danger is the possibility of being overrun by a Dutch cyclist.

Anne Frank House

Simply put, tickets to the Anne Frank House are hard to get. If you have your heart set on visiting the Anne Frank House during your free time in Amsterdam, **make sure you plan ahead and buy your ticket on the museum's website (www.annefrank.org/en) in advance. Tickets are available to purchase 2 months prior to the date of your intended visit.**

Please note:

- Even when purchasing in advance tickets sell out quickly – there is no guarantee they will be available for your trip.
- Tickets purchased online are for a specific date and time. They cannot be rescheduled or transferred; they are also non-refundable.
- Because this is an independent activity that is not included in the cost of your tour, Grand Circle will not reimburse you for unused tickets for any reason.

If you haven't decided yet whether you want visit the house—or if tickets are sold out/unavailable online—the museum does issue a LIMITED number of same-day tickets that you can buy at the museum. Keep in mind: The lines are long and tickets usually sell out early. But on the bright side, if you don't get a ticket, there's still a wealth of other things to do in town—from seeing the Old Masters at the Rijksmuseum, to exploring the decks of the SS Amsterdam at the National Maritime Museum, to finding the hidden church known as “Our Lord in the Attic”. Ask your Program Director for suggestions.

Van Gogh Museum: You must book tickets on the museum's website (www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/) at least two months in advance.

Rijksmuseum: You must book tickets on the museum's website (www.rijksmuseum.nl/en) at least three weeks in advance.

Local Transportation

On foot: Amsterdam lends itself to walking, just be sure to wear your sturdy walking shoes.

Public Transportation: Amsterdam's GVB operates a comprehensive public transportation system for which pre-paid fare cards are readily available.

Bruges in Brief

City Layout and Details

The heart of Bruges is encircled by a broad circular canal that opens at its southern end to become the Lac d'Amour (Lake of Love). This lake served as the town's busy port in the Middle Ages, before the silting of the Zwinn. Today, a lovely green park lines its shores. Southwest of the lake is the railway station. Bruges's narrow streets fan out from Grote Market, the vast central square, and the network of canals weaves its way to every corner of this small town.

Local Transportation

On foot: The best way to see both Bruges and Ghent properly is to stroll through their charming little cobblestone streets at leisure. Just be sure to wear your sturdy walking shoes.

Bicycle: Biking is a favorite transport method of the locals, and it's a terrific way to see the towns at your own pace. Accommodating bikers are beautiful canal-side, tree-lined roads. Bikes can be rented at the Bruges train station. Discounts are given for rentals of three days or more.

Shopping: What to Buy, Customs, Shipping & More

There may be scheduled visits to local shops during your vacation. There is no requirement to make a purchase during these stops, and any purchase made is a direct transaction with the shop in question, subject to the vendor's terms of purchase. Grand Circle is not responsible for purchases you make on your trip or for the shipment of your purchases.

Returns

If you discover an issue with an item, you should contact the vendor directly and expect that any resolution will take longer than it would in the U.S. We recommend that you keep a copy of all your receipts, invoices, or contracts, along with the shop's contact information. Keep in mind, local practice may vary from U.S. standards, so don't assume that you have a certain number of days after the purchase to speak up or that you are guaranteed a refund.

Crafts & Souvenirs

Netherlands

There is an abundance of art/prints and antiques available in the Netherlands, in addition to bargains on clothing and textiles. Keep an eye out for traditional items like *stroopwafel* (a cookie consisting of two thin wafers filled with caramel syrup), Delftware (famous blue and white pottery), Dutch cheese, wooden clogs, and salted licorice.

Belgium

Popular items include porcelains, Belgium (the most famous laces to look for are *bloemenwek*, *rozenkant*, and *toveresseteek*), European antiques, leather goods, and edibles like chocolates, pralines, and the thin, spicy biscuits called *speculoos*.

U.S. Customs Regulations & Shipping Charges

For all things related to U.S. Customs, the ultimate authority is the U.S. Bureau of Customs & Border Protection. Their website, www.cbp.gov has the answers to the most frequently asked questions. Or you can call them at **1-877-227-5511**.

The top three points to know are:

- At time of writing, your personal duty-free allowance is \$800 for items brought with you. Items totaling more than \$800 are subject to duty fees.

- **Items shipped home are always subject to duty when received in the U.S.** Even when the shop has offered to include shipping and duties in the price, this typically means shipping to the nearest customs facility and payment of the export duties—not door-to-door shipping or payment of the import duties. All additional duties or shipping charges would be your responsibility. Unless an item is small enough to send by parcel service (like FedEx), chances are you will need to arrange shipping or pick-up once the item is in the U.S. and will need to pay customs duties.
- It is illegal to import products made from endangered animal species. U.S. Customs & Border Protection will seize these items, as well as most furs, coral, tortoise shell, reptile skins, feathers, plants, and items made from animal skins.

DEMOGRAPHICS & HISTORY

Netherlands

Facts, Figures & National Holidays

- **Area:** 16,034 square miles
- **Capital:** Amsterdam
- **Language:** Dutch is the official language. A large percentage of the Dutch are also fluent in English and German.
- **Location:** Situated on the coast of the North Sea, the Netherlands borders Germany to the east and Belgium to the south.
- **Population:** 16,947,904 (estimate)
- **Religions:** Roman Catholic 28%, Protestant 19%, other 11% (includes about 5% Muslim and lesser numbers of Hindu, Buddhist, Jehovah's Witness, and Orthodox), none 42%
- **Time zone:** The Netherlands is on Central European Time, which is six hours ahead of U.S. EST: when it's 6 am in Washington D.C., it is noon in Amsterdam.

National Holidays: Netherlands

In addition to the holidays listed below, the Netherlands celebrates a number of national holidays that follow a lunar calendar, such as Easter and Ascension Day. To find out if you will be traveling during these holidays, please visit www.timeanddate.com/holidays.

01/01 New Year's Day
04/27 King's Birthday
05/05 Liberation Day
12/25 Christmas Day
12/26 Second Day of Christmas

The Netherlands: A Brief History

Peaceful, tolerant, and prosperous, the Netherlands enjoys an enviable level of comfort and influence. But as its history proves, its success was hard won.

Germanic and Celtic tribes lived here by 750 BC, protected from invasion by the area's extensive wetlands. This changed in 57 BC, when Julius Caesar conquered the south, and established a military post in Nijmegen. Under the Romans, there was relative stability for 400 years. Franks came in the 5th century, bringing Christianity with them. By 800, the Emperor Charlemagne had a palace in Nijmegen. After his death, the Low Countries were split amongst various nobles.

With increasing attacks by Viking raiders, local rulers fortified their towns. These feudal lords also enlisted their subjects to fight against rival lords, and in return they granted certain rights that were set down in charters. By the 12th century, many Dutch trade towns were enjoying limited self-government as communes. Many joined the Hanseatic League, and a strong merchant class grew. But their prosperity was threatened by constant wars.

In the 14th century, the dukes of Burgundy rose to power, and generally dismissed the local charters. There were frequent rebellions but eventually, the communes grudgingly accepted the unity provided by the Burgundians. Shipbuilding thrived, and there was a brisk trade. The Dukes were patrons of the arts, and this ushered in the cultural flowering of the Northern Renaissance. In 1425, Jan van Eyck became the court painter of Duke Philip the Good. Italian financiers settled in the area, strengthening trade and cultural links with Italy, and commissioning artworks.

When the Hapsburgs inherited the Burgundian territories in 1482, their ruler, Charles V (born in Ghent), cherished the Low Countries and business went on as usual—until he abdicated in 1555 and gave the region to his son, Philip of Spain. The Reformation had taken hold in the Netherlands and Philip, a staunch Catholic, began a brutal Inquisition. Religious violence erupted, and Philip sent the Duke of Alba to slaughter thousands. This caused great resentment against Spanish rule, and a sense of Dutch nationalism arose, even among some Catholics.

What followed was an Eighty Years War for independence. But a hero emerged in Prince William of Orange, who went into exile; hired pirates to attack Spanish ships; and led a revolt. The first Dutch victory occurred when rebels drove the Spanish from Leiden in 1574 after a year-long siege. William's victorious forces distributed bread and herring to the starving residents—an event still celebrated today. In 1581, the Union of Utrecht proclaimed the "United Provinces" independent from Spain. In 1648, Spain finally recognized Dutch sovereignty.

Despite the wartime destruction, Amsterdam experienced tremendous growth, fueled by waves of immigrants. Trade expanded; intellectuals flocked to the city; and Dutch explorers charted new courses and established colonies around the world. In 1602, the Dutch East India Company became the world's first global corporation. By the mid-17th century, the republic was the biggest maritime power of Europe, and arguably the wealthiest and most scientifically advanced. Calvinism was the official religion, but other Protestants, Jews, and Catholics were allowed to worship. In a society dependent on trade, freedom and tolerance were essential.

The Golden Age began to tarnish as conflicts arose with Britain and France, and the United Provinces erupted into civil war in 1785. Enter Napoleon, who established the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1806. It passed in 1815 to Willem I (of Orange-Nassau), whose dynasty continues today. As nationalism swept 19th-century Europe, the Netherlands made constitutional reforms, beginning the liberal, modern state, and sustaining a slow but constant economic growth.

During World War I, the Netherlands remained neutral. They tried to do this again during World War II, but the Nazis leveled Rotterdam in 1940 and within days, the rest of the country fell. Queen Wilhelmina fled to England, and broadcast inspiring messages via the BBC and Radio Orange. But Dutch resistance was slow to rise in the face of a harsh occupation, the mass deportation of Dutch Jews, and pervasive collaboration. Towards the end of the war, resistance gained momentum as the Nazis forced thousands of Dutch men to work in German factories. As

the Allies advanced, Dutch defiance grew. The “Hunger Winter” of 1944–45 was especially brutal, as the Nazis deliberately cut off food supplies, causing mass starvation. Many Dutch people had to eat tulip bulbs to survive. Canadian troops liberated the country in May, 1945.

The postwar years were times of material hardship and moral reckoning. As reconstruction got underway, 66,000 Dutch collaborators were tried in war trials. Many more never saw justice. To provide basic necessities, Prime Minister Willem Drees extended the welfare state. When the North Sea flooded in 1953, massive public works programs enabled the reclamation of 6,800 square miles of land, while providing jobs.

In the ‘60s, Dutch baby boomers came of age, demanding change. Social welfare programs reduced people’s reliance on the “pillarization” that once kept them beholden to sectarian groups. New ideas about equality, the environment, religion, sex, and drugs gained credence. Ever pragmatic, Dutch authorities adopted a policy of tolerance for things that couldn’t be enforced without causing more harm. Called *gedoogbeleid*, it persists to this day, but not without challenges.

Many immigrants arrived over the ensuing decades, often from Muslim countries, for family reunification, political asylum, and economic opportunity. After the assassination of two anti-immigrant/anti-Islamic Dutch figures—politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002, and filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004—far-right populists have preyed on the anxieties of their countrymen to challenge multiculturalism. The elections of 2010 saw a shift when the coalition government included the far-right Freedom Party of Geert Wilders, who decries the “Islamicization” of the Netherlands and advocates against the EU. Mark Rutte, who has been Prime Minister since 2010, leads the centrist People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy, or VVD.

Belgium

Facts, Figures & National Holidays

- **Area:** 11,780 square miles
- **Capital:** Brussels
- **Language:** Dutch, French, and German are the official languages.
- **Location:** Belgium is bordered by France, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands
- **Geography:** Belgium is located on the western edge of continental Europe. It has about 40 miles of seacoast on the North Sea, at the Dover Strait. France is south of Belgium, the Netherlands is directly north. The country measures only 150 miles across from the sea to the Ardennes.
- **Population:** 11,323,973 (estimate)
- **Religion:** Roman Catholic 75%, other 25%

- **Time Zone:** Belgium is on Central European Time, six hours ahead of U.S. EST. When it is 6am in New York, it is noon in Brussels. Daylight Saving Time begins the last Sunday in March and ends the last Sunday in October.

National Holidays: Belgium

In addition to the holidays listed below, Belgium celebrates a number of national holidays that follow a lunar calendar, such as Easter and Ascension Day. To find out if you will be traveling during these holidays, please visit www.timeanddate.com/holidays.

01/01 New Year's Day

05/01 Labor Day/May Day

07/21 Belgian National Day

08/15 Assumption of Mary

11/01 All Saints' Day

11/11 Armistice Day

12/25 Christmas Day

Belgium: A Brief History

The modern state of Belgium was officially born in 1830, but its story begins long before that, and is inextricably entwined with those of its neighbors. It has been called the “crossroads of Europe” and the “battlefield of Europe.” The Romans were the first organized invaders to experience it as both. Julius Caesar arrived here in 57 AD and made the unhappy acquaintance of the native tribes, whom he called “Belgae.” The name stuck even longer than the Romans did, who remained in Gallica Belgica for 500 years.

Germanic Franks swept into the north in the 5th century AD, while the southern part of the region was overtaken by the Romanized Merovingians, who were Latin-based. This established the linguistic (and cultural) divide between the Germanic Dutch (Flemish) speakers of Flanders and the French speakers of Walloon that still exists today. During the 9th century, Vikings made frequent raids, prompting the fortification of many towns.

As the control of French kings and Holy Roman Emperors waned, Belgium was divided into feudal states. Coastal Flanders was the wealthiest, thanks to its burgeoning trade. In the 12th and 13th centuries, cities like Bruges, Ghent and Ypres became important cultural centers, dominated by a rich merchant class that gained increasing political power and challenged the local counts. But the nobles prevailed by calling in the French army to squelch any dissent.

The Dukes of Burgundy ruled for less than a century but had a profound impact. The Burgundian Duke Philip, the wealthiest man in Europe, built an elegant palace in Brussels, established a university in Leuven, and sponsored Flemish artists. He is known as the Conditor Belgii (founder of Belgium.) The Hapsburgs eventually took all Burgundian holdings. Their heir, Charles V, was born in Ghent and set up court in Brussels. But he abdicated in favor of his son, the Spanish King Philip II. Philip was widely unpopular, a fanatical Catholic who imposed harsh anti-Protestant edicts, and sent Spanish mercenaries to enforce them. When Protestants reacted violently in the 1566 Iconoclastic Fury, Philip doubled down by sending 10,000 troops under the Duke of Alba.

War continued for eighty years and by the end, the Netherlands won independence from Spain. But present-day Belgium remained part of Philip's Spanish Netherlands, and Protestants were expelled. Later, during the Wars of the Spanish Succession, the Spanish Netherlands were handed over to the Austrian Hapsburgs. Their reign (1713–94) was comparatively enlightened, and the region was allowed a fair amount of autonomy. The revolutionary French invaded in 1794, but French rule ended in 1815 when Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo, near Brussels.

After this, the Congress of Vienna declared Belgium and Luxembourg as part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. King Willem I (of Orange-Nassau) divided his time between Brussels and The Hague, but he made enemies on the Belgian side when he tried to impose Dutch as the national language. Ironically, this also infuriated Flemish speakers, who saw their language as distinct from Dutch. The Belgians revolted during an opera performance in 1830. By 1831 it was over, and an independent Belgium declared Léopold of Saxe-Coburg Gotha King Léopold I of Belgium. He proved to be a competent ruler and helped Belgium prosper through the Industrial Revolution.

Léopold's heir, Léopold II, was committed to expanding upon his father's legacy. Through a series of shifty treaties, he personally acquired a bloc of Central Africa that was 70 times larger than Belgium. The "Congo Free State" was anything but free. Though Leopold paid lip service to abolishing the slave trade, his subjects in Congo were forced to work under abysmal conditions in rubber plantations. Almost half of the Congolese population died, directly or indirectly, due to Léopold's rule. Embarrassed by the world's condemnation, Belgium stripped Léopold of his property in 1908. But Congo remained a Belgian colony until 1960.

Belgium was a major World War I battleground. Germany invaded in 1914, despite Belgium's declaration of neutrality, and the Belgians put up a valiant defense led by their beloved King Albert. But Allied troops were bogged down in Belgian trenches for four horrific years. Thousands died and Belgium was stripped bare of its industrial infrastructure. The Germans returned during WWII in 1940 with a brutal air blitz. This time, the king, Léopold III, quickly surrendered. But the Belgian government objected and fled to London to operate in exile. Belgium had a strong but fragmented resistance. There was also significant collaboration from Belgian fascists, and from both militant Flemish and Walloon groups. Belgium was liberated in September, 1944, but fighting continued until January 1945 with the Battle of the Ardennes.

After the war the country was wracked with angst about Léopold III's wartime actions. Many believed him to be a collaborator and he remained in exile in Switzerland until 1950. In 1951, under pressure from Walloon socialists, he abdicated in favor of his son Baudouin I. Belgium struggled with reconstruction but emerged as a key international political player. In 1958 Brussels became the seat of the European Commission, and in 1967, the headquarters of NATO.

In the latter part of the 20th century a huge public debt and high unemployment crippled the economy. Frustrated with 40 years of mismanagement, in 1999 the nation voted out the ruling Christian Democrat party and experimented with a new era of liberalism. Liberals, Socialists, and Green Party coalitions have led most governments since the turn of the century, but with increasing challenges from far right-wing groups (often with anti-immigrant platforms), Flemish separatists, and other nationalist parties.

RESOURCES

Suggested Reading

Netherlands

Lonely Graves by Britta Bolt (2012, Mystery) The first in a series, this mystery follows Pieter Posthumus of the “Lonely Funerals” team—the people who arrange funerals for the unknown—as he looks into the death of a Moroccan immigrant.

Tulipmania: Money, Honor, and Knowledge in the Dutch Golden Age by Anne Goldgar (2007, History) The 17th-century speculation that caused a bubble (and a bust) of the Dutch tulip market is often presented a cautionary tale of capitalism gone wild. The author here debunks the hyperbole around this phenomena and instead explores how tulipmania reflected deep anxieties about the transformation of Dutch society during the Golden Age.

Girl with a Pearl Earring by Tracy Chevalier (1999, Historical Fiction) This book—which was a worldwide best seller—imagines the story behind the famous Vermeer painting by the same name.

Amsterdam: A Brief Life of the City by Geert Mak (1994, History) A Dutch journalist and native of Amsterdam offers a delightful survey of Amsterdam’s past and present, incorporating elements of politics, economics, and art history.

The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank (1947, Memoir) Arguably the most famous Holocaust book, this real diary shares the musings of Anne, a young Jewish girl who is hiding from the Nazis in an Amsterdam attic during World War II. If you’d like an adult’s perspective on Anne and her family, look for *Anne Frank: The Biography* by Melissa Muller.

Belgium

The Wisdom of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women’s Movement by Laura Swan (2016, History) *Beguines* were medieval residences set up to house unmarried women, called *beguines*, who dedicated themselves to a communal life and service to the poor. *Beguines* often earned their own living working in local industries, and though not part of any religious order, they were often guided by spirituality. This book explores the phenomenon, which was especially prevalent in the Low Countries.

War and Turpentine by Stefan Hertmans (2013, Biography/Memoir) An unusual hybrid book about an unusual life—one with a Dickensian childhood, service in World War I, a sad love story, and a passion for art. The author’s grandfather left behind several notebooks with his memories, which Hertmans reworked and edited as if his grandfather is telling his life story to the reader.

The Lady and the Unicorn by Tracy Chevalier (2003, Historical Fiction) The author here does what she did for her novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring*: weaves together fact and fiction to reveal the lives behind a masterful work of art. In this case, it is the titular series of six allegorical and

erotically charged tapestries that were created in Brussels, and now hang in the Musée de Cluny in Paris. Meticulously researched, it offers a vivid portrait of life in the Low Countries (and France) circa 1500.

The Factory of Facts by Luc Sante (1998, Memoir) Born in Belgium in 1954 and transplanted to New Jersey at age five, Sante reminisces about his upbringing in evocative passages about his national past and glimpses of his American experiences. The cumulative effect is a portrait not only of himself, but also of both his homelands.

The Abyss by Marguerite Yourcenar (1968, Fiction) The alchemist Zeno of Bruges is on a quest for knowledge, one that faces many physical and philosophical detours as he roams 16th-century Flanders, and far beyond. Zeno encounters the religious upheavals of the Reformation and counter-Reformation, the Black Death, the military might of Ottoman Turkey, and the brilliance and treachery of the 16th-century's greatest minds.

Suggested Films & Videos

Netherlands

Black Book (2006, Thriller) A young Jewish woman becomes a spy for the WWII resistance in German-occupied Holland, leading a dangerous double life. Paul Verhoeven's drama shows how an ordinary person is capable of doing extraordinary things when it's a matter of life and death.

Girl with a Pearl Earring (2003, Drama) Griet (Scarlett Johansson), a mysterious teenage girl, leaves her home to become a servant in the household of painter Johannes Vermeer (Colin Firth). Her thoughtful attention to detail catches Vermeer's notice. But she is also caught between the suspicions of Vermeer's wife, the predatory lust of Vermeer's greatest patron, and the cruel gossip of the town. Griet risks her reputation, but gains a place in history as the subject of one of the Northern Renaissance's most enduring portraits.

Rembrandt (1999, Docudrama) Klaus Maria Brandauer stars as the Dutch Master who changed the art world with his advances in painting, drafting, and printing.

Antonia's Line (1996, Comedy/Drama) This Oscar-winner is a delightful feminist fable about a widowed, prodigal daughter who returns to her small Dutch town after World War II. The townsfolk cannot understand why she wants to live independently. But Antonia takes several quirky souls under her wing, and brings warmth and joy over several generations through her growing and inclusive matriarchal community.

A Bridge Too Far (1977, Drama) This World War II epic is based on the book by Cornelius Ryan about Operation Market Garden, a daring but ultimately failed attempt to break through occupied Belgium and the Netherlands into Germany. Success depended on the capture of key bridges, but the mission was stopped at Arnhem. Whoever was your favorite 1970s male actor, he is likely in this all-star cast which includes Dirk Bogarde, Sean Connery, Michael Caine, Laurence Olivier, Robert Redford, Ryan O'Neal, James Caan, Anthony Hopkins, and more.

Belgium

The Brand New Testament (2015, Comedy) God is alive and living in a Brussels apartment, stomping around in his ratty bathrobe, tapping away at his outdated DOS computer, and gleefully inventing laws to frustrate humanity. (Dropped toast will always fall on the jam side. Whatever line you are in, the other will move faster.) His teenaged daughter Ea thinks Dad is doing a terrible job, so she hacks his computer, and leaks everyone's death date. People begin living their lives in unexpected and exhilarating ways. This religiously incorrect satire may offend some viewers, but others will appreciate its big-hearted message about freewill vs. determinism, and its uniquely Belgian irreverence.

The Monuments Men (2014, Drama) Based on the real-life Army platoon whose mission it was to find and rescue the vast cache of priceless art stolen by the Nazis. Here, George Clooney, Matt Damon, Jean DuJardin, Bill Murray, Cate Blanchett and friends are on the hunt for two Belgian masterpieces: *The Mystic Lamb* altar panels of Ghent by Jan Van Eyck, and Bruges' *Madonna and Child* by Michelangelo.

In Bruges (2008, Comedy) In this dark comedy, Irish hit men Ken and Ray seek shelter in Bruges, Belgium, after a job gone wrong in London. While in Bruges, Ken gains a new appreciation for life as he takes in the sights of the medieval city. Meanwhile, things start to change for Ray when he meets a woman named Chloe. Both attempt to carve a new life for themselves, but can't escape their past as they are obligated to take the next order from their boss.

The Factory of Facts by Luc Sante (1999, Memoir) Born in Belgium in 1954 and transplanted to New Jersey at age five, Sante reminisces about his upbringing in evocative passages. The effect is a portrait of himself and also of his natal homeland.

Peace in the Fields (1970, Drama) A French-language Belgian film directed by Jacques Boigelot, *Peace in the Fields* takes place around 1925, and revolves around the troubles of a middle-aged farmer whose mother has been accused of being a witch.

Useful Websites

Grand Circle Forum (tips from previous travelers)

www.gct.com/forum

Grand Circle Frequently Asked Questions

www.gct.com/faq

**International Health Information/CDC
(Centers for Disease Control)**

www.cdc.gov/travel

Electricity & Plugs

[www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/
plugs-and-sockets](http://www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/plugs-and-sockets)

Foreign Exchange Rates

www.xe.com/currencyconverter
www.oanda.com/converter/classic

ATM Locators

www.mastercard.com/atm
www.visa.com/atmlocator

World Weather

www.intellicast.com
www.weather.com
www.wunderground.com

Basic Travel Phrases (80 languages)

www.travlang.com/languages

Packing Tips

www.travelite.org

U.S. Customs & Border Protection

www.cbp.gov/travel

Transportation Security

Administration (TSA)

www.tsa.gov

National Passport Information Center

www.travel.state.gov

Holidays Worldwide

www.timeanddate.com/holidays

Useful Apps

Flight Stats

Track departures, arrivals, and flight status

LoungeBuddy

Get access to premium airport lounges around the world

Timeshifter

Personalized tips for avoiding jetlag, based on neuroscience and your own data

GoogleMaps or Maps.me

Maps and directions anywhere in the world

Triposo

City guides, walking maps, and more – and it works offline

Rome2rio

Where to go, what to see, and what to do in more than 160 countries

Flush or Sit or Squat

Find a clean toilet anywhere

Uber or Bolt or Grab

Ride sharing around the world

Visa Plus and Mastercard Cirrus

ATM locations

Shows the location of the nearest ATM in your network

TunnelBear

Provides a secure VPN (virtual private network) that will encrypt your browsing data when you use a public WiFi network

What's App or Skype or Signal

WiFi calling anywhere in the world

Duolingo, FLuentU, or Babbel

Learn dozens of foreign languages

Google Translate

Fast and simple translations

XE

Currency conversions

SizeGuide

Clothing and shoe sizes in all countries

Best Units Converter

Converts currency, mileage, weights, and many other units of measurement

Happy Cow

Locate vegan and vegetarian eateries in 195 countries

Eatwith

Dine with locals all over the world

Meetup

Connects you with locals who share your interests

Skyview

Identifies constellations and heavenly bodies

Travello

Find travel friends on the road

TripWhistle

Maps your location and provides emergency numbers for police, medics, and more

GeoSure

Safely navigate neighborhoods around the world

Tourlina

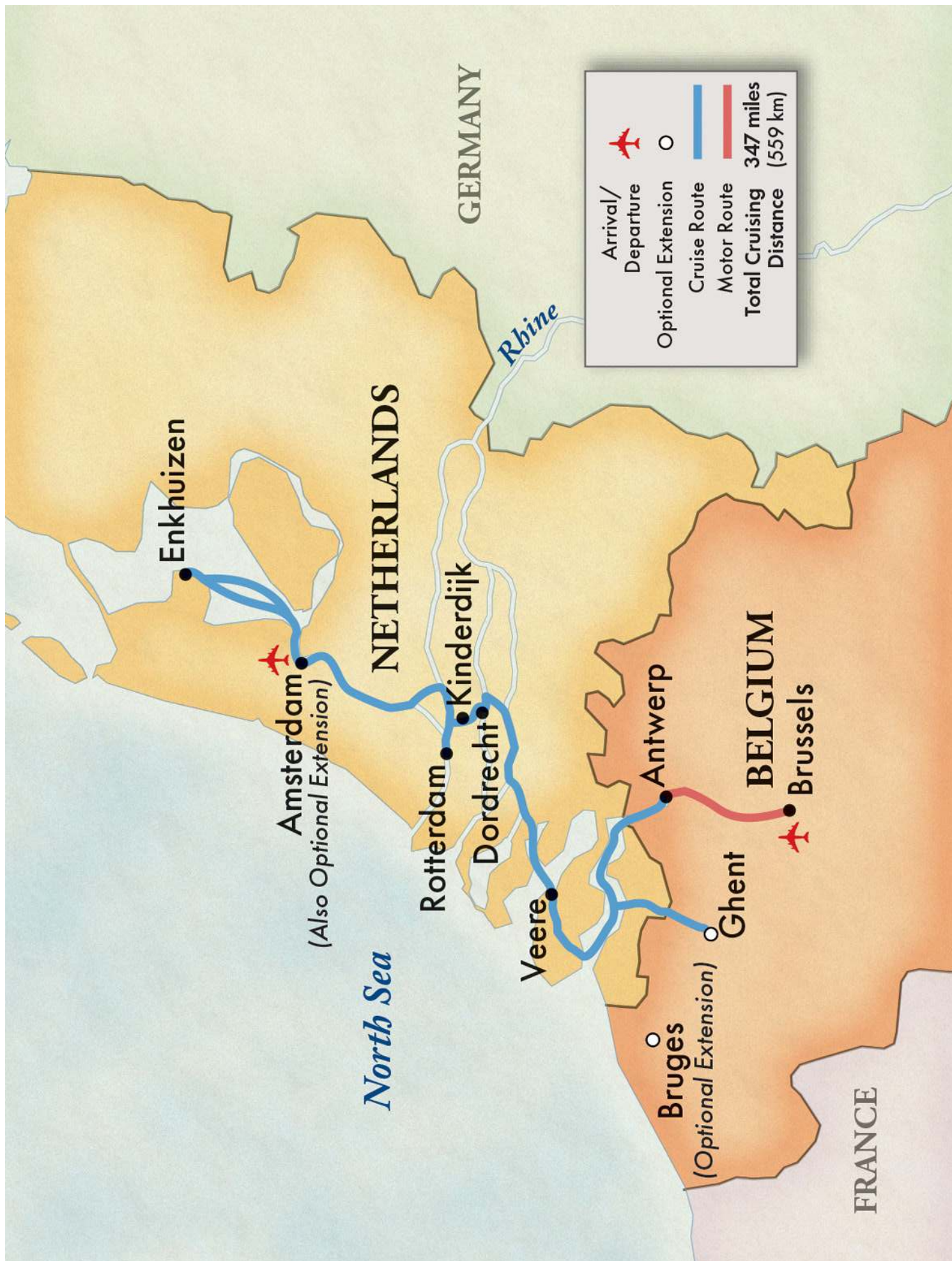
For women only, it connects you with other female travelers

ALIX for One

Created by and for women, it identifies solo-friendly dining spots in major international cities

Chirpey

For women only, connect with other women, find out what's safe, meet up, and more



SHARE YOUR TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

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Submitted by Fran Geisler, 8-time traveler
from Edisto Island, SC



Submitted by Milly Champeau, 6-time
traveler from Clinton, TN



Submitted by Elinor Graham, first-time
traveler from Ocala, FL



Created by Sarah Brown, first-time traveler
from Providence, RI



Created by Joseph Jiang, 3-time traveler
from San Francisco, CA



Created by Sheila Knox, 20-time traveler
from Modesto, CA



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