

RIKI, A CANADIAN DOG IN EUROPE

(Originally Published in Canine Review)

I spent a number of months backpacking in Europe in my younger and more wayward years, and I have returned periodically since to renew that special sense of time and history that only centuries-old streets and structures can give. So, when I heard that the World Dog Show was to be held in Amsterdam in July of 2002, I recalled the dog-friendliness of most of Europe, and thought this the perfect excuse to have a brief European interlude with Riki.

An entry for the show was quickly submitted and accepted; various friends were conned into looking after the rest of the menagerie; and plane reservations were made for a friend and me. With some snivelling and whining, I was able to pry Riki away from her handler for the requisite 11 days, and before long, we were on our way. Because we picked up Riki in Toronto, the flight wasn't too onerous for her, only a little over 7 hours, and she came out of her crate at the other end full of vim and vigour. The only requirement for bringing a dog into continental Europe is a rabies vaccination no more than twelve months and no less than thirty days prior to entry, along with an international travel health certificate dated within seven days of entry, certifying that the dog is free of communicable disease. Actually, when we arrived in Holland, an official ambled up as we were heading through customs, asking if we had the 'proper papers'. Upon receiving an affirmative answer, he casually waved us through with no inspection of either dog or certificates. I knew this was going to be a happy trip when I saw other dogs walking around in the airport, not in their crates, and all apparently just content to be with their people!

My friend and I initially stayed with her Dutch friends, so at first we didn't have to worry about hotels that took dogs. But for part of the trip, we found pet friendly hotels on the Internet. Only once was there any extra charge for the dog. I'm sure that there's more than one site, but we used PetTravel.com, and their information was accurate each time. We reserved as we went along, and even in early July there was never a problem with availability.

We were picked up at the airport by the Dutch friends, and we spent the next few days at their home in a small village called Benthuisen, about 40 kilometers west of Amsterdam. The low countryside is contained by a crisscross network of dikes and canals, and Riki had a wonderful run each day chasing rodents and birds and swimming in the fresh water canals. We learned that dogs must be kept on leash when on sidewalks and other "peopled" areas, but they are allowed off leash elsewhere, including parks. The smaller dikes are not for cars and they have two paths, one for

pedestrians and one for bicycles. Bikes are as popular a mode of transport as cars in Holland, and they have equal rights. The first thing Riki had to learn therefore was to respect their right of way on the bike paths when she was off leash. She soon recognized the shrill "ring a ling" of the bicycle bells and quickly moved out of the way. This is as much a matter of safety as courtesy especially in the bigger towns and cities, since motorbikes as well as bicycles use the bike paths, and pedestrians (and dogs) must take the same care as on a roadway.

Our initial plan had been to spend a couple of days doing a "bike and barge" tour, riding bicycles by day along the vast canal networks, and having meals and sleeping on an accompanying houseboat. Riki would have been allowed to accompany us, and to stay on the barge. As it turned out, however, the weather was not really conducive to a bike tour and so we chose to explore the Dutch countryside by car instead. Riki led us around the little town of Marken by the sea, where people wear traditional dress, and where houses were built on stilts to protect them from floods in the days before the enclosing of the Zeider Zee. We went to the famous North Sea resort site at Scheveningen and walked on icing sugar sand while Riki played in the waves, romped with a local dog and chased seagulls. There, as on some beaches in Canada, a special dog area has been set aside. We visited the ancient streets and open markets of Gouda, the city of cheese, where a townsman was so taken by Riki that he bought her a chunk of the best in one of the many cheese shops! We climbed in and around an old windmill in Leiden and learned about the now-defunct art of grinding grain with the aid of the wind and massive stones, pulleys and wheels. The stairs leading to the various levels of the windmill interior are narrow slats and near vertical, so as a matter of safety, Riki stayed outside and waited. But she was welcomed virtually everywhere else, and she accompanied us as we meandered into shops, markets and bakeries, down narrow cobblestone streets and into wonderful little cafes, most of them with plank floors, dark wooden walls and beamed ceilings.

The first couple of times in a restaurant, we cautiously confirmed at the door before entering that the dog was allowed, but invariably we were greeted with a smile and a wave in. In fact, we were told that in warm weather a doggy patron will usually be offered a bowl of cool water, without charge. Riki quickly realized that she was not to sit up looking for a handout, as is her norm when food is around, and I was impressed at how quickly she fell into a routine of lying quietly beside or under the table and having a nap while we had our coffee or meal. Before our trip was over, we ate with Riki beside us not only in small village cafes, but also in the haute cuisine dining

rooms of the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Brussels and the Hilton Hotel at Schiphol, with their upholstered chairs, fine china and silverware and linen tablecloths. The only request as we walked in with the dog was that we take a table against a wall, rather than in the center of the room. And all of this without a second glance or comment from any of the other patrons!

The World Dog Show which was more than a little overwhelming for an owner/handler - over 14,500 dogs from 53 countries, competing over 4 days in a labyrinth complex of 11 halls divided into 71 rings. It was a fabulous opportunity to see and be seen by others in my breed, and also to see and learn something about breeds that would not otherwise be familiar to North Americans. We spent some time on each of three days at the show, and Riki and I did well in the GSP ring - winning a third place. But I have to admit that, for the most part, my heart led me away from the dog show and out into the streets of Amsterdam. It's a wonderful city to explore by foot, and even more so with my beloved dog beside me. It's dotted with small parks and green areas along most of the canals where I could let Riki run free and get some exercise. Incredibly, no one picks up their dog waste and on more than one occasion, I was left wandering around with a full baggie, trying to find a trash receptacle.

We toured all around Amsterdam. Dogs are not permitted in places such as the Van Gogh museum, the Rijksmuseum or the Anne Frank House. But Riki went everywhere else, even on a canal boat cruise, being given a guided tour of the city and inner harbour by comfortable glass topped boat. We walked late one afternoon into the famous Red Light district, where ladies advertise their services by posing or lounging in varying degrees of undress in floor to ceiling windowed cubicles. Riki appeared to be a big hit, and several of these ladies smiled and waved at her, or blew kisses (at least I think it was at Riki), and I bought her a slinky necklace in one of the many sex shops in the area.

In most parts of Europe, dogs are allowed without being crated on all public transport including the trains and trams. Riki was initially somewhat stressed by the vibration and clanking of the trams, and by the noises and echoes in Amsterdam's Central Station. But she soon settled down. When we traveled out of Amsterdam by fast train one morning to the town of Alkmaar to see the cheese market and festival, Riki rode in the 1st class car with us on a special "Dagkaart Hond" ticket for roughly the equivalent of \$4.00 Cdn return.

Paris is also reputed to be very dog friendly and I had my heart set on walking under the Arc de Triomphe and down the Champs Elysees with Riki.

So once we were finished showing on the last day, we headed out of Holland in a rented Volvo station wagon. We made it as far as Lille in eastern France, but there was just too little time and too much to see in Belgium to spend our last precious days racing down the highways. So Paris will have to wait for another trip.

We ended up instead spending time in Belgium, with its rolling wooded hills, quaint towns and mighty stone cathedrals. We got hopelessly lost in Brussels, a driver's nightmare, and had to recuperate by sitting until dark with Riki at a sidewalk café on the city's main square and people watching. We visited the town of Ypres in western Belgium, where some of the bloodiest battles and greatest loss of life occurred during the Great War. As with museums in other parts of Europe, Riki was not allowed into the war museum at Ypres. Neither could she go through the magnificent St. Martins Cathedral, but I was able to leave her in a down-stay on the cool stones just inside the entrance while we toured the vast interior. More than once on this trip I silently blessed Donna Bradley, my time to time obedience instructor, with her emphasis on teaching dogs not merely rote obedience but manners and life skills. I would never even consider taking a dog on a European vacation unless it was extremely reliable in the basics.

We drove around from small town to small town, stopping when something caught our interest, and finding that all areas, shops and buildings, with the exception of churches and museums, are accessible to dogs. At a Belgian chocolate shop in Hoogstraten, Riki viewed the wares from behind glass, and eagerly accepted free samples! We wanted to see where John McCrae penned "In Flanders Fields", a poem that every Canadian schoolchild learns at some point or another. With Riki walking beside us, we found the very spot, then a field medical station, and now one of dozens of cemeteries where, truly, flowers of all sorts bloom between tens of thousands of white grave markers. It was all surprisingly moving, and having Riki with us did not detract at all from the thoughtfulness of the day. I ensured that she did her business outside the cemetery area, and as usual, there were no stares or suggestions from the other visitors that her presence was inappropriate.

By now, it was late afternoon on the last day and we were still near the French-Belgian border. Our plane left from Amsterdam the following morning and so it was time to hot foot it back to Holland. The vacation was over. And how did I know for sure the next day that we were back in Canada? Well, the sign in Toronto airport firmly stated that animals must be kept caged whilst in the building, and I was charged \$32.10 to have a stamp on her papers saying that Riki was home!