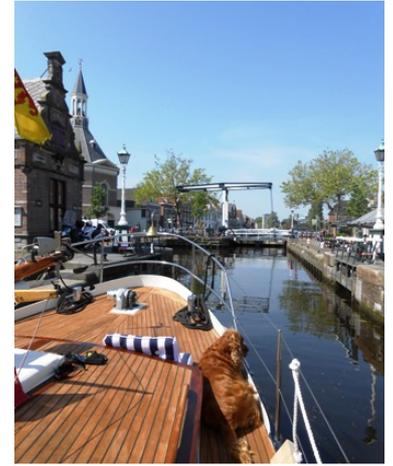


## Delft and Den Haag... from pottery to paintings



And so we drift on...through the “Green Heart of Holland” to a tiny canal-side marina in Leiden (later to become our winter base for the year), from here visiting Haarlem, a classic city of cobblestoned streets, huge market place and the even larger Grote Kerk van St. Bavo (whom I thought was called St. Bravo-hey, what a great name- until I put my glasses on).



It is immense. It's star attraction is the Miller organ- one of the largest in the world at 30m high and with over 3000 pipes. It was played by both Handel and Mozart. But even more interesting for me was the floor, totally paved in huge granite slabs- gravestones. And it is from here we get the saying “stinking rich” as after some years, the cathedrals began to, well...stink from the decaying remains buried below them. Stinking rich because only the rich could afford to be buried inside the churches. (Remember this for Trivial Pursuit!) Another interesting thing is that the Dutch have the most enormous churches yet they are strangely empty and, although Protestant, there is rarely a cross in sight anywhere. Occasionally, you'll spot one in a stained glass window. Due to strict Calvinist roots I think. Today, many of them are converted into cafes, exhibition halls for modern art and the like. In Delft, I was lucky enough to stumble upon a symphony orchestra rehearsing in the 800 yr. old Oude Kerk (called, obviously, the New Church).



Royal Blue Delft





Delft, apart from being a town of great beauty and quiet charm, is, of course, the home of the blue & white Royal Delft Blue porcelain (in fact, copied centuries ago from a process developed in China who now, in revenge perhaps, produce all the cheap copies sold in the numerous souvenir shops!) The Royal Porcelain Factory is delightful though, housed fittingly in a lovely old building, the only place where the porcelain is still all hand-painted. It takes 10 years to become a master painter and you can see, not only the exhibits of antique porcelain and whole wall replicas of famous Old Masters paintings that took years to paint, but also look over the painter's shoulders while they are at work.



Delft was also the home of Johannes Vermeer, one of the greatest of the Dutch Old Masters, even though he painted just 35 canvasses- but each one a masterpiece, simple interiors, beautiful colours, a breath-holding sense of tranquility. He was the master of light. He died poor, left 11 children and his widow was forced to sell two of his paintings to the baker to repay their debts.



The fantastic Vermeer Centre explains his work through reproductions, "View of Delft", "The Milkmaid" and "Girl with a Pearl Earring" (considered to be Holland's Mona Lisa) among them. It's a brilliant exhibition. I managed to see the originals and more at the Mauritshuis, in the Hague, a lovely mansion from 1640, housing the royal collection- each one a masterpiece.

