

HOLLAND'S DIRTY SECRET

THE WADLOPEN

Beginning in the sixteenth century, when monks herded their cattle from the Dutch coast to Schiermonnikoog Island, walking the mud flats has been a popular—if messy—pastime in the Netherlands.

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I always went straight through the puddles when I was a kid—never around them. My pant legs were constantly soaked up to the knees; my feet swimming inside my rubber galoshes. My mother was continually wringing the day's fun out of me, hopelessly trying to salvage her wall-to-wall carpets.

Funny, that American childhood doesn't seem very far away today, as I stand, covered head to toe in mud, in a field near Pieterburen, on the northernmost coast of the Netherlands.

I guess one never grows up, you just get older.

I've just spent the last four and a half hours traipsing through muck—voluntarily. Although I'll revel in this accomplishment tomorrow, right now I'm just glad to be on *terra firma*, instead of *terra slippery*.

Again, I've done this of my own free will.

Welcome to the centuries-old Dutch tradition—*wadlopen*. Each year, *wadlopen*, or mud walking, lures over 50,000 people to the Wadden Sea, just off the Dutch provinces of Friesland and Groningen. They come at low tide to brave the muddy, murky sea bottom and walk between the shoreline and one of the Wadden Islands. Surrounded by over 3,000 square miles of shimmering mud flats and sea, they slip and slide their way towards the islands through rain,

hail and an occasional sun shower.

That's how I've spent my day, along with 80 or so walking mates who now resemble a mass migration from the Black Lagoon. Grey mud is caked on every limb; we smell like something you need to scrape off your shoe. We're bone tired; but we're happy.

Our trek is just one of the many organized each season by the mud walking foundation *Stichting Wadloopcentrum*. The

Stichting, one of three *wadlopen* organizations, takes about 11,000 walkers out between May and October.

Siemon Niehof is a guide with the *Stichting*, with almost 300 walks to his credit. He knows where it's safe to venture, "where the mud will come up to your ankles and where the mud will come up to your waist," he explains. He calls this "reading the sea bottom." Niehof, like the other guides, can also read a compass and a GPS (global

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foundation was set up in 1963 to cater to the hordes of Dutch walkers eager to make the trip. For the next few years, groups of over a thousand people walked together across the mud flats, ironically to savor the solitude and rare wide-open spaces of their country.

Today the walks are tightly controlled and numbers are regulated. Groups are smaller—fewer than 150 people. Still,

positioning system) and he knows a lot about tides, winds, first aid and weather.

Without guides, there would be no opportunity to experience this wilderness area—legally, at least. As Niehof explains, it's not only illegal to set off on your own across the flats—it's incredibly dangerous. "You think you can do it since you can see the island in front of you. But the

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weather can change; fog can roll in." Or you can be caught in a thunderstorm—something Niehof has experienced, but doesn't recommend.

Seven hundred years ago the sea broke through the coastline, forming the Wadden Islands. Every year since then, the sea bottom has continued to change. The more storms during the winter, the more changes to the *wadlopen* routes. So the volunteer guides—doctors, lawyers, bus drivers and teachers, like Niehof—need to know "how to see the sea." Our guide does seem to see a route that's not apparent to the rest of us. Ten minutes into our walk, after we've gotten our "mud legs" and are just starting to marvel at how easy it is to walk on the slippery sea bottom, our guide marches straight into one of the rushing channels that cut through the wide patches of mud.

Where the water is waist-high, he pauses and sticks his walking staff, or *stok*, out in front of him, measuring the depth. Too deep for our group! We continue to walk alongside the channel as he moves downstream, stopping every few yards to measure. Finally, he starts back to shore. Still too dangerous, I think, after watching his testing. The water must have been about four feet deep.

"This way," he says, motioning us into the channel. He must be kidding! That water is practically up to my neck! Not to be left behind, however, I follow the lead of my walk mates, take my knapsack off and hold it above my head. The channel bed is slippery, but the cool, rushing water is refreshing – and up to my armpits. Several tense steps later, I'm on the other side of the channel.

And so the day goes. First, mud legs; next, the channel rush; then the realization that I am walking in the midst of some of Europe's most beautiful nature. In fact, just last year [October 2002], the United Nations added the Wadden Sea to its list of protected waters – in such company as Australia's Great Barrier Reef and the Florida Keys. It doesn't take long to see why.

The Wadden Sea is the largest area of undisturbed wildlife in Western Europe. Millions of birds rest in the area during

their annual migration. Tens of thousands of seals breed here. Every once in a while one of those seals pops up to watch us, seemingly amused. Flocks of birds take flight when we approach. All this nature, at the edge of one of the most densely populated countries in the world!

Emily Augenstein, an American college student on the walk, is more interested in the jellyfish along the route, than the occasional seal or flock of birds. She spends a lot of time out of doors in her native Washington and compares the experience to home. "It's an easier walk than in the mountains because it's all flat, but the traction is obviously worse. It's like walking through the rain forest on a really wet day, only with no rain. And then she adds, "It's really nice to get to play in the mud." A girl after my own heart. Finally, with four hours of steady marching behind us, fatigue sets in. It's about this time when I begin to understand why the experienced walkers are all wearing Lycra or Spandex shorts. Wet shorts, no matter what their length, chafe. My nylon running shorts are just beginning to wear on my thighs. I look around and see Augenstein's companion struggle in his baggy surfer shorts. At the beginning of the walk the two students had been poking fun at the older Lycra-clad crowd. They're chaffing, not laughing, now.

I ignore my rustling shorts and aching muscles and search the horizon for dry land—a sort of reverse oasis effect. Despite my exhaustion, I'm determined to keep up with the experienced walkers. I can spot the dike, and the end of the trek, not so far in the distance. My pace increases, my stride lengthens and suddenly . . . kersplat! I'm flat on my face in the mud.

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KERSPLAT! I'm flat on my face in the mud.*

I slip and slide and right myself as fast as possible, laughing, and continue on with my group. No damage. Just a welcome feeling of muddiness from my high-top sneakers to the bill of my baseball cap. I'm five years old again. And my mother won't be waiting at the end of the journey to spoil all my fun!

IF YOU GO - THE MESSY FACTS

Walking tours cost around € 25 per person. There is a wide variety to choose from. The best source of information is the *Stichting Wadloopcentrum*. Although their website is in Dutch (www.wadlopen.com) they will email you in English to answer questions (info@wadlopen.com). The schedule is usually posted at the beginning of the calendar year.

Dress in layers of clothing. Wear sunglasses, bring strong sunscreen, but expect to be cold and wet, as well. Put cameras, food, etc. in waterproof bags (zippered sandwich bags are fine) and then in a daypack. You will need some sort of high-top sneaker or dry boot. Most walkers buy a cheap pair that they can discard at the end of the walk – check out *Wadlooplein* or some other used clothing market. Lycra or spandex shorts are a must to prevent chafing.

Amsterdam is a three or four hour drive from most wadlopen routes, so it's best to spend at least one night in the area. The village of Pieterburen, with about 500 inhabitants, has several hotels and campsites, as well as a seal rescue center and historical garden that are interesting to visit.

Other marches

Sittard Kennedy March is a celebratory waltz for the assassinated US president. Various cities and dates http://www.kennedymars.org/default_eng.htm

The walking version of the great 11 city skating race 27-05-2003 <http://www.elfstedenwandeltocht.nl>

By far the most inclusive site for the dozens of the dozens of walks that are staged throughout the year http://www.wandelpad.nl/wnd/Evenementen_Tochten/more2.html

