

Going Dutch for Tulips



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

After years of procrastination, my wife and I finally made it to Keukenhof Gardens in The Netherlands. Mention tulips and Holland comes to mind. What better place to appreciate that country's national flower in the most brilliant and explosive colours than in the largest flower garden in the world?

Spread over 32 hectares, Keukenhof (meaning Kitchen Garden in Dutch) is also known as the Garden of Europe. Located in the small town of Lisse in the South Holland province, it was established in 1949 by the town mayor as an exposition ground for horticulturists in the country and elsewhere in Europe to showcase flower hybrids which would contribute significantly to turn The Netherlands into the world's largest flower exporter.

Keukenhof is actually made up of a few gardens with distinctly different styles, including the historical garden, English landscape garden, nature garden and Japanese country garden.

After travelling through the Netherlands and Belgium for almost a month, we arrived at the charming town of Leiden in early April 2016. At the central railway station early the following morning, we boarded the first bus for Keukenhof Gardens, 20km away. The return bus fare was €10 each and admission to the Gardens cost us another €16 each.

We were among the first to enter the Keukenhof. The garden is planted with 7 million bulb flowers, mainly tulips but there are also daffodils and hyacinths. There are 4 sections, each with a different theme. The overall theme is The Golden Age, referring to an era that has seen trade, arts and sciences flourishing in the country.



Visitors can explore the Gardens freely via 15km of footpaths.

Last year, Keukenhof Gardens was open from 24 March to 16 May and between 800,000 and 1 million visitors were expected during these 8 weeks.

We spent the whole day, about 10 hours, there and were able to see practically all that was worth seeing. Of the four sections, Juliana and Willem-Alexander are extremely beautiful. The latter showcases a vast number of tulip hybrids and lilies as well as other flowers and plants. At the Oranje Nassau Pavillion, different cut flower shows are staged every week. Beatrix Pavillion has a permanent orchid and anthurium show.

There is a windmill on the eastern edge of the Gardens. Visitors can take regular boat trips on the adjacent canals to view the vast bulb fields in the vicinity.

Ironically, tulips are not native to The Netherlands. They were mainly found in the mountains between Turkey and China. In the mid-16th Century, the powerful Sultan Suleiman II of Ottoman Empire filled his palace

gardens with the most beautiful tulips. He gave some tulip bulbs to an Austrian ambassador who, in turn, passed them to a prominent Dutch botanist, Carolus Clusius, who was then living in Vienna. When Clusius went back to the Netherlands and settled in Leiden in 1593, he planted the tulip bulbs in Hortus Botanicus in Leiden, thus introducing tulips to his homeland. The word "tulip" comes from the Persian word, "tulipan", which means turban.

During the Dutch Golden Age, which roughly spanned the whole of the 17th Century, the unique nature of the tulip, especially the saturated, intense colours of the petals, soon made it a status symbol among the nouveau rich, and contract prices of tulip bulbs went sky high.

At the peak of the tulip madness in 1637, a single bulb could be sold for 10 times the annual income of a skilled craftsman! But of course this couldn't last and the market collapsed shortly thereafter. Today, the term, "tulip mania", is used to describe any economic bubble where asset prices deviate tremendously from intrinsic value. ■