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On the desolate and uninhabited Rottemerplaat, the most northerly point of the Netherlands, a birdwatching observation tower and several sheds stand as the last human bastion on the final stretch of firm ground.



The Wadden Sea near Ter-schelling at low tide. The channels revealed resemble topaz green veins in the white sand.





This is the Biesbosch in the summer: enjoying nature in a kayak. Most shingle banks are now nature reserves or recreation areas.



A beaver leaves its lodge between the pollard willows at high tide in Rhoon. The lodge is in a so-called willow tidal forest along the Oude Maas, singular in its kind, for this is the only freshwater tidal river in the delta of Rhine and Meuse.









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Back in time: Zaanse Schans, the open-air attraction, in the snow with historic industrial windmills. The right hand page shows unique Zaanse timber architecture. The Zaan region is the oldest industrial area in Western Europe.

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The Grevelingenmeer near Battenoord, a hamlet on the South-Holland island Overflakkee, is a favourite wintering place for flamingos. The striking birds give an exotic touch – both literally and figuratively – to the area.







Stacked sheaves of reeds in Kalenberg (a small village situated in the middle of the Weerribben-Wieden National Park) stand out sharply against the surroundings shrouded in mist.



Cows in a meadow close to Westbroek, near Utrecht. For centuries, cows have been a characteristic element in the meadow landscape and captured by countless painters.

PEAT MARSHLAND

At one time, peat marshes covered large parts of the Netherlands. Until the late Middle Ages people left these inhospitable areas untouched; they were swampy, inaccessible and swarming with mosquitoes. During the eleventh century, people began reclaiming the peat marshes. It only took place on the peat areas on the high sands much later. There were expansive peat moors, particularly in Drenthe and the east of Groningen, long into the twentieth century, where a visitor could easily get lost. The majority of peat areas have now been cultivated, and today the peat marshes are being restored.

In the lowland there are the peat meadows – characteristic of the Netherlands – with their network of drainage ditches, the habitat of grassland birds and the mole cricket, a rare member of that species. On the peat on the high sand ground there are areas planted with heather, grasses and birch trees. The peat area also has many stretches of water and marsh woods.

Peat, or turf, is a brown-black substance that consists of partly decayed vegetation matter that falls and is submerged in water. Peat water is an acidic environment with de-oxygenated conditions. Bacteria and fungi do not thrive under such circumstances, so consequently the organic material hardly decays at all. In low peatlands, nutrient-rich ground water rose to the surface (see page XX), and this created the marshy conditions necessary for the formation of peat. Peat only formed on higher sand soil if rainwater, which is actually poor in nutrients, could be retained. That is the reason why vegetation is fairly scanty.

From around the year 1000, agriculture, livestock farming and turf harvesting began. Ditches were dug to drain the peat. Soil compaction resulted. The land sank and become increasingly damp, too wet for agriculture and ultimately even for meadows. The solution came around 1400: windmills. These could be used to pump up the water and discharge it into ‘boezems’ (water drainage lakes). As time went by, turf harvesting increased. In the course of the twentieth century, coal, gas and oil assumed the role of main sources of energy. Around 1960, turf harvesting came to an end.

The peatlands that remain are today (just as in the Middle Ages) largely used as meadows or hayfields because they are too damp for other uses.









Friendly rolling hills near Epen, in South Limburg, during the autumn. The Dutch feel as if they are abroad here, which is not that strange since Belgium is virtually round the corner.