

Giethoorn - the Venice of the North

Daan Kloeg & Hans Wolkers

A complete travel and photo guide
to the most romantic village in Europe



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Table of Contents

Introduction	5	Old Dutch Crafts	77	Addresses	160
		The Boat Builder	78	Tourist Information	160
History	6	The Eel Fisher	83	Hotels	160
		The Reed Cutter	88	B&B	160
How to get there	13	The Potter	101	Restaurants & Cafés	164
		The Chef	104	Camping & Camper	165
Discover Giethoorn	15			Renting a Boat	166
Southern Giethoorn	17	National Park		Renting a Bike	167
Northern Giethoorn	19	Weerribben-Wieden	107	Museums	168
Short Hike	21			Galleries	168
Long Hike	23	Special Places	123	Nature	169
Boat Trip	26	Car Route	124		
		Dwarsgracht	125		
Highlights	30	Wanneperveen	130		
Baptist Church	31	Zwartsluis	132		
Museum 't Olde Maat Uus	32	Sint Jansklooster	135		
		Vollenhove	140		
Four Seasons		Pumping Station			
Giethoorn in Photos	33	A.F Stroink	144		
Spring	35	Blokzijl	145		
Summer	39	Nederland	152		
Autumn	56	Kalenberg	153		
Winter	67	Windmill De Wicher	157		



Introduction

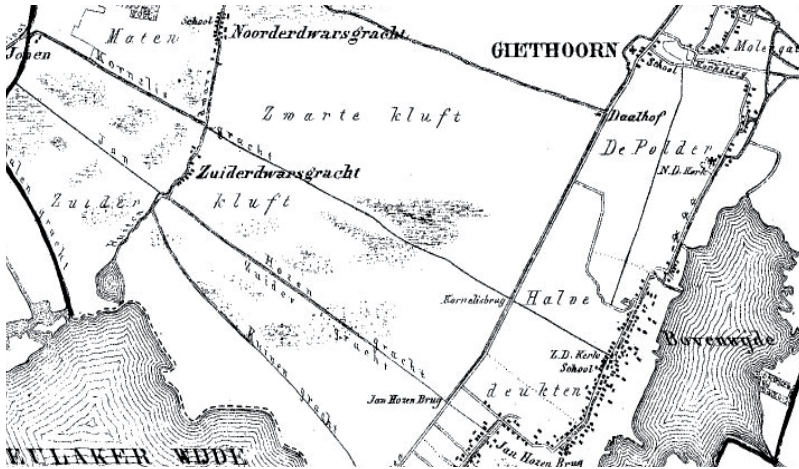


Giethoorn - the Venice of the North

Without any doubt, Giethoorn is one of Holland's best-known secrets. A hidden gem with a rich tradition and history, close to Amsterdam. In Giethoorn's center time has come to a stop. Many traditional farm houses, with their characteristic reed-covered roofing, compete for the visitor's attention. Highlights are century-old canals, wooden bridges and workshops, where wooden boats are still being built using traditional techniques and craftsmanship. This guide will offer you a complete overview of Giethoorn, a romantic town that really earns its nickname 'Venice of the North'. There is plenty of attention for the historic old

farmhouses, the traditional crafts, but also for the excellent restaurants, for example the not to be missed famous, two-Michelin star restaurant. The guide also contains a clear, up-to-date map, with walking routes through the town center as well as marked highlights. This will efficiently help you find the most attractive places to visit. In addition to Giethoorn, the guide will also help you discover nearby highlights, like the historic town of Blokzijl, Zwartsluis, Vollenhove and the extensive nature areas, dominated by water, reed, and spectacular skies. These areas are home to a wide variety of bird species, big mammals, like foxes, deer and otters, and the best sunrises of the country.





Map of Giethoorn 1860

History

The early days

Giethoorn's history began as early as 1290, when the Catholic Church encouraged wandering gypsies to settle down, by giving them a piece of land. Digging peat, harvesting reed, and some agriculture were the main source of income for the new residents. By cultivating the fertile land, the new settlers were surprised to find many goat horns, remnants of previous residents that suffered from a devastating flood during the past century. This inspired them to call their new home *Geytenhoren* or 'Goat horn'. Over the years this evolved to *Geythorn* and eventually into Giethoorn. Here and there, goat images refer to the town's historic name.

Peat, reed and farming

For centuries, an important activity of Giethoorn's residents was harvesting peat as well as reed. The transport of the brown chunks of turf and large reed bundles was done by boat, using different canals. These were especially dug out for this kind of transport, but slowly, farmers also started using them to move cattle, stacks of hay and their crops. The central canal runs right through the town center and many farms can therefore only be reached by bridges. These bridges have a characteristic, high design, so that the boats and their cargo could easily pass underneath. A water village with its unique designed boats was developing: the Venice of the North.





After the Second World War, the peat harvesting came to an end and farming became increasingly important. However, the reed harvest is still important for the Giethoorn community. The many reed roofs in Giethoorn, but also in the rest of the Netherlands, require a steady supply of this sustainable material.

Scene from the film 'Fanfare', 1958



Visit of Queen Juliana to Giethoorn on July 1, 1953

Modern times: tourism

Tourism in Giethoorn was basically non-existent until the late 1950s. That changed when Dutch movie maker Bert Haanstra made a successful movie, *Fanfare*, about this iconic village. After his film came out, suddenly, the traditional little village was famous and it didn't take long before tourism was booming. In the beginning, mainly Dutch people visited Giethoorn, but within ten years, also tourists from abroad, mainly Belgium and Germany, found their way to the 'Venice of the North'. Tourism, but also a reduced demand for reed caused a change in the town and many traditional customs were lost. The sailing farmers with their boats full of livestock disappeared and many farms were sold and rebuilt to accommodate people from elsewhere. The increased tourism also led to more restaurants, cafés, hotels, boat and bike rental places. But the village of Giethoorn kept its charm.

From all over the world

Today, Giethoorn still is a unique and charming place, with less than 3000 inhabitants. It is visited by people from all over the world. Despite modern times, still many traditional arts and crafts can be found in the village. From harvesting reed, fishing for eel, to building the traditional Punter boats. Every year, an estimated 1.5 million tourists find their way to the ‘Venice of the North.’

Iconic boats in Giethoorn

Giethoorn has several unique boat designs dating back to the pre-tourist times, when peat harvest and farming were still the dominant sources of income. Depending on the specific needs, there were three main differently-sized designs. Although today’s life has changed dramatically, and tourism is the main source of income for Giethoorn, these boats are still being built by a handful of specialized ship yards in and around town, using traditional

techniques and materials (see page 78). There are still two Punter shipyards in Giethoorn, where the traditionally designed boats are still manufactured using ancient techniques.

The Gieterse Punter

The Gieterse Punter (Gieterse Pointer) is the most important boat in and around Giethoorn. It has a recognizable, iconic design that has survived many centuries. This versatile boat is about 6 meters long and 1.5 meters wide. People used it for all kinds of transport and it was as important as a car is today. A Punter could be used as a sailing boat, but in Giethoorn’s canals, it was pushed using a long pole that could reach the shallow bottom. This technique

*Top: the greengrocer in a Punter,
Giethoorn, May 27, 1946*

*Bottom: fashion show in Punters,
Giethoorn July 10, 1954*





Transportation of milk in a Gieterse Vlot, 1926

is called *bomen* in Dutch. The Punter was not only used for transport, but also for family visits, funerals and marriages, while shop owners, like the butcher and baker also sailed the Gieterse Punter to deliver their goods. Laborers working in peat digging or reed harvesting used it to commute to their work. And even market salesmen sailed the Punter to transport their goods over longer distances to local markets. And even today, this boat is also still professionally used for the transport of reed, while tourists can rent these traditional boats to explore Giethoorn.

The Gieterse Vlot

A bit bigger than the Punter is the Gieterse Vlot (the Gieterse raft), a boat about 10 meters long and 2 meters wide. This bigger sized boat was preferably used to transport heavier loads of cargo, like the big 30-liter metal milk cans, but also large hauls of hay, peat, and reed could be efficiently transported



with the Gieterse Vlot. The boat was big enough to function as a ferry to local markets as well. Similar to the Punter, this boat could be equipped with sails, but was mostly pushed by a long pole.

The Gieterse Bok

The third important and biggest ship used in and around Giethoorn is the Gieterse Bok. This was a huge ship that could exceed 12 meters and sometimes had a cabin for comfort. Not only huge loads of crops could be moved, but even livestock, like cows, were transported. These ships were costly, and therefore, farmers could rent these boats during certain seasons.

Top right: Punter yard, 1946



Gieterse Bok, Giethoorn, 1946

Transportation of cattle in a Gieterse Bok



Peat harvest

In the old days, collecting peat was the financial cork keeping Giethoorn afloat and the harvest shaped the landscape around Giethoorn as we know it today. The lakes around Giethoorn are the direct result of large-scale peat harvesting. Peat is the humified leftover of small peat plants, Sphagnum, that grew massively in the swampy areas of the Netherlands. When these plants died, their remains were preserved due to the wet, oxygen-poor conditions. On top of the dead layer of plants, new peat plants could grow and slowly the peat layer increased. Over hundreds of years, layers of this humified material, sometimes several meters thick, were built up and could be dug and collected. A shallow lake, roughly one to two meters deep, was left. After drying, peat was mainly used as fuel. Already during Roman times, peat was burnt to heat houses, but its popularity increased during the Middle Ages.

During these times, the population was growing, while fire wood became more and more scarce. Peat became the dominant fuel for households, but also for the industry, like breweries, distilleries and ovens used by blacksmiths. During the Golden Age, it fueled the industrialization. Peat winning decreased when coal became available during the 19th century, but due to scarcity during the Second World War, peat remained important to heat houses until the late 20th century.

Reed harvest

Around Giethoorn, reed harvesting is one of the traditional trades. It still is a valuable resource used mainly to cover roofs. It is sustainable and insulates really well. The reed from around Giethoorn is one of the best in Europe. In the old days, reed cutting was mainly done by hand. With special knives, the harvesters cut the stems and bound them



Digging peat was hard labor





together in large bundles using ropes. Today, reed mowing is done by special machines that can also help with combing the reed, to remove the small parts, so that only high-quality long stems are left. Then, the reed bundles are tied together by hand. These bundles are placed upright leaning against each other in tipi-shaped piles, the so-called *Stoeken*, to dry. After the first drying period outside, the reed is moved to a covered storage for further drying.

Reed is commercially collected between December and early April from an area of roughly 2500 hectares. Approximately, 350 workers and 30 companies are involved in this traditional craft. It is seasonal, part-time work, and most harvesters have additional jobs outside the season, for example fishing or covering roofs with reed. Harvesting reed is not only of commercial interest. It is also part of nature management. If this marsh plant would be allowed to grow unlimited, the

marshlands would get taken over by forest and disappear. To allow the survival of this important craft, while maintaining the characteristic natural reed lands, the Dutch government subsidizes the harvesters with a yearly 2.2 million euro's. Not all reed is harvested though: patches are left here and there, since these are important as shelter and nesting area for birds. For the same reason, after April the harvest is forbidden, to allow an undisturbed nesting period for birds.



Giehoorn, punter.

Left: harvesting reed by hand and transporting it on a Punter



How to get there?

How to get there by car

Although traveling by public transport outside rush hour is reasonably good, you might prefer to be independent of trains and buses. Going to Giethoorn with your own car is a bit quicker: it roughly takes one and a half hour from Amsterdam to Giethoorn. It has the additional advantage that you can explore the area around Giethoorn. For example, the National Park Weerribben-Wieden (page 107) or the numerous picturesque towns around Giethoorn, like Blokzijl (page 145), Zwartsluis (page 132) or Kalenberg (page 153).

Car rentals Schiphol Airport

Renting a car is an excellent option to be independent of the public transport schedules. In Amsterdam there is a variety of rental companies, for example at Schiphol Airport. It is a good idea to book your rental car in advance and pick it up at the airport upon arrival. Reservations can be made in advance by using for example the website www.booking.com and choose 'car rentals'. Here, you can select your rental dates as well as the pick-up and drop-off location. But there are also other car rental websites, like Hertz or Europcar.

On page 124 you can find a touristic car route