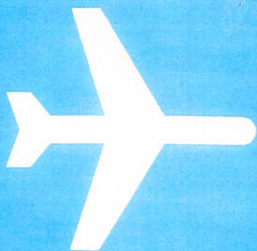


TRIPS_

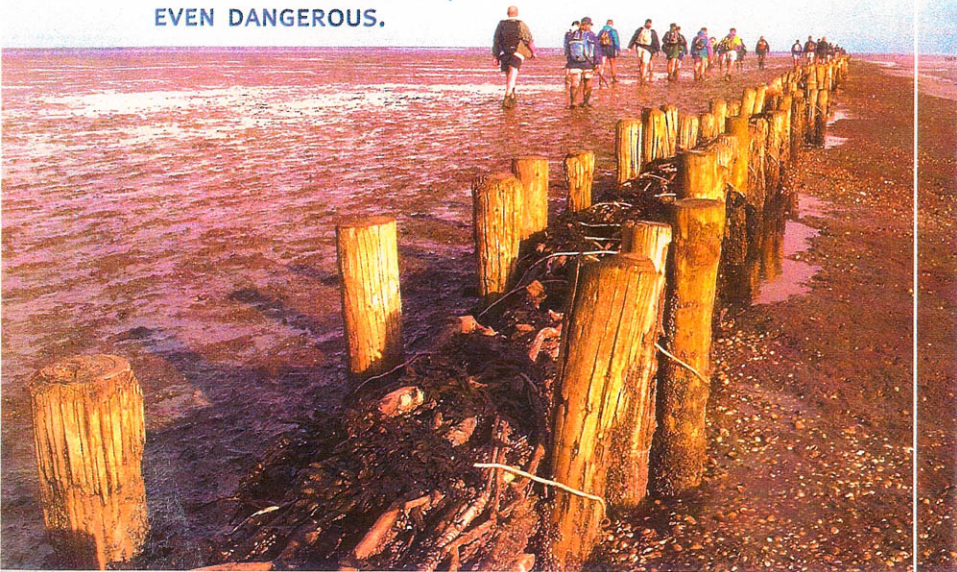


Mudwalking Holland

> Get ready for mud and the squelching rhythm of your feet sinking in and out of it.

PHOTOS: DAVID PALER

MUD WALKING (WADLOPEN) HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS
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The Wadden Sea (Waddenzee) is a shallow, inland puddle north of the Netherlands. From atop a dyke that marks the reaches of protected land and the beginning of Holland's wind-combed water wilds, the Wad is a reed-and mud-matted littoral. When the tide peels back, the sea floor looks like a pewter plate, reflecting the stooping Dutch sky.

If you've built of hearty material, from May to mid-October you can walk across the clay to the Netherlands' northernmost barrier islands that lie like a perforation between the Wad and the choppy Northern Sea. The walking creates its own squelching rhythm: step with the left foot, sillink into the batter. Step right, sillink to the hip. Extract your left leg. Step left. Sillink. Extract. Step right, sillink. Repeat. Mud walking (Wadlopen) has been described as "horizontal alpinism" and is guided because it can be rough, even dangerous.

Most Dutchers live below sea level and amidst the highest population density in the Western world. This means that the Wadden Sea, at low tide, represents an immersion in, and departure from, the character of the country: It is a low, vast, open space whose only residents are fish, seals, and 5,000 species of fowl.

The heftiest nature reserve in Holland, the Wad is also Europe's largest intertidal mudflat, and one of the largest temperate mudflat ecosystems on earth. It supports salt marshes, wet meadows, sand banks, dune systems, and reclaimed polders. A constant flushing tidal flow carves deep channels and high banks into it, shifting its muddy pattern every six hours with tidal ebb and flow.

During breeding season, boaters can be fined for playing radios too loudly on the Wad. This is because its banks provide a resting place, at low tide, for gray and common seals, and home to dozens of rare plant species. An estimated six to nine million birds (with names like British hegear: Dunlin, Curlew, Wigeon, Grey Plover) use the Wad as a lay-over during their annual migrations. The slick also serves as a nursery for commercially significant fish.

But even mud can be endangered. Experts estimate that pockets beneath the Wad hold up to 240 billion square yards of natural gas worth US\$16.5 billion. The World Wildlife Federation has called for the international community to recognize the Wadden Sea as a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) and has called it one of the protected coastal areas most at risk from a global sea and temperature rise, erosion, and greater variability of coastal water salinity. Because non-biodegradable pollutants are massaged by tides into the clay and ingested by plankton which pass them through the food chain, life on the Wad is threatened by shipping, military activities, gas and oil exploration, water pollution from nearby rivers, overfishing, harbor development, and swelling tourism.

Which is to say, after riding against the wind into a driving rain on an old Gazelle bicycle, you won't find anything more Dutch than walking through Dutch mud. —SHONQUIS MORENO

Guided trips between eight and 20 kilometers (three to five hours) cost about US\$10 to US\$30. Reserve a spot in advance. Walking without a guide is not only unlawful, but can prove fatal.

Stichting Wadloopen Pieterburen, Pieterburen
May–October, 40–150 people, +31-595-528300,
www.wadlopen.com, info@wadlopen.com

Dijkstra's Wadlooptochten, Pieterburen
Mid-May–mid-October, up to 150 people, +31-595-528345

Henk Schildhuis, Loppersum
May–September, up to 12 people, +31-596-572886

Lammert Kwant, Ezinge
Year-round, 10–15 people, +31-594-622029,
www.wadgids.nl, wadlopen@planet.nl

For more information, check out the Netherlands Board of Tourism website:
www.visittholland.com/coast/wadden/mudwalking.html

RATINGS

Fitness: **F F**

Cost: **\$**

Time: **1**

Gear: **G G**

Technical Ability: **F**

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