

Welcome to the vegan capital of Holland

by **Isabel Fraser**

IT'S not every day you float down a motorway on a boat – but in Utrecht it's a rite of passage. 'The Netherlands is known for our canals. Less known is their history,' says our guide Jitte (pronounced 'Yetter'). 'The one you're sailing on right now had a whole other life 50 years ago.'

Once a medieval moat, the Catharijnesingel canal that flows through Utrecht's centre was filled with cement in the 1970s and turned into a motorway to boost city life.

The sustainable food scene in Utrecht matches the city's status as an eco-conscious utopia. There's even an 'eco-sexy' hotel...

Reopening the restored canals six years ago was just one way of greenifying the Netherlands' fourth-largest city. Now, with more bikes than residents and vegan food galore, the city is cementing itself as an eco-conscious utopia.

It was also one of the few cities in the Netherlands to be relatively

unscathed by World War II, which is why much of its historic architecture is still intact – and often reinvented.

This is true of the medieval cellars that line canals below the city level. The garage spaces have been transformed into vibrant yoga studios, restaurants and cafés. So, talking of



Dutch delights: Enjoy a falafel wrap alongside a view of the city's Dom Tower

food – Utrecht isn't all vegan but it's a sustainable foodie delight. Broodje kaas (a type of cheese sandwich) bitterballen (deep-fried balls of mince), Hollandse nieuwe (raw herring served with onion).

These staples of Dutch cuisine don't exactly scream vegan.

With the rise of sustainable travel and a growing student population, Utrecht's food scene has followed eco-friendly suit.

In a dark-blue building on the Mariaplaats, Le Jardin works with local suppliers and grows their own produce, so the menu is shaped by the season and can change each day. Think pointed cabbage with passion fruit puree and roasted cauliflower with toasted lentils.

Another venue, BROEI, creates a relaxed vibe through low-hanging lights, rustic benches and art on every wall. The lightest bread and butter pudding I've ever tasted (vegan, or not) features on the menu.

If there's one lunch spot not to miss, it's Life's A Peach. Nothing is snooty about its menu of gluten-free focaccias and sweet treats. The vegan 'nduja focaccia - with sausage substituted for a spicy, smoked paste made of lentils and sun-dried tomatoes - is better than the real deal.

For slower-paced luxury, try Kasvio – home of seasonal plant-based dishes. Minimalist interior design and beautifully crafted plates make for an exquisite dining experience. Lion's mane mushroom baked on charcoal, with roasted seaweed and orca beans, is a creative meat alternative with truly complex flavours.

If you prefer to be guided around Utrecht's vegan food scene, take a tour with V For Food (£60 for three-and-a-half hours, seven bites to eat and two drinks). This will take you to the Last Vegas snackbar, which produces vegan alternatives to traditional Dutch snacks including bitterballen; and Kluts bakery, home to rich, sweet treats including a salted caramel cookie that's to die for.

When you get to FLFL, order a fresh falafel wrap and stroll a few feet to eat with a view of the Dom Tower.

Want to burn off the calories?

Rent two wheels and spend an afternoon cycling on the cobbled streets, keeping a look out for the



Wheels in motion: Isabel gets on her bike to navigate around the canals

statues of Dutch icon Miffy – the beloved children's character created by Dick Bruna in his Jeruzalemstraat studio. You can catch a recreation of the studio in the Centraal Museum.

Wander through the Neude Library – a former post office – and check out its Spectacle of Books exhibition, where unpublished works are given their chance to shine.

Another building that has maintained its historic exterior is the Conscious Hotel, my 'eco-sexy' (their words, not mine) digs for the trip.

Nduja focaccia
ch, above, and
Le Jardin



Having been
a monastery and then
an orphanage, the
building became
home to the legendary
music venue Tivoli
Oudegracht, hosting
Prince, Red Hot Chili
Peppers and Nirvana.

The hotel encapsulates all this city stands for: recycled furniture, water-saving showers and solar panels provide a sustainable stay (from £98 per night).

It would be disingenuous to say I've been vegan since coming back home, but I have been eating plant-based food whenever I can.

Getting there Utrecht's vegan offerings are just one way the city makes sustainable travel easy. Firstly, there's no need to fly.

A Eurostar from King's Cross to Rotterdam and then a Dutch Railways line from Rotterdam to Utrecht gets you there in just over four hours.

Isabel was a guest of the Netherlands Board of Tourism, holland.com, and hosted by Discover Utrecht

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