

NIEUWERKERK AAN DEN IJSSEL JOURNAL

# A Rare Deep Freeze Warms the Dutch Soul



Michael Kooren/Reuters

Canals in the Netherlands no longer freeze every winter, so the chance to ice-skate outdoors created a frenzy in Kinderdijk and elsewhere in the south. "Everybody took days off," said one mayor.

By JOHN TAGLIABUE

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## NIEUWERKERK AAN DEN IJSSEL, the Netherlands

— For the first time in 12 years, the Netherlands' canals froze this month, bringing the Dutch, who like their tulips in neat rows, a heady mix of pandemonium and euphoria.



The New York Times

Canals in Nieuwerkerk aan den IJssel lured many skaters.

Hundreds of thousands of skaters, their cheeks as red as apples in the subzero temperatures, took to the ice, and hospital wards were filled with dozens of people with fractured arms, sprained ankles and broken legs.

Train engineers were ordered to go slowly to avoid hitting skaters who clambered over railway tracks to get from one frozen canal to another. Even the minister of defense, an avid skater, fell and broke his wrist. His ministry announced that the national defense remained in safe hands, even if one of them was in a cast.

In the 19th century, when Hans Brinker, the hero of the novel in which he tries to win a pair of silver skates, coasted along Holland's ice, the canals froze almost every year. But water pollution and [climate change](#) have made this so rare that today a boy of 15, Brinker's age, may never have seen a frozen canal, or at least remember one. Until, that is, this year.

"For us, it's in our genes," said Gus Gustafsson, 68, a retired insurance executive, explaining why he and his wife rushed out to buy new skates and take to the ice under a cloudless blue sky. "It was like a frenzy that came over people, including lots of kids, like my granddaughter, who is 5." With thousands of others, they skated northeast toward Utrecht,

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is 5." With thousands of others, they skated northeast toward Utrecht, then toward the cheese capital, Gouda.

With an influx of immigrants, the country has been struggling to maintain what it considers its Dutch soul, and Mr. Gustafsson was one of many here who thought the skating experience enabled the Dutch to reconnect with their identity. "There were only Dutch people on the ice," he went on. "I saw no people of Arab descent."

But André Bonthuis, who has been mayor in this town of 23,000 people for the past 20 years, said he saw Indonesians and Moroccans, among other newcomers to the Netherlands, on the ice. "It's rather new for people from Morocco," he said. But he agreed there was something very Dutch about canal skating, which is depicted in paintings by Dutch masters as early as the 17th century.

"Water is our friend, and 10 percent of our area is water," he said.

"From the oldest days, in very little villages, people could skate to each other."

Mr. Bonthuis, 59, said he skated with friends recently but also spent a lot of time just skating meditatively alone, leaning slightly forward, arms crossed behind the back. "It's nice to skate when there is a beautiful view of the fields," he said. "You see a lot of people skating alone."

Asked whether the skating frenzy had an economic impact, or perhaps had helped the Dutch forget the downturn, he replied: "Everybody took days off." He added: "A lot of Dutch canceled ski holidays, so that hurt the economy, at least in the ski resorts."

But over at Haitsma, a big hardware and skating supply store, Henk Haitsma, 62, the owner, was not complaining. His shelves were swept clean. "I sold 3,000 to 4,000 pairs of skates in the last 10 days," he said. In that time frame he would have sold several hundred in other years.

The Dutch, famed for their champion speed skaters, like to go first class on the ice. The most expensive pair Mr. Haitsma sells, fancy skates with hinged blades, retails for \$1,190. Other expensive models have removable linings that are put in a microwave oven, then pulled over the skater's foot, where they shrink to the perfect size. Many of the store's skates have removable blades, enabling skaters to walk off the ice without damaging their blades.

Monique Matze says she just hopes skaters stay off the railroad tracks. She is the spokeswoman for ProRail, which operates the Dutch railway tracks, and she was troubled by the numbers of skaters crossing the rails, many wearing bulky skates.

"When our tracks run over water and people want to get from one side to the other, they just climb over," she said. There had been no accidents, she said, but she added: "This weekend there were a lot, lot of skaters, and we had no means to facilitate crossings, so the only thing we could do was to caution them."

There may have been no railway accidents, but there were plenty of other mishaps. The defense minister, [Eimert Van Middelkoop](#), "fell on a rough spot on the ice," according to a statement by the ministry. This week he was back at his desk, with his arm in a cast.

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“He’s over 60; he shouldn’t have been skating,” said Henk Van Engelenburg, a retired architect, with a laugh. Mr. Van Engelenburg, 74, who makes his home in a restored 17th century windmill, said his wife, who loved to skate, had a problem hip. “She cried because she couldn’t skate,” he said. But his 6-year-old grandson was on the ice, pushing a chair to avoid falling, the traditional Dutch way of teaching children to skate.

By this week, the rain and clouds of the usual Dutch winter were back. Weather experts said that the cold snap that brought the ice earlier in the month was caused by cold air that came rolling in from the east, across Germany and into the Netherlands. It was “favorable weather for skating,” said Harry Geurts, a spokesman for the Royal Dutch Meteorological Institute, in nearby De Bilt. “Lots of sun, little wind, really incredible.”

Mr. Geurts said he did not skate. “I just like to walk in the woods,” he said. “When you have freezing fog, it’s fantastic.”

Oddly, though, the cold swept across only the southern Netherlands and not the north. That mattered because this year is the 100th anniversary of the first race across frozen canals through 11 cities in the north, and it has been repeated every year in the past century when there has been ice.

Will there be another cold snap to freeze the canals of the 11 cities tour? “Not in the coming weeks,” Mr. Geurts said. “At the earliest, in February.”

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