



Pack up and go...

Home or abroad, our weekly travel pages have all the best deals

For eight magical weeks every year the Keukenhof gardens opens its gates to visitors, **writes YVONNE GORDON**

Go Dutch in a floral wonderland

It's early morning at the Keukenhof and the sails of the windmill are turning gently in the breeze. We've climbed the windmill stairs and can see that behind the mill, acres of bulb fields stretch into the distance, with stripes of green, then pink, yellow and purple tulips growing.

But there is no need to walk the tulip fields to admire the blooms — this is Keukenhof Gardens, a 32-hectare floral wonderland in the Netherlands filled with a staggering 7 million blooms and just 40km from the centre of Amsterdam and 20km from Schiphol Airport.

Throughout the park, paths and walkways wind between beds of tulips of all different colours — a bed of purple, then orange, then yellow, white, pink, red. Some of the tulips have two colours.

There are lakes, trees, pathways and benches and in one part of the garden, a 'river' of blue tulips curves along a wide floral pathway between

the trees. There are also daffodils, hyacinths, crocuses and cherry blossom trees.

In the Keukenhof's vast indoor pavilions, there are exhibitions of new tulip varieties, cut flower shows and one pavilion is packed full of orchids of all different colours. One of the first things I learn at the Juliana Pavilion is that the

tulip, the distinctive icon of the Netherlands, didn't originate there but came via Turkey, and



FLOWER POWER — The Keukenhof gardens span 32 hectares



Tulips were at the root of the first stock market crash

have a disease, the market collapsed overnight and many fortunes were lost.

Luckily the tulip trade survived — and in the historic garden in the centre of Keukenhof, you can admire beds with rare species of tulip going back to the 1700s.

We started the day with a 7am trip to Flora Holland in nearby Aalsmeer. This is the world's largest flower auction — the size of 400 football fields, handling more than 20 million cut flowers and 2.5 million potted plants a day.

We watched, fascinated, as workers drove trolleys full of flowers of all colours and shapes around, delivering flowers by order to 'streets' in the vast warehouses. There's a giant conveyor belt, 19km long,

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FLORAL ART — Each year there's a themed floral mosaic at Keukenhof

also moving the flowers and plants. In a separate room, there are huge auction clocks on the wall and the dealers buy the flowers, stopping the clock as it counts down, for each sale.

Hundreds of flowers per minute are sold this way. Some 30 per cent of the flowers are imported from as far away as Africa and South America and 85 per cent will be exported.

Keukenhof is also near the historic city of Haarlem which dates back to 1245 and is just 15km from Amsterdam but much quieter, with lots of small streets and shops to explore. While Keukenhof is open, there are four daily buses to Haarlem.

There, at the Frans Hals Museum, dedicated to the

famous Golden Age painter, the rooms are decorated with special bouquets of tulips in vases made by design students during the weeks of Keukenhof.

Over at the craft brewery Jopenkerk, set in an old church, you can enjoy a Tulpomania Jopenbier during the Keukenhof weeks. This brewery started making the beer in 2015 from a 17th-century recipe.

Visitors to Amsterdam will spot thousands of tulips for sale on the streets, in flower markets and planted in parks, gardens and public spaces.

A visit to Keukenhof and Haarlem gives an insight into the flower's history and a chance to admire thousands of these colourful flowers up close.

How to get there...

Ryanair has four flights a day from Dublin to Amsterdam Schiphol Airport (www.ryanair.com, fares from €24.99) and Aer Lingus has four daily flights from Dublin and two from Cork (www.aerlingus.com, from €29.99). From Schiphol, take the Keukenhof Express Bus 858 or 361 — you can buy a bus and garden combo ticket.

Keukenhof Gardens

Keukenhof is open for eight weeks a year — this year until May 16. Entrance is €16 per adult and €8 per child, see www.keukenhof.nl for more details. The price including bus from Schiphol is €24 (or €12.50 for children). For information on the flower auction, see www.floraholland.nl and for more travel information, see www.iamsterdam.com.



GET HOOKED — Visitors to Hook Lighthouse will hear the stories of light keepers

SEA STORIES AT HOOK HEAD

Hook Lighthouse at Hook Peninsula in Co Wexford has a brand new tour experience. The tour at the 800-year-old lighthouse is part of the new tourism project, Ireland's Ancient East.

Visitors will ascend the 115 steps of the Lighthouse Tower and meet a life-size figure of St Dubhan, who with his fellow monks, dedicated their lives to the safety of all of

those at sea in the early 5th century, while William Marshal, the first Earl of Pembroke, will also grace visitors with his 'presence'.

Visitors will also hear stories of lighthouse life before automation and real life tales of the light keepers that manned the tower, saving lives at sea. For information on the new tour, see www.hookheritage.ie.

Kids go free on this family-friendly deal

Irish Ferries has great news for parents planning a break to Britain this year with a top family-friendly offer.

Following on from the success of their 'EPIC' passenger sale, Mum and Dad are the only ones who pay when families travel by car on Irish Ferries' cruise ferry services from Dublin to Holyhead and Rosslare to Pembroke.

Up to six children per booking, 15 years and under can travel free-of-charge every day to the UK up until December 18, inclusive of weekend sailings, peak July and August holidays and school mid-terms.

The offer applies to new motorist bookings made before May 17, 2016. For more visit www.irishferries.com.

Get the most from the US coast

Explore the magic of West Coast USA on a two-week self-drive tour with GoHop.ie.

On the Western Values tour you can take a nostalgic ride along sections of historic Route 66 and visit the Grand Canyon, one of the seven natural wonders of the world. Behold the rich colours of Bryce Canyon's famous spires, called 'hoodoos' and gaze at Zion's massive sandstone cliffs of cream, pink and red.

Enjoy 24-hour entertainment in glittering Las Vegas or stand at the lowest land elevation in North America in Death Valley. Take a bike ride along San Francisco's world famous Golden Gate Bridge and visit the homes of the stars in glittering Los Angeles.

Western Values tour is priced from only €759pp. Price includes 13 nights' accommodation as per the itinerary, a compact two-door car with fully inclusive insurance or similar, taxes and charges.

Flights are not included and will be priced on application to ensure the best fare. Visit www.gohop.ie or call 01 241 2382.

