Day trip to Keukenhof

When: 18-April-2003  
Who: Xiaomeng and Jinghai

On Good Friday, we set off for Keukenhof -- the largest spring garden in the world. The Keukenhof is located in the area between Amsterdam and The Hague, in and around the town of Lisse. A 30 minutes train took us from Amsterdam to Leiden, from where a direct express bus conveyed us to Keukenhof. The garden is open nearly 8 weeks a year, when flowers are in blossom. This year it will last till the latter part of May.

Not surprisingly, the landmark flower in that place is.... you get it... Tulip, which is the national wide beloved flower of the Netherlands. The Dutch are mad at tulips :-) Though I had seen splendid pictures of Keukenhof before I came here, I was still struck by the spectacular scene at first glance, where colorful flowers embedded in ages-old trees.

It is amazing that the Dutch managed to develop all sorts of varieties of tulips. Not only different combination of colors but also different shape of the corolla. To appreciate the full scale of human experiment on Tulip, you have to visit the several indoor greenhouses, which display more delicate varieties, for instance black tulip (though I would say it is rather deep dark purple.).

Wandering around easily took several hours. After having lunch at a lovely garden corner, we headed towards the vast area of outdoor blooms. It is inspiring to see how different flowers are grouped and formulate various shapes. On top of that, some brilliant artificial "art pieces" also added to the hilarious atmosphere, giving off a sense of dutch humor.
From the edges of the gardens, we could see the commercial bulb fields stretching in all directions. Enchanted by its stark beauty, we decided to pay a visit to the bulb fields outside the garden, which is by the way free. The broad strips of various colors stretching on and on were such a pleasant service to the eyes. We took quite some pictures in this area.

Taking the express bus back to Leiden, we decided to pay a short visit to the town, as daylight was still sufficient. Leiden is a classical old canal town, which also homes the country's oldest university -- Leiden University. Many of the old university buildings just lie right beside the canal. It is also in this university's botanic garden, where tulip was first introduced to Holland and planted locally in the 16th century. Leiden is actually a town well worth a visit, even just meandering around in random directions. We intended to end our trip at a spectacular cafe, which looks like an old fortification. But it turned out to be so popular that we did not find available seat. So we ended up at another lovely cafe, with some nice dutch snacks -- kroketten (croquette) and with a nice view towards our intended fortification cafe...

Several days later, accidentally I watched a television program on Discovery Channel about tulip, which is both informative and illuminating. It is called the tulip mania, one of the worst economic crises in history. It was in the 17th century, a mania for tulips swept the Netherlands. The exotic flower attracted attention from wealthy people, who could pay big money for a rare variety of tulip just as another way to show off and impress visitors. Seeing its vast profits, everyone joined in (remember every dutch are born with merchant skill) and out-bid each other to get the bulbs, then sold it to another hand. Vast money were made during
hand changing and the price of bulbs increased many times higher than its original prices. At its peak time, a single rare bulb cost the same price as a town house in Amsterdam. The whole market went wild as everyone put his or her life long savings into the bulb trading. It was also at that time the concept of option (the exclusive right, usually obtained for a fee, to buy or sell something within a specified time at a set price in the future.) was invented, which allowed tulips to be trade even before they were grown. Needless to say, the market collapsed at a certain point, which bankrupted many people and incurred massive social disorder for that time. Thinking of the economic bubbles all along through history till nowadays, it is striking to see how history repeats itself all the time and yet people seems forget it quickly. Maybe as someone said "the only thing people learn from history is that people never learn from history"....

Anyway, one tip for any of the future visitor: at Leiden bus station (which is right beside the central train station), you can buy ticket that combines the entrance to the garden and the express bus tickets. This exempts you from queuing again in Kenkenhof ticket office.

Finally, I made a flash (thanks to my Mac's convenient and powerful multimedia functionality :-), consisting of the beautiful pictures we took on Keukenhof and Leiden. You can access it on www idi.ntnu.no/~xiaomeng/pictures/keukenhof_s.mov. You need to have QuickTime to open it (QuickTime is freely available in the internet.)

Have a colorful spring day!!
Xiaomeng.