My name is... Otto Jan

THE NETHERLANDS

Kuublab, journeys around the world, to show readers how children in other countries and cultures live and play. Today we JOURNEY TO THE NETHERLANDS. Next month, travel with us to South America.

Otto Jan

Otto Jan Verlens, 12, read two books during three weeks of vacation last summer.

BEEK. The Netherlands—Many Americans think Otto Jan Verlens’s country is full of cheese, tulips and windmills. That’s true, but this Dutch 12-year-old doesn’t like cheese, the tulips are in a different part of the country and the windmills are mostly a tourist attraction.

Otto Jan (pronounced Van) lives in Beeck, a town of 17,000 people in the southern part of the Netherlands. Some people call the country Holland, but that is the name of two provinces, not the whole country. The country borders the North Sea, between Belgium and Germany in Western Europe.

Otto Jan’s home is a three-story, four-bedroom duplex with big windows. His mom is a nurse, and his dad is a water engineer. He has two older brothers, Adrian, 17, and Samuel, 15.

Most Dutch families have a car, but not the Verlens. When their car broke down seven years ago, they decided not to get another one. They ride bicycles instead.

“It’s bad for the environment to drive,” Otto Jan says. His parents have other reasons, too. “We want to show the children that we don’t have to do everything we can do,” says his mother, Bertha. “We have to make choices in life.”

On trips, they can take the train. Over the summer, they rented a car and camped in Germany, Switzerland and France. Going to the beach near Montpellier in southern France. During three weeks of vacation, Otto Jan read two books. Dutch students have eight weeks of vacation every summer, and kids in different parts of the country have different times. “Everyone was on the road at the same time,” Otto Jan’s mom says. “It would cause problems.”

He rides his bike to school, which is nearly three miles away in the town of Gelden. “When it rains,” Otto Jan says, “there’s nothing you can do about it. You get wet.”

Children here go to a kindergarten for two years, beginning when they are about 4 years old, and then go on to six years of primary school. Then comes six years of secondary school.

Otto Jan goes to a school called Graf Van Juyt College. Classes start at 8:15 a.m. and end at 2 or 3 p.m., depending on the day. Otto Jan has Dutch, English, French, German, Spanish, math, science, geography, biology, art, music and gym. The classes are 50 minutes long, with Dutch and math three times a week and most of the others twice a week. Art and music meet once a week.

Each week there’s three hours of gym, which includes track, soccer, volleyball, basketball and judo. In spring, the students play softball. Schools in the Netherlands don’t have sports teams. Kids compete in sports teams at community centers after school.

The Netherlands that Otto Jan lives in might not be the Netherlands that most Americans think of, but it’s a good place, he says. “I like it here.”

—Kathy Lally

Favorite TV show: “Everwood” (in English with Dutch subtitles).
Favorite music: Rhythm and blues and hip-hop. He especially likes the Black Eyed Peas and Justin Timberlake.
Favorite sport: Soccer. “Barcelona and Manchester United are my favorite teams,” he says.

CARRY SLEE

Otto Jan Verlens, 12, read two books during three weeks of vacation last summer.

For breakfast, Otto Jan usually has bread with butter and chocolate sprinkles (called nagelbald) and a glass of milk. Otto Jan takes his lunch to school. While most kids have bread and cheese, he takes three slices of bread and eats some with slices of pork and a side of vegetables. They always have a milk-based dessert such as yogurt or flan.

In Limburg province, the region where Otto Jan lives, there’s a special pie (above) called raijal. It’s usually made with pears or cherries and has a thick, cake-like crust sturdy enough to hold with three fingers.

The Verlens live in the last half of a duplex in Beeck, in the southern part of the country.

THE NETHERLANDS

Independence was written on parchment from the Netherlands.

Don’t call Holland: Many people think “the Netherlands” and “Holland” are the same. Holland really refers to two provinces, North and South Holland.

Windmills: There are about 1,000 in the Netherlands. At one time, the country had as many as 10,000.

Bicycles are used by many people in the Netherlands, and Otto Jan bikes to school each day.

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