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Dutch yearn for return of mythic ice skating race: Will 2013 be the year?

For 15 years, it's been too warm for the Elfstedentocht ice skating marathon. But there are still places you can skate in the Netherlands

By Savita Iyer-Ahrestani 27 December, 2012

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The ice was thick enough last year for skaters in the Friesland province town of Dokkum, but it will need to be much colder this year before the Elfstedentocht ice skating race can be held.

As winter deepens in the Netherlands, the Dutch keep watch on their thermometers, anxiously trying to will the temperature to drop low enough to freeze the many canals that crisscross the country.

Once that happens, they'll rush outside to take part in the country's favorite winter activity: ice skating.

But locals are particularly keen for the "Big Freeze" in the northern province of Friesland, where, when the conditions permit, an 11-city speed and leisure skating race, or Elfstedentocht, is held.

The 200-kilometer marathon along a network of canals passes through 11 Frisian cities and typically attracts upward of 16,000 skaters.

For the past 15 years, however, the Dutch have been disappointed. It's simply not been cold enough for the race to be held.

For an Elfstedentocht to take place, Friesland's canals needs to be frozen to a thickness of 15 centimeters, according Wiebe Weiling, chairman of the Koninklijke Vereniging De Friesche Elf Steden, the organization that organizes the event. This requires an extended run of consecutive freezing days and freezing nights.

Last year was a near miss, but close enough to get many Dutch excited enough to start sharpening

their blades.

“Last year, even though we had a very short winter that lasted only 14 days, we could actually have had the Elfstedentocht if we’d just had two more days of freezing weather,” says Weiling. “In most of Friesland, the canals had the requisite 15 centimeters of ice.”

The most recent winner, a farmer named Henk Angenent, took 6 hours and 49 minutes to complete the course in 1997.

Will 2013 prove to be the year that brings a freeze deep enough to hold the Elfstedentocht for the first time since then?

Tough to tell, says Weiling, a first-rate skater who has participated in two Elfstedentochts.

For one thing, winters are getting milder everywhere in the world. While there were 15 Elfstedentochts held in the twentieth century, weather experts believe that this century will only see one race every 10 years.

In Stavoren, the oldest city in Friesland and one of the stops on the Elfstedentocht, the weather forecast for the last week of 2012 calls for rain and low temperatures between 3 and 9 C (37 to 48 F).

Maybe January will bring a change.

Other skating opportunities

With or without Elfstedentocht, the skating-obsessed Dutch are still eager for winter, says Annamarie Thomas, a Dutch Olympic speed skater and two-time world champion in short distances.



Dutch speed skating champ Annamarie Thomas says with or without Elfstedentocht, the Netherlands will continue to be a skater's paradise.

“Most people in Holland know how to skate, since we have so much natural ice around,” says Thomas, who started skating at the age of four and who as a child skated to school throughout the winter. Thomas’s father skated the Elfstedentocht twice.

Today, Thomas coaches speed skaters and continues to train. She says even without Elfstedentocht, there are plenty of opportunities for locals and visitors to take part in the country’s winter pastime.

When the canals freeze each winter, the skating crowds come out in force.

Novices who want to give canal skating a whirl will find the experience exhilarating, though caution is advised.

“If you’re new to Holland and have never skated on a canal before, make sure you see other people out there before you hop onto the ice,” Thomas says. “It’s also advisable to take a knife along and cut into the ice, particularly on canals where you don’t see anyone or there are very few people

skating. If it’s hard to cut through the ice, then it should be safe to skate on.

“Remember that it’s never safe to skate under a bridge because the ice may not be frozen there.”

For those not ready to glide on a canal, there are plenty of indoor rinks across Holland. During the New Year period, most cities build ice rinks on their central squares that bring together seasonal charm with the pleasures of outdoor skating.

Click on the links below (in Dutch) for information on ice skating rinks in select Dutch cities.

Amsterdam: [Winterplaza \(http://www.kermisplaza.nl/ijsbaanleidseplein/\)](http://www.kermisplaza.nl/ijsbaanleidseplein/) (until January 6, 2013):

Elst: [Winter Festival \(http://www.winterfestijnoverbetuwe.nl/informatie/ijsbaan.html\)](http://www.winterfestijnoverbetuwe.nl/informatie/ijsbaan.html) (until January 6, 2013):

Tilburg (speed skating rink): [Ireen Wust Ijsbaan \(http://www.sportintilburg.nl/Schaatsen/Ireen_Wust_IJbaan\)](http://www.sportintilburg.nl/Schaatsen/Ireen_Wust_IJbaan)

Enschede (speed skating rink): [Ysbaan Twente \(http://www.ijsbaan-twente.nl\)](http://www.ijsbaan-twente.nl)

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