

# EVERYTHING IN THE GARDEN IS LOVELY

Roger Wheeler visits Floriade in the Netherlands



AERIAL VIEW

Floriade? What is that? Never heard of it! I've heard that so many times. Every ten years for the past fifty, the Dutch have mounted the **World Horticultural Expo** called **Floriade**, which is basically a mixture of the Eden Project and Kew Gardens spread over 66 hectares in **Venlo** in the far south east of the Netherlands, very close to the German border, and in fact nearer to Dusseldorf than Amsterdam. It opened at Easter and will close on 7th October 2012, and for those six months will play host to two million visitors. It's an enormous international undertaking, the biggest thing that the Dutch do and as they know a thing or two about flowers they do it very well.

The statistics are impressive: 1.8 million bulbs, 18,000 shrubs, 5,000 roses, 3,000 trees, the list goes on and is really quite meaningless when seen on paper. It's quite an amazing spectacle, or it will be in the summer. We went on the opening cool and windy Easter weekend and for something on this scale, which is primarily about plants and all things green, we didn't expect miracles, however when the millions of bulbs, roses and miscellaneous planting settle in and get into their stride it will be spectacular. There are five themed zones called **Relax & Heal**, **Green Engine**, **Environment**, **Education & Innovation** and a **World Show** stage. When we visited there were several bands and exotic dancing troops bravely strutting their stuff in the very chilly wind, but they were smiling no doubt through gritted and chattering teeth. They say this is the biggest flower show in Europe and I can believe it. The two huge



EARTH WALK

floral pavilions house staggering displays of flowers from across the globe and the wonderful fragrance knocks you out as you enter.

The two major themes are environmental sustainability and education. As it is ostensibly a world event, there are 35 countries represented and some of these stands we found extremely puzzling. The Israeli exhibition in particular consisted of a large white space just saying 'Israel'. Mexico was equally odd but they were giving away very nice oranges (Dutch of course). Several were just large tourist stands featuring the delights of their individual countries; Azerbaijan was just a large pavilion with a huge video featuring... Azerbaijan! None had any link with flowers or horticulture as far as we could tell, maybe they will in time.



WILLOWMAN

One of the highlights for us was **The Willowman**; here in one of the many woodland glades we found a guy weaving beautiful structures from willow, he had made bird cages, rabbit hutches and chicken runs all woven from the living wood. As this was the opening weekend he'd only just started but it was fascinating to watch.

There are six restaurants and several ice cream and soft drink outlets, a huge outdoor cinema, and twice daily shows on the World Show Stage featuring music, theatre, dance and acrobatics with a 'harvest' theme. Floriade really needs to be seen to be fully appreciated. The cost of the park is in the region of €80m (about £65m), it's taken

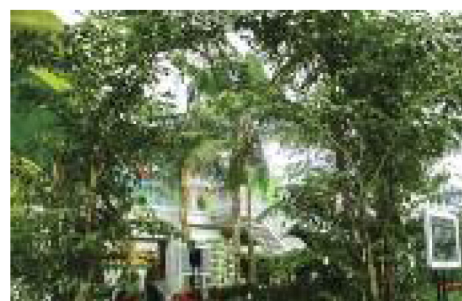
eight years to plan and construct and 500 people thousands of hours to create. Its legacy will be a lovely park with obviously a lot of the planting left for future generations to enjoy. Children and education about the environment, which is right on message for today, is very well catered for. It is impossible to do justice to something as big, complex and spectacular as Floriade in a few words; it only happens every ten years and in my opinion would be well worth a visit in July or August, when the exhibits are at their best

Entry isn't particularly cheap at €30 each, but given a warm sunny day it would be well worth it. My only problem was that they have built a cable car which runs right over the entire park; great idea and a very good way to get an overview, but they franchised this attraction out and the company running it want €6, which was a step too far. Having paid €30 entry, eaten and no doubt enjoyed a decent lunch at a price, to expect more money for what should be just part of the experience is simply a cheek. We declined the opportunity.



You need a full day at Floriade as there's so much to see and enjoy, though it is possible to combine a trip to Venlo with a weekend in Amsterdam which is two hours away by train. We stayed overnight at a local hotel, the **Chateau de Raay**, part of the Sandton Group. 'Local' meant two bus journeys, as there is nowhere to stay anywhere near the park itself. Our hotel, a converted castle and now a four star hotel, was €69 for one night, first-class value. We had a large very comfortable room and ate in the excellent restaurant. The waiters were all young and very attractive and so eager to please, which made dinner quite memorable. As usual, when in Amsterdam, we stayed at **The Bridge Hotel**, our home from home in that city. We've been staying there for ten years and its consistent value for money, reliability and friendly service means that we will always head there.

[www.floriade.com](http://www.floriade.com)  
[www.sandton.eu/en/baarlo](http://www.sandton.eu/en/baarlo)  
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TROPICAL HOUSE