

CYCLING THROUGH WATER

Previous state

Limburg is the cycling paradise of Flanders, Belgium and even the Euregion. Twenty years ago, Limburg invented a network of cycling junctions. This is a network of different cycling routes that are connected to each other via junctions (usually crossroads of bicycle trails). With the help of a map of the bicycle route network, cyclists can put together their own bicycle tour by planning a route from one junction to another. Limburg has developed 2.000 km of cycling trails.

Every year we receive an average of two million cyclists. The Limburg bicycle route network is one of the main reasons for visiting Limburg, and is therefore one of the biggest attractions of our province.

De Wijers is a unique nature reserve which contains about 700 hectare of ponds and culture-historical domains. It is situated in central Limburg. Until recently, this domain could not be entirely explored by bike. Bokrijk is one of the hot spots in this area with high landscape and historical values. The domain of Bokrijk includes a 19th-century castle with its own park, an open-air museum, an arboretum, a nature reserve and a pond complex.

Aim of the intervention

The aim of Limburg is to strengthen its position as a market leader in bicycle tourism through new impulses. To achieve this and stay number one, the ambition is to add new, high quality bicycle opportunities to the existing bicycle route network.

By adding an extra layer to the Limburg bicycle route network through innovative projects, Toerisme Limburg wants to put a spotlight on Limburg as a cycling paradise, to attract even more bicycle tourists from the Netherlands and abroad.

To ensure tourists can explore the domain of the Wijers to the fullest, a new landmark was created: 'Cycling through Water', a bicycle trail straight through a pond.

This trail does not only connect two junctions of the bicycle route network, therefore enhancing how cyclists plan their next bike ride, it also allows tourists to experience nature in a completely different way. When on this trail, one is literally eye to eye with the waterfowl.

In addition to 'Cycling through Water', there are three other projects in development: 'Cycling through Trees', 'Cycling Underground' and 'Cycling across the Purple Heath'.

Description

In 2014 the search started for the best location to develop 'Cycling through Water'. In consultation with the Flemish Agency for Nature and Forests and the Flemish Land Agency, Bokrijk was chosen. The decision was based on the existence of a bicycle path between two ponds, which limited the ecological impact.

In April 2016 'Cycling through Water' opened, an experience bike trail through a pond of the De Wijers nature reserve in Bokrijk-Genk. Since its opening, more than 300.000 cyclists have visited the cycling path. And the numerous walkers are even not included in that number. This project has given a boost to the entire region.

Features:

'Cycling through Water' in figures:

- Concrete cycling path.
- Between junctions 91 and 98 of the bicycle route network.
- 212 meters long, 3 meters wide and 1.60 meters deep.

The project was completed in a very short time thanks to the positive cooperation between the project partners. The construction of the bike trail was combined with nature conservation projects in the surrounding ponds. This resulted in improvement of the water quality and a significant increase in the habitat of amphibians.

- The bike path has provided qualitative improvements to the entire environment.
- Thanks to the project, Bokrijks new forest and landscape management plan has been accelerated. This benefits the currently present fauna and flora.
- The dikes have been remodeled which has resulted in purer water in the ponds over a longer period. This is a good thing for the amphibians.
- Under the bike trail an underground crossing is provided. Amphibians have the ability to move uninterrupted between the two ponds.
- The Bokrijk open-air museum is also visually 'closer' to the bicycle route network and has an increased amount of visitors.
- Assisted by the heritage department of the Flemish government the heritage of the De Wijers received an upgrade. The 'monks' who traditionally regulate the water management of the ponds were replaced by replicas. The old remnants of the 'monks' were preserved.
- The innovative design of the bike trail creates a unique water experience in this special nature area.

Other features:

- **Unique:** This is not only unique for Limburg, but even a first for Belgium and Europe. You can have this unique cycling experience nowhere else!
- **Car-free:** Of course this is a car-free route. The safety of the cyclists is essential. Nevertheless, the design took into account the possibility of using the path as an evacuation route of the Bokrijk domain. Emergency services can use this route in case of emergency.
- **Full of experience:** The bike trail through the water brings you into closer contact with the water and the environment. The cyclists ride at the water level and look out over the water on both sides of the cycle path. This allows the tourist to see, feel and even touch the water. For bystanders a unique image is also created from a distance, as only the heads of the cyclists will be visible.
- **Comfortable and safe:** The design explicitly took into account the safety and comfort of the cyclists. For example, the floor of the cycling path is constructed with special slip-resistant tiles, even in frost.
- **Win-win:** Not only cyclists and tourism, but also nature, the environment and the heritage landscape profit in numerous ways.

Looking out over the water

Beside the nature conservation projects the interaction between the ponds and the open-air museum will be increased by including the historically valuable Pigeon Tower and the old farm called Hoeve Ceulemans. Transforming them into viewpoints will reward the visitor with a beautiful view of the ponds and the cycling tourists moving in between them.

Evaluation

'Cycling through Water' leads cyclists through a 212 meters long and 3 meters wide concrete path with water at eye level on both sides. Swans and other waterfowl float on the edge and watch the cyclists curiously. Since its opening, the interest in this special bike trail is huge. An average of 800 visitors per day explore this part of the Limburg cycling junction network. With highs on Saturday and Sunday and no less than 5.000 cyclists on top days.

Not only cyclists participate, many walkers also take a peek. It is nice to see how the heads of the cyclists seem to 'glide' across the water surface. That also explains the hype on social media. A lot of visitors post photos and selfies online. Even blogs talk about the extraordinary experience.

'Cycling through Water' has provided qualitative improvements to the larger environment. The project is not only an impulse for Bokrijk, but also for the future tourist development of the De Wijers site. This bicycle attraction is a clear reason for tourists to come and share.

The success of 'Cycling through Water' makes it clear that the bicycle route network in Limburg offers a very strong grid for incorporating innovative tourism projects. Through this and similar cycling experiences, Limburg will take its place on the international map as a cycling region, where beautiful landscapes and unique heritage are strung together. In addition these projects can be a stimulant for future developments on and next to the bicycle route network.