

Carlos Rizo (left), Bas de Beer (right)

TWO WHEELS, TWO COUNTRIES, COUNTLESS STORIES

"It has two wheels, and it can ride, right?" That was Go Dutch founder Bas de Beer's first thought about his first bike in Canada. Back then, being choosy wasn't an option. The Dutchman had little money—he was nineteen, just finishing hotel school in Amersfoort—and found himself in Toronto after a study exchange "sold me on the idea to come back to Canada and try and see if I can make a future for myself with her," he says.

Fifteen years later, that "her" is his Canadian wife. That future now entails two sons and a bustling business. And that first bike is long gone.

"Within the first two weeks, it got stolen, and I was heartbroken," recalls De Beer. Yet the loss may have been fortuitous. While the newcomer had quickly found success in matters of the heart and embraced a career in events management, a yearning persisted.

"In the years I worked [for an agency] here, I worked on bicycle charity events—cycling is my biggest hobby, but also my biggest interest—but the one thing I kept missing was my Dutch bike," he says. "What I was looking for is that ultimate *omafiets*."

The "grandma bike," as its name translates to, is praised by De Beer for being an upright model that "feels like a sofa to sit on" and provides "greater visibility." Eventually, far more than one turned up—though only after a decade and a pandemic.

"There were no bikes to be had in any of the Toronto bike shops," De Beer notes of the global supply shortages he observed in 2020. "So I said, 'I'm going to change that narrative and try and bring a container full of Dutch bikes from Holland.'"

Since COVID restrictions meant he couldn't inspect the products in person, he asked his father, still living in his hometown of Hilversum, to buy the container "sight unseen" on his behalf from a secondhand supplier. When the shipment arrived months later, "it was just 400 bikes in front of me that I had now had to fix," remembers De Beer.

He wasted no time.



A Canadian model

Go Dutch opened in March 2021 in Toronto's Yonge-Eglinton neighbourhood. De Beer runs the company with his partner, Carlos Rizo—who is not Dutch but has an affinity for the culture since his parents spent a significant time in the Netherlands—supported by five part-time mechanics and two volunteers.

On first glance, there are the trappings of a typical North American retailer. Shiny two-wheelers are kick-stood and wall-mounted between colourful displays of helmets, panniers, and locks. But a closer look reveals distinctly Dutch specs: the step-through or low-step frame; an enclosed hub system and chain guard; weather-protecting fenders; and a rear rack ready to carry cargo or children.

New and used, in e-bike and analogue formats, the assortment is entirely European and mostly Dutch. Classic brands include Gazelle, Batavus, and Union, while among the more contemporary are Cortina, VanMoof, and Go Dutch's own branded *omafiets*. Iconic cargo bikes are available, too, with Bakfiets.nl models usually custom-ordered or bought used and Urban Arrow soon joining the catalogue.

The secondhand inventory largely comprises pieces that were abandoned on Dutch streets, impounded by Dutch municipalities, and resold to local suppliers. Stored in Go Dutch's basement-turned-*fietsenstalling*, the "pre-loved," as they're called, are snugly parked or suspended in rows. Most appear only lightly used, with their original dealer decals intact.

Customers appreciate that each "has had a previous life—it's got some history and a story attached to it," says De Beer. "We've put some care into the bike to make sure it rides safely and replaced parts where necessary. But ultimately, the bike has been recycled to serve another lifetime."

The basement houses two other collections: the meticulously categorized spare parts and the treasured museum pieces. Among these collector bikes are an OV-fiets, a Dutch public transport rental; a tandem built for an adult and three kids; and a Heineken custom edition with a beer crate for a front luggage rack.

Sales aside, Go Dutch offers rentals, tune-ups, and repairs. Yet when it comes to a Dutch bike, service tends to be minimal, De Beer stresses. "You have practically zero maintenance because it's internally geared. The brakes are lower maintenance as well. That's the whole idea of the Dutch—they like to ride their bikes around with no hassle."

For the idea of his transnational business model, De Beer credits a Canadian institution, Plain Bicycle. In 2017, the nonprofit in Winnipeg began its stated mission to "import everyday cycling culture to North America" through refurbishing and selling bikes from the Netherlands. Normaal Bike in Edmonton is the other Canadian retailer of Dutch bikes known by De Beer, who describes enjoying regular video calls with both shops' teams to exchange ideas and feedback.

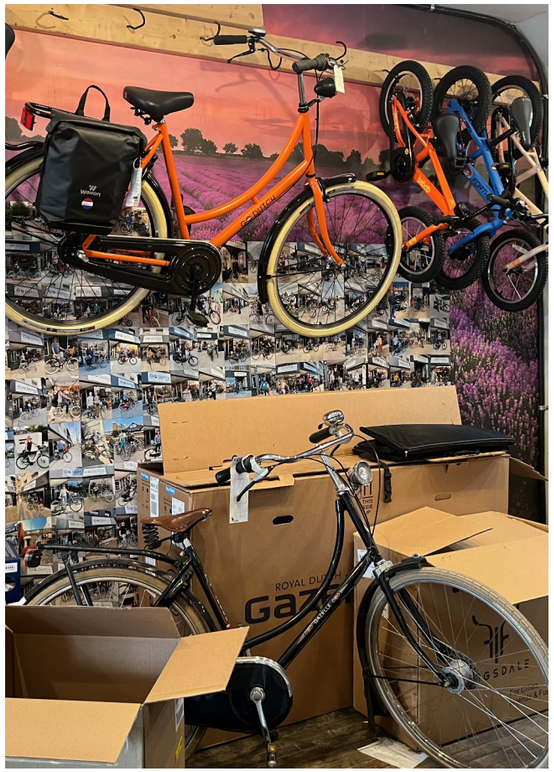
Dutch utility and more

Of Go Dutch's current clientele, "maybe twenty percent is actually Dutch," estimates De Beer. "So I'd say we're teaching eighty percent of this whole Dutch bike culture—what it's all about and what a Dutch bike is all about."

Considering Canadians are, on average, shorter than Dutch riders, the stock skews toward smaller sizes. Another distinguishing feature is the sides of the bell and brake lines, which are often reversed between the Netherlands and North America.

Beyond the merchandise and mechanics, the Go Dutch team is equally enthusiastic about introducing others to their own practical and sustainability-minded cycling ethos.

"Getting on a Dutch bike doesn't mean you can use that bike in a Tour de France, because that's not what it was made for. It was made for utility," says De Beer. "That's the idea that we want to give to Canadians."





Speaking of Toronto specifically, he would argue that cycling is one of the most affordable and efficient ways to move around a city continuously facing car congestion.

"It's very good for the mental state," he adds. "If we have a tough day here, we go out for a bike ride."

But De Beer acknowledges that not everyone is initially comfortable with or prepared for cycling in cities, especially those with fragmented bike lanes, as is the case across the Greater Toronto Area.

"We try and help people gain that confidence through education," he says. "If somebody comes in here and needs that extra little bit of support, we'll go with them." The Beltline—a tranquil cycling and walking trail a five-minute ride from Go Dutch—is a favourite route for staff to bike alongside customers.

Contrary to practice in the Netherlands, "I would always suggest having a helmet on your head," De Beer emphasizes. Even for confident riders, himself included, he points to the risk of drivers who are inexperienced dealing with cyclists and the higher speeds of e-bikes, which are booming.

Incidentally, the protected cycle track that runs in front of Go Dutch was installed as recently as 2024. "We went to every single protest to vouch for these bike lanes to remain where they are," says De Beer, referring to a broader ongoing political debate about preserving and expanding Toronto's cyclist protection measures.

Nowadays, Go Dutch ships worldwide. For demos and deliveries in Montreal and Ottawa, the company makes a conscious decision to use four wheels, in the form of its bike-transporting van. Visits to towns with a high concentration of Dutch communities elsewhere in southern Ontario are also on the horizon.

TEXT AND IMAGES: KARINA HOF

