

ALLURING AMSTERDAM



Hotel Arena

streets and town squares, make for a unique experience. Granted, it's a bit of touristy thing to do, but a great introduction to the 'Venice of the North' is aboard one of the ubiquitous glass-topped barges you'll see chuffing down the waterways. Especially after dark, when the canals and bridges are illuminated, the old town has an almost mystical quality to it.

But the best way of exploring the city is undoubtedly by bicycle. Judging by the legions of two-wheeled vehicles every which way you turn (officially there are 600,000 bicycles in Amsterdam) the 'stalen ros' (iron horse), as they are lovingly referred to, is still the country's main mode of transportation – come wind, rain, hail or snow. And sunshine – but given Holland's sea climate, it's best to be prepared for damp weather at all times.

Most streets have separate bike lanes, making the city heaven on earth for cyclists. Before hopping on a rented bicycle, a word of caution: if you think the train tracks on the road are for those quaint trams, think again – they double as racetracks for emergency vehicles and taxis, and many a hapless tourist has narrowly escaped by the tails of their raincoats.

STEEPED IN RICH HISTORY, AND WITH MORE CULTURAL AND HISTORIC ATTRACTIONS PER SQUARE KILOMETER THAN ANY OTHER CITY IN THE WORLD, AMSTERDAM'S APPEAL IS NEVER-ENDING. IN A PERFECT PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CITY'S COLORFUL HERITAGE, A DISTINCTIVE DESIGNER EDGE IS NOW ALSO ADDING A STYLISH NEW TWIST.

AMSTERDAM REMAINS ONE of Europe's most popular tourist destinations. The city of Rembrandt and Van Gogh attracts around four million visitors annually, giving it fourth ranking among European destinations – after London, Paris and Rome. Not bad for a world capital with a relatively modest population of less than 750,000.

A quick history lesson: founded in 1275, *Amstelodamum*, as this fishing village was originally called, derived its name from the words 'Amstel' (river) and 'dam'. The town rapidly expanded into a lively trading port and leading financial center. During the

Dutch Golden Age of the 17th century it was the wealthiest city in the world. This glorious past is best exemplified in the *grachtengordel*, the canal belt area around the Singel, Herengracht (Gentlemen's Canal), Keizersgracht (Emperor's Canal) and Prinsengracht (you guessed it – Prince's Canal) in the center of town.

With more than 6,800 protected houses and buildings, many of which date back to the 16th to 18th centuries, Amsterdam has the largest historic town center in Europe. These monumental homes and buildings, combined with the charms of cobblestone

CULTURAL HIGHS

Since the 17th century's Golden Age, Amsterdam has attracted many affluent travelers curious about 'the miracle of Europe'. The large number of national treasures in the city's many museums reflects this prosperous age. Not to be missed is the Rijksmuseum (national museum), which houses Rembrandt's *Night Watch* along with the work of several other Dutch masters, the Stedelijk Museum (municipal museum) for its internationally acclaimed modern art, the Van Gogh and



Cheese shop, Nine Little Streets

Historisch (historic) Museums.

Besides works on permanent display, be sure to check for special exhibitions. Currently on show at the Van Gogh Museum is a collection of his nighttime works, including the world-famous *Starry Night*, while Johannes Vermeer's masterpiece *Woman Holding a Balance*, on loan from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, is also on display. A rare opportunity to see the Royal Palace on Dam Square presents itself in June when it reopens after three years of extensive renovations.

For a glimpse of Holland's modern architecture, the Eastern Docklands are worth an afternoon of exploration. Once the turf of squatters, prostitutes and drug dealers, the area is a glowing example of 21st century urban planning gone right. In recent years, this harbor region has flourished into a colorful hodgepodge of converted warehouses, modern canal houses and quirky, eye-catching bridges.

WINDOW SHOPPING

While PC Hooftstraat in the museum quarter is still the place for big-name designer label shopping and celebrity spotting, it's never been the stomping grounds for Amsterdam's young and trendy. They can either be found in the bustling pedestrian shopping streets of Damrak, Rokin, Kalverstraat and Leidsestraat, or leisurely strolling around neighborhoods with a more local flavor like De Pijp, the Jordaan or the Negen Straatjes (Nine Little Streets).

Working-class district area De Pijp has developed into quite the trendy area over the past few years and a much sought-after location to live for hip young urbanites. Countless cafés, bars and cozy eateries have sprung up, many in the immediate area of the Albert Cuyp Market. This bustling market is where townsfolk stock up on fresh produce, ethnic foods and discount clothing.

The Jordaan and The Nine Little Streets are located in the heart of Amsterdam's canal district. Both these trendy spots are dotted with hip boutiques, specialty bookstores, colorful 'bruin cafés' (local pubs) and gourmet restaurants. Art galleries, in particular for contemporary art, are prevalent in the Jordaan, Amsterdam's 'Soho', while there is a high concentration of antiques in the Spiegelkwartier area, the street leading up to the Rijksmuseum.

An unexpected area to go shopping, and not only 'window shopping' at that, is in Amsterdam's infamous Red Light District. Formerly the sole domain of 'ladies of pleasure', local authorities are on a mission to clean up the area, aided by laws enabling the closure of establishments suspected to be involved in criminal activity. So far the city has bought up 55 buildings from a former prostitution baron and rented them out to local fashion designers.



Marlies Dekkers, Nine Little Streets



GASTRONOMIC PALETTE

Thankfully a lot has changed since the days when 'Dutch' followed by the word 'cuisine' was a *contradictio in terminis* – unless you were a fan of overcooked meat and potatoes. One of Holland's first forays into expanding its gastronomic palette was 'rijsttafel' (rice table), a smorgasbord of Indonesian dishes served in small portions. This invention of the Dutch colonists in Indonesia is an absolute must-taste.

With the emergence of a whole new generation of über-trendy eateries, Amsterdam's restaurant scene has expanded well beyond its colonial roots. There's fashionable Momo, which specializes in sushi, sashimi and other Asian-style dishes. The menu is presided over by Chef Anthony Sousa Tam, formerly of top London restaurant Hakkasan.

A mere two months ago, café-restaurant Stanislavski in the Stadsschouwburg, the city's municipal theater, opened its doors. The complex has undergone a spectacular renovation restoring it to its former splendor. Magnificent chandeliers, gleaming marble columns and stucco ceilings have given the interior a glamorous, Viennese ballroom vibe.

Amsterdam's hottest hangout by far is French bistro Café George. Reservations are required months in advance, and it doesn't help matters that five tables are permanently pre-booked by different fashion labels – but it does make for très joli people-watching of course.

For Michelin-star quality cuisine these venues come highly recommended: Restaurant Sophia, situated in Amsterdam's posh museum quarter and which serves up

Asian-inspired tapas; Fifteen restaurant and cooking school, based on Jamie Oliver's Restaurant Fifteen; Brasserie Harkema, a Parisian-style *brasserie*; and Nevy, a seafood restaurant in a French *Les Halles* fish market type setting. Nevy is by the same owners of acclaimed restaurant Envy and wine bar Vyne.

MONUMENTAL STAYS

It wasn't until after 1950 that the unique character of Amsterdam's town center was discovered by the international travel brigade, leading to an explosive growth in the number of hotel rooms. Nowadays, visitors have 33,000 hotel rooms to choose from, of which nearly half are four- or five-star accommodation.

In a city with such a rich history it comes as no surprise that many of these hotels,

floatels and hostels have colorful pasts, like the legendary Amsterdam Hilton, scene of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's 'bed-in for peace' 40 years ago. On the edge of the city center near Oosterpark you'll find Hotel Arena, housed in a former orphanage dating back to 1890. A century later the building was converted into a refuge for modern-day 'orphans' – a youth hostel for backpackers – before getting a makeover in 1999 to become Hotel Arena. While many original details have been preserved, such as the gilded wrought iron staircase in the reception area, the long, foreboding corridors and imposing high windows, the rooms have been furnished in a contemporary, minimalist black and white style.

Centrally located in the fashionable Eastern Docklands area is Lloyd Hotel & Cultural Embassy. A hotel for emigrants in the early 20th century, it has since been



Lust, Nine Little Streets

WITH OVER 100 KILOMETERS OF CANALS, 90 MANMADE ISLANDS AND 1,500 BRIDGES IT'S EASY TO SEE WHY THE CITY IS NICK-NAMED 'VENICE OF THE NORTH'



Brasserie Harkema's annex



Hotel Arena

transformed into a hotel cum cultural center. Amsterdam's newest luxury five-star establishment, Grand Hotel Amrâth, is situated in the Scheepvaarhuis (shipping house), an iconic building that was originally the head office for major Dutch shipping companies. Architect Ray Kentie has preserved its unique heritage by designing all rooms around a nautical theme.

Boutique hotel The Dylan, located in a 17th century building on the Keizersgracht in the heart of the Little Nine Streets shopping district, is the city's most elegant affair. The interior was designed by Anouska Hempel, the renowned London designer of Blakes London and The Hempel.

AFTER HOURS

Although it's been around since 2003, making it ancient in nightlife years, Jimmy Woo's popularity remains unabated. Named after a fictional Hong Kong Triad boss, the lounge is made to resemble an 18th century opium den. Another preferred watering hole with an oriental and cinematically-inspired theme is lounge bar Suzy Wong, which happens to serve up the best cocktails in town.

Popular dance venue Club 11, formerly situated in a disused post office, just reopened in a rather dismal building on Wibautstraat (also not the prettiest street on the block), until recently occupied by two of Holland's national newspapers. But don't let appearances fool you, this club has a huge cult following among the hipper-than-thou crowd who may be a bit too snobbish for some.

Amsterdam's vibrant music scene is spread out over the city. Panama, located in the former Port Authority building in the Eastern Docklands, has seen the likes of Alicia Keys, Timbaland, John Digweed, *Deep Dish* and *Tiësto* perform on its stage, while The Sugar Factory is favored among jazz fans. Paradiso, a relic of the 60s hippie culture, remains one of the most popular venues in Amsterdam.

After all these years Supperclub is still going strong too, from which Bangkok's Bed Supperclub 'borrowed' the concept of pre-clubbing dining whilst lounging on a mattress in a stark white interior, minus the experimental performances staged every night at the Supperclub in Amsterdam.

Author Felix Marti-Ibanez once wrote, "In Amsterdam the water is the mistress and the land the vassal. Throughout the city there are as many canals and drawbridges as bracelets on a gypsy's bronzed arms..." It sums up a gypsy heritage the city still embraces – replete with its famous museums, 'green' coffee shops and multi-cultural inhabitants. What it lacks in size it makes up for with a spirit of creativity to firmly cling on to its coveted position on that most-popular-city list. 2



Stanislavski



Melkmeisjesbrug



The Dylan

TRAVEL LINKS

Tourist Information
www.iamsterdam.com

Where to Eat
Momo (www.momo-amsterdam.com)
Stanislavski (www.stanislavski.nl)
Restaurant Sophia (www.restaurant sophia.nl)
Fifteen (www.fifteen.nl)
Brasserie Harkema (www.brasserieharkema.nl)
Nevy (www.nevy.nl)

Where to Stay
Amsterdam Hilton (www.hilton.com)
Hotel Arena (www.hotelarena.nl)
Lloyd Hotel & Cultural Embassy (www.lloydhotel.com)
Grand Hotel Amrâth (www.amrathhotels.nl)
The Dylan (www.dylanamsterdam.com)

Nightlife
Jimmy Woo (www.jimmywoo.com)
Club 11 (www.ilove11.nl)
Panama (www.panama.nl)
The Sugar Factory (www.sugarfactory.nl)
Paradiso (www.paradiso.nl)
Supperclub (www.supperclub.com)