

Amsterdam Revisited

by Ellen Boonstra

Amsterdam has never quite managed to shake off its image as a Sodom and Gomorrah of readily available sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, a flashback to the 60s where hippies still roam the streets advocating "make love, not war," and where John Lennon and Yoko Ono staged their 'bed-in for peace' at the Amsterdam Hilton Hotel. Sure, you can still get stupefied and idle for hours at the 'pot cafes' like Grasshopper, Mellow Yellow or Happy Days, but the city has so much more to offer.

But first a quick history lesson. Founded in 1275, Amstelodamum, as this fishing village was originally called, derived from the words Amstel (as in the river) and dam. The town rapidly expanded into a lively trading port and important financial center. In its heyday, the Golden Age of the 17th century, it was the wealthiest city in the world. This glorious past is clearly evident in the *grachtengordel*, the canal-ring district in the center of town around the Singel, Herengracht (Gentleman's canal), Keizersgracht (Emperor's canal) and Prinsengracht (no translation necessary), with its many splendid canal houses and historic landmarks.

Granted, it's a bit of a touristy thing to do, but a great introduction to the 'Venice of the North' is hopping on board one of the ubiquitous glass-topped barges you'll see chuffing down the waterways. Especially after dark, when the canals and bridges of Amsterdam are illuminated, the old town has a distinctly mystical air to it.



Spin City



After the boats, the second best way to explore Amsterdam is by bicycle. Judging by the numerous bikes at every turn, it wouldn't be a surprise if the country's bicycle-to-people ratio rivals the sheep-to-people ratio of New Zealand. Environmentalists will be happy to hear the *stalen ros* (iron horse), as it's commonly referred to, is the country's main mode of transportation, come wind, rain, hail or snow. Yes, there is sunshine too, 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 your 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 utility vehicles and taxis, and many a hapless tourist has narrowly escaped by the tails of their raincoats.



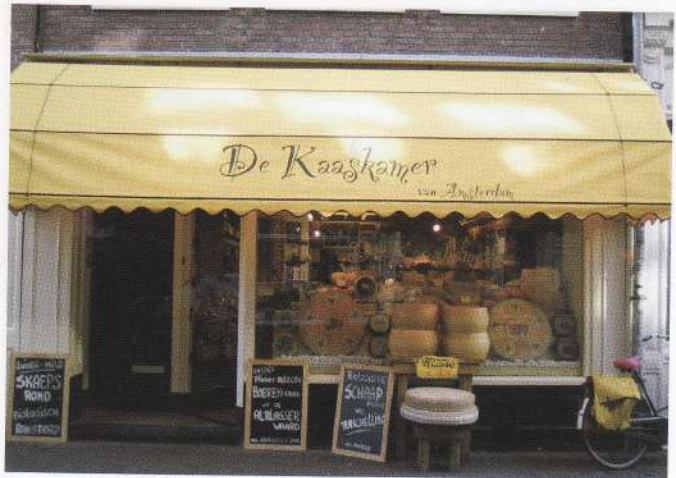
Cultural Highs



With the inner city practically being one big outdoor museum (it is, in fact, the largest historic town center in Europe), you could almost forgo the indoor ones were it not for all the masterpieces by Rembrandt, Van Gogh, and other luminaries on display at repositories like the Rijksmuseum (national museum), the Stedelijk (municipal museum), and the one devoted solely to Van Gogh.

For a glimpse of the city's more modern side, head over to the Eastern Docklands. 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 grown into a colorful hodgepodge of converted warehouses, modern canal houses and quirky, eye-catching bridges.

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Photos by Ellen Goonstra



Monumental Stays



Centrally located amidst the fashionable Eastern Docklands is the Lloyd Hotel & Cultural Embassy. This monument, dating from 1921, has been transformed into a hotel-cum-cultural center for local residents, international artists, visitors and businessmen. Called "much more than just a wacky design hotel" by *Newsweek*, each of the hotel's 188 rooms, ranging from one to five stars, has a different size and no two rooms are furnished alike.

Closer to the city's heart is Amsterdam's newest luxury five-star establishment, Grand Hotel Amrâth. This hotel is situated in the iconic Scheepvaarthuis (shipping house), which in the olden days was the head office for major Dutch shipping companies. Acclaimed restoration specialist and architect Ray Kentie splendidly preserved its unique heritage and designed all the rooms around a nautical theme.

Another place to bed down with a colorful past is Hotel Arena, housed in a former orphanage built in 1890. A century later the building was converted into a refuge for modern-day 'orphans'—a youth hostel for backpacking globetrotters. In 1999 the building was reborn again as Hotel Arena, with rooms, a bar, a restaurant, a club, and meeting rooms all under one roof. A team of local interior architects has given the building a fresh new appearance, imaginatively incorporating the imposing high windows, long corridors, and wide staircases into the design. By contrast, the rooms have been furnished in a contemporary, minimalist black-and-white style.



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, pedestrians-only shopping streets of Kalverstraat and Damrak near Dam Square, or in neighborhoods around the city's canal district like Jordaan and Negen Straatjes (nine little streets). Both these areas are dotted with local designer clothing stores, specialty bookstores, charming 'bruin cafés' (local pubs), and gourmet restaurants.

Over the past few years, the working-class district of De Pijp has developed into quite the happening neighborhood. For young urbanites it's also become a trendy place to live. Countless boutiques, cafés and cozy eateries have sprung up, many in the immediate area of the Albert Cuyper Markt. This teeming market is where townsfolk stock up on fresh produce, ethnic foodstuffs, and discount clothing.

A surprising place to go shopping, and not just leering and 'window shopping,' is Amsterdam's infamous Red Light District. Formerly the sole domain of 'ladies of the evening,' local authorities are on a mission to clean up the area. So far the city has bought up 55 buildings from a former prostitution baron and rented them out to local fashion designers.



Travel Links

Tourist Information

Amsterdam Tourism Board (www.iamsterdam.com)

Where to Stay

Amsterdam Hilton (www.hilton.com)

Lloyd Hotel & Cultural Embassy (www.lloydhotel.com)

Grand Hotel Amrâth (www.amrathhotels.nl)

Hotel Arena (www.hotelarena.nl)

Where to Eat

Momo (www.momo-amsterdam.com)

Café George (www.cafegeorge.nl)

Nightlife

Jimmy Woo (www.jimmywoo.com)

Suzy Wong (www.suzy-wong.com)

Panama (www.panama.nl)

The Sugar Factory (www.sugarfactory.nl)

Paradiso (www.paradiso.nl)

Supperclub (www.supperclub.com)



Dutch Treats



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.

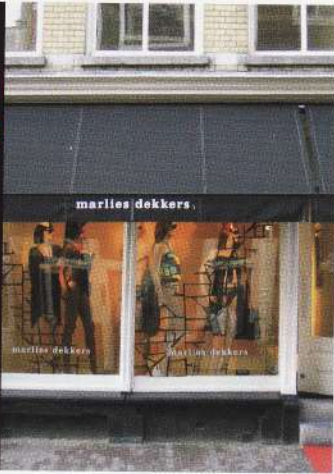
With the emergence of a whole new generation of uber-stylish eateries, Amsterdam's restaurant scene has expanded well beyond its colonial roots. There's Momo, which specializes in sushi, sashimi and other Asian-style dishes. The menu is presided over by chef Anthony Sousa Tam, formerly of top London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

But Amsterdam's hottest hangout by far is French bistro Café George. Reservations must be booked months in advance, since five tables are permanently pre-booked by different fashion labels. All the 'beautiful people' hanging out makes for an attractive side dish.



Photo courtesy of Amsterdam Tourism Board

So far the city has bought up 55 buildings in the Red Light District from a former prostitution baron and rented them out to local fashion designers.



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 Asian vibe and cinema-inspired theme is the lounge bar Suzy Wong, which serves up the best cocktails in town.

Amsterdam's rollicking music scene reverberates across the city. Panama, located in the former Port Authority building in the Eastern Docklands, has played host to the likes of Alicia Keys, Timbaland, John Digweed, Deep Dish and Tiësto, while The Sugar Factory is favored by jazz fans. Paradiso, a relic of the 60s hippie culture, remains one of the most popular venues in Amsterdam for the up-and-coming stars of indie rock.

After all these years, Supperclub is still cooking too. As an interesting footnote, Bangkok's Bed Supperclub 'borrowed' the concept of pre-clubbing dining whilst lounging on a mattress in a stark white interior from this icon, though without the experimental performances staged every night at the Amsterdam venue.

No matter how much things might change in Amsterdam, upon returning I'm always struck by its constants and perennial attractions: the history-drenched canals, the bicycle-filled streets, and all the stately, centuries-old buildings. These sights keep the city in a state of perpetual grace, unmoved by the whirlwinds of change and popular culture that sweep through it.



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