



Adventures in NETHERLAND

All cities are two places – the one on the map and the one in your head.

By Sharon Stephenson

The problem with Amsterdam is the latter: it exists largely in the collective imagination as a slightly grubby destination of stag parties, sex workers and the constant fug of marijuana smoke. That's certainly how it appeared to my backpacking eyes more years ago than I care to remember.

But time – and the city fathers – have been kind to Holland's capital and today Amsterdam has managed to clean up its act without losing its flamboyant edge. Sure, it's still a magnet for rowdy stag parties, and the red light district is filled with just as many blokes trying not to look uncomfortable.

Somehow, though, Amsterdam appears to be cleaner and less hedonistic than I recall. It's certainly greener than before: these days, emission-free boats ply the waters of the city's canal system, electric cars somehow manage to squeeze their way down tiny cobbled streets, and even the bus shelters sport solar generators.

So I probably shouldn't be surprised that Amsterdam was recently voted one of the world's best places to live. A waitress I chat to on my first day sums it up perfectly when she tells me that her hometown is "one of Europe's most compact, lived-in and traffic-free capitals".



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"This city is incredibly easy to live in and get around," she says. "There's beautiful architecture, art and culture, plus we're one of the most permissive places on the planet. Why wouldn't you want to come here?"

She's got a point. But even though Amsterdam is as flat as a *pannenkoek*, the delicious Dutch breakfast pancakes to which I quickly become addicted, one of the best ways to explore it is from the water.

Built more than 400 years ago, Amsterdam's protected canals wrap around the city like an octopus's tentacles. Known as the Venice of the North (although with more canals than the Italian city), Amsterdam is built on 90 islands and divided by concentric canals that were awarded UNESCO Heritage status in 2010. Chuck 80 bridges and a staggering 8,000 monuments into the mix, and it's easy to see why the Tourist Board reports that around 40% of tourists come to Amsterdam solely for the canals.

Not surprisingly, water taxis are plentiful and cheap, so we board one to explore the three main canals: Herengracht (Patrician's Canal), Prinsengracht (Prince's Canal) and Keizersgracht (Emperor's Canal). We also detour to Zwaneburgwal, the canal made famous by local artist Rembrandt who lived in a house overlooking this canal in the former Jewish quarter. His house (Rembrandthuis) has been meticulously restored to its original condition and is now a museum that has expanded to incorporate his studio and the room where he displayed and sold his paintings.

Many Amsterdammers have a very personal connection to the tranquil waterways, choosing to call them home. Around 2,500

houseboats line the canals and range from something out of a glossy interiors magazine to 'should have been relegated to the scrap heap years ago'. One thing most of them have in common is a lack of curtains.



"Only foreigners use curtains," one houseboat owner tells me. "In Holland, having no curtains says, 'I'm very open, I have nothing to hide.'" Which could explain why we end up seeing much more than we expected on our canal cruise! "You quickly learn to look the other way," laughs the houseboat owner.

Amsterdammers with deep pockets tend to favour the narrow but eye-wateringly expensive houses that line the canals. A local tells me the reason they're so narrow: because each building was taxed according to how wide it was in the 16th-century. They're also a little wonky because, apparently, they were designed to lean forward so goods could be winched directly from boats to the tops without hitting the buildings. But they are stunning, and thanks to the 'no curtains' philosophy, it can be fun to wander past at night and peek into these lovely homes.

By day two we're ready to swap boats for bikes, the preferred mode of transport in Amsterdam. In fact I see everyone from pinstriped businessmen to high-heeled fashionistas to mothers with children cycling their way around the city. Apparently even the Dutch royal family has been spotted on two wheels. It's estimated there are more bikes than people in Amsterdam, and the locals collectively cycle around two million kilometres a day.

I'm not a cyclist at home, but a friend who is tells me road users in Amsterdam are far more polite than in New Zealand. As we duck in and out of the patchwork of cobbled streets surrounding the Jordaan district, it certainly seems as though cyclists are respected. By the time I chain my bike outside the Anne Frank Museum, I'm beginning to feel like a local.

The last time I was in Amsterdam, I was put off visiting the city's most popular tourist



Photos courtesy of Martin Haughey.



attraction by the queues that unspooled around the block. Despite our early arrival, it appears nothing has changed. However, it's well worth the wait because the three-storey townhouse on Prinsengracht, where Anne and her family hid from the Nazis for two years, is a haunting reminder of this dark period in history.

We climb the stairs to the Secret Annex in silence – this is where the dramas recorded in Anne's famous diary were played out. The rooms remain bare, stripped of their contents by the Nazis when the family was sent to concentration camps in 1944, but numerous photos show how cramped and uncomfortable conditions would have been. One of the most poignant exhibits is Anne's original diary, bound in red and white plaid cloth, which really brings home the terrible suffering she and so many others went through.



It's a little sobering to go from the Holocaust to priceless paintings, but you can't come to Amsterdam and not visit the Rijksmuseum, believed by many to be the world's most culturally important museum. Re-opened in 2013 after a 10-year, NZ\$537.5 million refurbishment, the Rijksmuseum is astounding. The obvious magnet is the world's largest collection of Rembrandts, particularly his famous 'Night Watch' painting. Just be prepared to put a whole day aside for a visit – with more than 5,000 paintings on display in 200 rooms, there's a lot of art to take in.

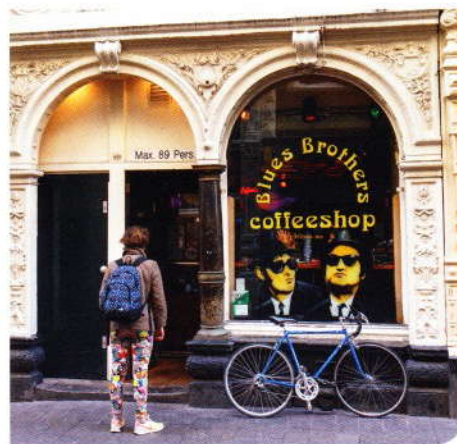
Museums are, in fact, about as abundant as canals. If the Rijksmuseum hasn't tipped you over the edge, try the Van Gogh Museum, where more than 200 of the tortured artist's paintings and drawings are on display, or the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art, which features works by Cezanne, Picasso and Mondrian. Just as interesting is the architecture of the Stedelijk's new wing, which locals have unkindly likened to a giant bathtub.

The smaller, more unusual museums are where Amsterdam really comes into its own. From the Houseboat Museum to the Hash, Marijuana and Hemp Museum to the Erotic Museum, these might not be for everyone, but the gaggles of women streaming into the Museum of Bags and Purses certainly loved that one.



More than 4,000 bags line the shelves of this three-storey canal house, from 17th-century leather pouches and 1920s' beaded clutches through to the latest Marc Jacobs and Prada designs. The museum started as a private collection but now features everything from the precious and unusual to the highly covetable and the downright odd, including a handbag fashioned out of a leopard's head, which leaves us shaking ours.

Having paid a visit to the city's notorious red light district as a backpacker, I don't really want to repeat it. I am, however, glad someone talked me into it this time because the powers-that-be have cleaned up the area and, rather than being a dangerous den of iniquity, it's now full of trendy bars and restaurants. It's also home to Oude Kerk, Amsterdam's oldest church – and its oldest building – built around 1213.



One thing I definitely don't need to do again is visit one of Amsterdam's infamous 'coffee shops', where soft drugs rather than caffeine are on the menu. They're still there and are as popular as ever, although a sign outside one coffee shop announcing a crackdown on people cycling under the influence does make me smile. 🚲

What you need to know

How to get there:

From New Zealand, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines offers daily flights ex Auckland with its code-share partner Malaysia Airlines via Kuala Lumpur – or partner carrier Air New Zealand via Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Vancouver connecting with KLM flights to Amsterdam.

Where to stay:

Accommodation is plentiful and comes in all shapes, sizes and price tags. On a budget and desperate to sleep after the 30+ hour long-haul schlep from New Zealand, I fell on the Ibis Amsterdam Centre like a long lost friend. It's right next to Centraal Station and is cheap, clean and safe.

What to eat:



Don't leave town without trying the local speciality: raw herring. If you're squeamish, you might want to avoid the way the locals eat them – holding them aloft by the tail, tilting back one's head and lowering in the herring. Still, you can always get rid of the taste with another local culinary delight: frites with mayonnaise. They're basically fries all dressed up but gosh they're good.

How to get around:

Amsterdam is an eminently walkable city, but a canal cruise will give you a different perspective. There are numerous tour operators dotted around the canals, so take your pick. Hiring a bike, even if for only an hour or two, is an essential Amsterdam activity and again, there is a range of bike rental operators to choose from.

