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The Best of Amsterdam

Prosperity—ranging from crass commercialism to genteel gentrification—has settled like a North Sea mist around Amsterdam’s graceful cityscape of canals and 17th-century town houses. Yet “free thinking” and “anything goes” still have their place: They’re the catchphrases by which Amsterdam lives its collective life. And all this free living is fueled by a successful economy, not by the combustion of semi-legal exotic plants. City government has worked hard to transform Amsterdam from a hippie haven to a cosmopolitan business and cultural center—and it’s succeeding. Mostly.

Amsterdam’s more than 740,000 denizens aren’t so easily poured into the restrictive molds of trade and industry. They continue to mix tolerably well in their multiracial melting pot (though there are growing signs of discontent with continued immigration).

A side effect of the city’s new concern with economics and image is that youthful backpackers who don’t wash much, stay in cheap hostels, and think smoking hash is the high point of the city’s cultural life aren’t as welcome as they once were. But when they come back with a paycheck that allows them to stay at an upscale hotel, buy tickets for the Concertgebouw and the Muziektheater, eat in a Japanese restaurant, and splash out for a diamond or two, well, that’s another story.

Still, all is far from lost for the bohemian souls: If they want, they can smoke hash all the livelong day. And anyone can partake in Amsterdam’s culture, history, and scenic cityscape, without stretching credit card limits.

Amsterdam is a city on human scale. Few skyscrapers mar the sky’s clarity, and most of the populace walks or rides pedal-bikes. Amsterdam’s historic center recalls the city’s Golden Age, when it was the hub of a vast trading network and colonial empire. It was then that wealthy merchants constructed gabled residences along neatly laid canals. A delicious irony is that the placid old structures now host brothels, smoke shops, and some extravagant nightlife. The city’s inhabitants, proud of their pragmatic live-and-let-live attitude, have decided to control what they cannot effectively outlaw. They permit licensed prostitution in the Red Light District—as much a tourist attraction as the Rijksmuseum or the Van Gogh Museum—and the sale of hashish and marijuana in designated “coffeeshops.”

But don’t think Amsterdammers drift around town trailing clouds of marijuana smoke. They’re too busy zipping around on bikes, inline-skating through Vondelpark, sunning on their porches, browsing arrays of ethnic dishes, or watching the parade of street life from a sidewalk cafe. A new generation of entrepreneurs has revitalized old neighborhoods like the Jordaan, turning some of its distinctive houses into offbeat stores, bustling cafes, hotels, and restaurants. Along the waterfront, old harbor installations have either been put to bold new uses, or swept away entirely in favor of large-scale modern developments.

Amsterdam Orientation



Impressions

What other place in the world could you choose where all of life's comforts, and all novelties that man could want are so easy to obtain as here and where you can enjoy such a feeling of freedom?

—René Descartes, French philosopher (1634)

While Amsterdam may box your Puritan ears, this great, historic city is an experiment in freedom.

—ABCNEWS.com (2000)

The city will quickly capture you in its spell. At night, many of the more than 1,200 bridges spanning 160 canals are lined with tiny lights, giving them a fairy-tale appearance. Some mornings, the cityscape emerges from a slowly dispersing mist to reveal its enchanting form.

Amsterdam doesn't merely have style; it has substance too. Besides the many canals and bridges, antiquarian bookstores, brown cafes (the Dutch equivalent of neighborhood bars), gin-sampling houses, and chic cafes and nightclubs, it offers up treasures such as the Jewish Historical Museum, the Rembrandt House Museum, and the modern Stedelijk Museum.

Perhaps Amsterdam's greatest asset, though, is its inhabitants. Many speak English fluently and virtually all are friendly to visitors. Plop yourself down amid the nicotine-stained walls of a brown cafe to enjoy a beer or a *jenever* (gin), and you'll soon find yourself chatting with an amiable local.

Much of Amsterdam's pleasure arises from just being in it, so toss out any "miles and miles to go before I sleep" mind frame. Between dips into artistic and historic treasures, take time to simply absorb the freewheeling spirit of this vibrant city.

1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **Cruising the Canals:** Hop aboard a glass-topped tour boat for a cruise on Amsterdam's storied canals. From this vantage point, you get the best possible view of all those gabled Golden Age merchants' houses. Ignore anyone who tells you it's a tourist trap—it *is* a tourist trap, I suppose, but it got that way by being justifiably popular. See p. 173.
- **Biking the City:** To pass for an authentic Amsterdammer, pick up a bicycle so ancient, rusted, and worn that no self-respecting thief would waste a second of his time trying to steal it (ah, but he will). Then charge into the ruckus of trams, cars, buses, and other bikes. Better yet, rent a bicycle that's in decent condition—and go carefully. See p. 62.
- **Riding a Canal Bike:** Lifelong Amsterdammers—and even expats who ought to know better but aim to pass as natives—scoff long and loud at this. Let them. Pedal yourself through the water for an hour or two on your own private *pedalo*. Go at your own speed to view the canals in style (not much style, I'll admit). See p. 173.
- **Skating the Canals:** When the canals freeze—it doesn't happen every winter—you'll find few locals who'll argue against the proposition that God is a Dutchman. Giving Amsterdammers the chance to go around on ice is one of the few ways to pry them

off their bicycles. Strap on a pair of long-bladed *noren* skates and join them. See p. 177.

- **Walking on the Wild Side:** Stroll through De Wallen to examine the quaint 16th-century canal architecture, peruse secondhand bookstores, and observe inhabitants as they walk their dogs, ride their bikes to the shops, take the kids to school. Oh, and since this is the Red Light District, you're bound to see certain minimally attired women watching the

world go by through red-tinted windows. See p. 160.

- **Whiffing “Coffeeshop”:** It's true—smoking marijuana is officially tolerated in Amsterdam's “smoking coffeeshops.” These aren't your neighborhood cafes, and they're not for everyone, but they're an established part of Amsterdam's alternative tradition. You'll be able to buy and smoke marijuana inside, and no law-enforcement agency will hassle you. See chapter 10.

2 Best Splurge Hotels

- **Amstel InterContinental Amsterdam,** Professor Tulpplein 1 (☎ 020/622-6060): The last word in opulence offers much more, including one of the city's best restaurants and a superb location beside the Amstel River. This is the first choice of visiting celebrities, so don't be surprised if you see famous faces. See p. 97.
- **Amsterdam American,** Leidsekaade 97 (☎ 020/556-3000): This hotel boasts the best location in town—it's on Leidseplein, Amsterdam's most lively square, and is close to theaters, cinemas, and a casino. Location aside, this is a fine hotel, and its Art Deco-style **Café Americain** is a city institution. See p. 91.
- **The Grand Amsterdam Sofitel Demeure,** Oudezijds Voorburgwal

197 (☎ 020/555-3111): The Grand really is rather grand, both inside and out; it once served as the seat of the Amsterdam Admiralty and the city council, among other official municipal functions since the 15th century. Now it guards its virtue along a tranquil canal edging the Red Light District. See p. 77.

- **Hotel Pulitzer,** Prinsengracht 315–331 (☎ 020/523-5235): No fewer than 25 old canal houses on Prinsengracht were reconverted to create this hotel, which would ordinarily be considered a serious loss, except that the Pulitzer is a real prizewinner. See p. 86.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Hotel Agora,** Singel 462 (☎ 020/627-2200): Those canal-house hotels that don't hit you over the head with opulence more than make up for it with the personal touch. This paragon of the type feels like a canal-side home. See p. 87.
- **Ambassade Hotel,** Herengracht 341 (☎ 020/555-0222): Here, in 10 neighboring canal houses on the

Golden Bend (for centuries the city's most fashionable district), you'll feel you're in the home of a rich 17th-century merchant. Most of the spacious, individually styled rooms have large windows overlooking the canal. See p. 87.

- **Hotel Arena,** 's-Gravesandestraat 51 (☎ 020/850-2410): What this unusual place has, in spades, is an

action-oriented and informal temperament that's typical of Amsterdam—the kind of shared outlook that attracts many to this city in the first place. Arena combines this unpretentiousness with genuine style and a judicious level of comfort. See p. 98.

- **Hotel de Filosoof**, Anna van den Vondelstraat 6 (☎ 020/683-3013): Few—if any—hotels have an operating philosophy as distinctive as this one, which takes its inspiration from the great thinkers of the past. And

this is no shameless sophistry disguising a grim underlying truth. In this case, idealism has produced a more-than-acceptable reality. See p. 93.

- **Seven Bridges**, Reguliersgracht 31 (☎ 020/623-1329): In some hotels, you realize the owners aren't just running a business, but doing what they love. This is that kind of place. It's obvious that all the furniture, fixtures, and fittings have been selected with loving care, and guests receive the same conscientious attention. See p. 88.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **Pop a Herring**: Amsterdam folk like their herring fresh and raw from a neighborhood fish stall. The best in the business is **Van Alتنا**, Stadhouderskade at Jan Luijkenstraat (☎ 020/676-9139). Eat your fish in the approved Dutch manner—whole, holding the fish by its tail, with your face to that wide Holland sky. Amsterdammers prefer theirs chopped, with onion. See page 125.
- **Eat on the Water**: I won't go so far as to say you'll never eat better than on an **Amsterdam Dinner Cruise**, operated by Holland International (☎ 020/622-7788). But you'll have the music, the candlelight, the canals, and, if you're lucky, the moon over the water. See p. 238.
- **Feast in the Park**: Tucked away behind the trees of Vondelpark,

Vertigo, Vondelpark 3 (☎ 020/612-3021) lends a touch of the country to a convivial venue that's backed up by some fine food. See p. 132.

- **Try a Rijsttafel**: Dutch settlers in the East Indies created the banquet-style “rice table.” Comprising from 10 to 30 little dishes, some as fiery as rocket exhaust, a *rijsttafel* is a great introduction to Indonesian cuisine. See p. 106.
- **Live the Américain Dream**: Join *tout* Amsterdam for coffee, tea, and *gâteau* in the stunning Art Nouveau and Art Deco ambience of the Amsterdam American Hotel's Café Américain. You'll be pleased to learn that the service has improved since a post-war Dutch writer described the waiters as “unemployed knife throwers.” See p. 124.

5 Best Free (or Almost Free) Things to Do

- **Sail the IJ Ferry**: The short ferryboat ride across the IJ channel between Centraal Station and Amsterdam-Noord (North) is a great little cruise and provides a good view of the harbor. Only the shortest routes are free; the others cost little more than a song. See p. 174.

- **View Golden Age Paintings**: Usually it costs a bundle to see paintings from the Old Masters period of Dutch art. An exception is the multiple images of Civic Guards companies hanging in the Schuttersgalerij of the Amsterdams Historisch Museum. See p. 143.

- **Visit the Begijnhof:** There's a price to pay for stepping into the cloistered community that for centuries has been a residence for women of "sound character." You need to be tolerably quiet and comport yourself with dignity—or you'll get tossed out by the guards. See p. 156.
- **Visit the Flower Market:** The vast array of flowers and potted plants in their "floating" home on the Singel canal comprises the city's largest and

most colorful plant assortment. The flowers, however, are not free. See p. 218.

- **Take in a Lunchtime Rehearsal Concert:** If you can live with the occasional duff note and a program that doesn't always follow the script, treat your ears to classical music from 12:30 to 1pm at the Muziektheater (Tues) and the Concertgebouw (Wed), every week from October to June. See p. 223.

6 The Best Outdoor Activities

- **Cross Bridges over Untroubled Waters:** Amsterdam has more bridges—and more canals—than Venice, a city Italians are proud to call "the Amsterdam of the South." Find out what humbles Italians by crossing as many of Amsterdam's 1,200-plus bridges as you can; the views are unparalleled. See chapter 7.
- **Tiptoe through the Tulips:** Join four centuries of Dutch tradition by going overboard for a flower that's become synonymous with Holland. In spring,

you'll find them everywhere. Sharp promotion (and a seed of truth) says the best place to pick up a bunch is at the Flower Market on Singel. See p. 218 and p. 206.

- **Beach About Zandvoort:** Come rain, hail, or shine (and often enough, all three on the same day), Amsterdammers ride the rails for a short hop out to its brassy—but not classy—coastal resort. The bracing North Sea air blows away all that marijuana smoke. See p. 246.

7 The Best Museums

- **Rijksmuseum:** The State Museum houses some of Holland's most important artworks: Rembrandt's world-famous *The Night Watch*, four of Vermeer's miniatures, and numerous pieces by Frans Hals. In all, this is one of the world's most impressive Old Masters collections. See p. 140.
- **Van Gogh Museum:** The world's largest collection of Vincent's works is housed here—some 200 paintings and 500 drawings—ranging from *Sunflowers* to earless self-portraits.

Here, you can trace this great, tragic painter's artistic and psychological development. See p. 141.

- **Anne Frankhuis:** The clear and haunting words of a young Jewish girl trying to survive and grow in unimaginable circumstances have moved millions since they were first published in the aftermath of World War II. It's a melancholy but unforgettable experience to spend a reflective moment in Anne Frank's stark hideout from Nazi terror. See p. 136.

8 The Best Neighborhoods

- **De Jordaan:** Bounded by Brouwersgracht, Singelgracht, Prinsengracht, and Leidsestraat, this former artisan

neighborhood has recently become gentrified. With its own small canals, street markets, and an array of minor

attractions, it's a great place for random wandering. See p. 160.

- **De Wallen:** Just below the low-life sin section of “The Walls”—that is, the Red Light District—is a contrast: this delightful southern district of

Old Amsterdam encompasses tranquil canals lined with handsome 16th-century houses and the University of Amsterdam's bustling campus. See p. 160.