

## The Best of Amsterdam

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**E**asygoing, liberal Amsterdam has never entirely shed its reputation as a hippie haven, even with an economy that has moved far beyond this cliché. It's surprising how many people still think of the city as caught in some rose-tinted time warp of free love, free drugs, free everything. The heady heyday of the '60s and '70s—if it ever existed to the extent legend and the soft-focus afterglow of memory would have us believe—has given way to new millennium realities.

Prosperity has settled like a North Sea mist around the graceful cityscape of canals and 17th-century town houses. A tour of the burgeoning suburban business zones provides evidence enough of the new priorities. The city government has worked assiduously to transform Amsterdam from a hippie haven to a cosmopolitan international business center, and there seems little doubt it is succeeding.

Fortunately, it has not been completely successful. Amsterdam is still “different.” Its 740,000 citizens, bubbling along in their multiracial melting pot, are not so easily poured into the restrictive molds of trade and industry. Not only do “free thinking” and “anything goes” still have their place, they are the watchwords by which Amsterdam lives its collective life. Don't kid yourself, though. All this free living is fueled by the wealth a successful economy generates, not by the combustion of semi-legal exotic plants.

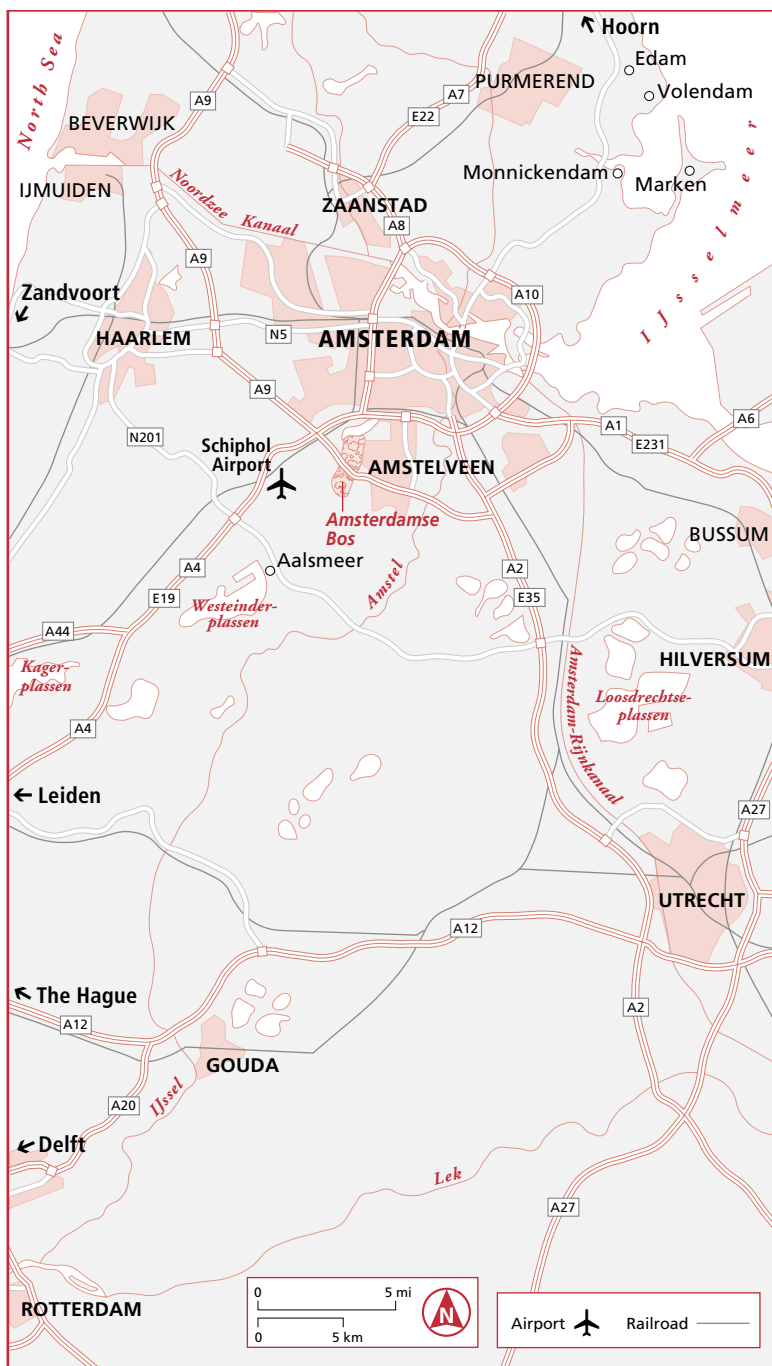
A side effect of the city's concern with economics and image is that youthful backpackers who don't wash much, stay in cheap hostels, and think smoking hash is the high point of the city's cultural life, are no longer quite as welcome as they once were. When they come back in 10 years with a salary that allows them to stay at a good hotel, buy tickets for the Concertgebouw and the Muziektheater, eat in a Japanese restaurant, and splash out for a diamond or two, why then, everything will be different.

Still, all is far from lost: You can smoke hash all the livelong day if that's what you want. More important, you can enjoy Amsterdam, its culture, history, and beauty, without stretching the limits of your credit cards.

Amsterdam has been drawn to a human scale. Few skyscrapers mar the clarity of the sky and the populace mostly walks or bikes from place to place. The historic center recalls Amsterdam's Golden Age as the command post of a vast trading network and colonial empire, when wealthy merchants constructed gabled residences along neatly laid-out canals. A delicious irony is that the placid old structures also 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 and the Van Gogh Museum—and the sale of hashish and marijuana in designated “coffeeshops.”

But don't think most Amsterdammers drift around town trailing clouds of marijuana smoke. They are too busy zipping around on bikes, inline-skating through Vondelpark, sunning on their porches, browsing arrays of ethnic dishes,

## 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)

or simply 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 the distinctive houses into offbeat stores and bustling cafes, hotels, and restaurants.

The city will quickly capture you in its spell. At night, many of the more than 1,200 bridges spanning the 160 canals are lit with tiny lights that give them a fairy-tale appearance. On some mornings the cityscape slowly emerges from a dispersing mist to reveal its treasures.

Amsterdam doesn't merely have style, but content too. Besides the many canals and bridges, it offers up such delights as the Jewish Historical Museum, the Rembrandt House Museum, the Waterlooplein flea market, the floating flower market, antiquarian bookstores, brown cafes (the Dutch equivalent of neighborhood bars) and gin-sampling houses, and chic cafes and nightclubs.

Perhaps Amsterdam's greatest asset 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 Amsterdammer.

Between dips into artistic and historical treasures, be sure to take time out to absorb the freewheeling spirit of Europe's most vibrant city.

## 1 The Best Amsterdam Experiences

- **Cruising the Canals:** Save yourself inches of shoe leather by hopping aboard a glass-topped canal boat for a cruise through Amsterdam's beautiful canals, from where you get the best possible view of all those gabled Golden Age merchants' houses. Just 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. 169.
- **Viewing Old Masters at the Rijksmuseum:** Unfortunately, most of the museum is closed for refurbishment through 2008. But in the sole wing that remains open, the Philips Wing, the Rijksmuseum has assembled *The Masterpieces*, highlights from its collection of 17th-century Dutch Golden Age, ah, masterpieces, among them Rembrandt's classic *The Night Watch*. See p. 135.
- **Visiting with Vincent:** At the Van Gogh Museum, where the world's largest collection of Vincent's works is housed in perpetuity, you can trace the artistic and psychological development of this great, tragic painter. See p. 138.
- **Remembering Anne Frank:** The clear and haunting words of a young Jewish girl trying to survive and to grow up in unimaginable circumstances have moved millions since they were first published in the aftermath of World War II. They speak both for her and, in a way, for all those whose voices were never heard. It's a melancholy but unforgettable

experience to spend a reflective moment in the Anne Frankhuis, amid the stark surroundings of Anne's hideaway from the Nazi terror. See p. 134.

- **Treating Your Ears to the Concertgebouw:** Take in a classical music concert at one of the world's most acoustically perfect halls, home to the famed Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and prime stop for visiting philharmonics (the musicians are sometimes pretty good, too). See p. 219.
- **Going Tiptoe Through the Tulips:** Join in with four centuries of Dutch tradition and go overboard for a flower that, though its natural home is among the mountain-fringed plains of Turkey and Iran, has become synonymous with Holland. In spring you'll find them everywhere, but sharp promotion (and at least a seed of truth) has it that the best place to pick up a bunch of tulips from Amsterdam is from the Flower Market on Singel. See p. 216.
- **Biking the City:** If you want to pass for an authentic Amsterdammer, find a bicycle that's so ancient, rusted, and worn that no self-respecting thief would waste a second of their valuable time trying to steal it (ah, but they will). Then, charge like Custer at Little Bighorn into the ruckus of trams, cars, buses, and other bikes. Better yet, rent a bike that's in somewhat better condition—and go carefully.
- **Hunting for Antiques:** Five hundred and more years of Amsterdam history, including a guaranteed piece of the city's 17th-century Golden Age, is there for the wrapping in the Spiegelgracht antiques quarter. And all you need to acquire it is a fistful of euros or some flexible plastic. See chapter 8.
- **Shopping for a Steal at a Street Market:** You'll have to get up pretty early and be pretty slick to hoodwink a Dutch street trader and score a genuine kill at the Waterlooplein flea market or the Albert Cuyp street market. But bargains have been sighted at both, and local color is guaranteed. See chapter 8.
- **Riding a Canal Bike:** Amsterdam natives—and even some long-term expats who ought to know better but who are trying to pass themselves off as Amsterdam natives—scoff long and loud at this. Let them. Pedal yourself through the water for an hour or two on your own private tourboat and at your own speed, to view the canals in style (not much style, I'll admit). See p. 170.
- **Skating the Canals:** When the canals freeze over—and sadly it doesn't happen every winter—you'll find few Amsterdammers to argue with the proposition that God is a Dutchman. The chance to go around on the ice is one of the few things that can pry the locals off of their bikes. Strap on a pair of long-bladed *Noren* skates and join them in their favorite winter outdoor activity. See p. 175.
- **Shuttling Across the Harbor on the IJ Ferry:** The short passage by ferryboat back and forth across the IJ channel between Centraal Station and Amsterdam Noord (North) is a great little cruise and provides a good view of the harbor. What's more, the ferries on the shortest routes are free. See p. 56.
- **Crossing Bridges When You Come to Them:** Amsterdam has more bridges and more canals than Venice—a city that Italians are proud to call “the Amsterdam of the South.” Find out what

makes Italians so humble by crossing as many of the 1,200 bridges over the untroubled waters of Amsterdam's canals as you can reasonably fit in. The views are great. See chapter 6.

- **Living the "Américain" Dream:** Join *tout* Amsterdam for coffee, tea, and *gâteau* in the stunning Art Nouveau ambience of the American Hotel's Café Américain. The service has improved somewhat since a post-war Dutch writer described the waiters as "unemployed knife throwers." See p. 118.
- **Beaching About Zandvoort:** Come rain, hail, or shine (and, often enough, come all three on the same day), Amsterdam rides the train for the short hop out to its brassy but not classy sea coast resort and lets the bracing North Sea air blow away all that hash and marijuana smoke. See chapter 10.
- **Popping a Herring:** Chasing herring is what got this city started, and Amsterdam folk are still in hot pursuit. They like their herring fresh and raw from a neighborhood fish stall. Now, raw herring is something of an acquired taste. One way to acquire the taste is to eat it in the approved Dutch manner—whole, holding the fish by its tail, with your face to that wide Holland sky. But Amsterdammers themselves, being sensible folk, prefer theirs chopped, with onion. See chapter 5.
- **Dining Out on a *Rijsttafel* (Rice Table):** The concept of "Dutch cuisine" is generally considered to be a contradiction in terms. Luckily, Dutch colonialists in Holland's former possession, Indonesia, were inventive enough to supply an alternative. Consisting of anything from 10 to 30 little Indonesian dishes, some of them as fiery as a rocket exhaust, a *rijsttafel* is a

great introduction to Indonesian cuisine and a substantial meal in its own right. See p. 99.

- **Sinking a *Jenever* (Dutch Gin):** Spend a leisurely evening absorbing the atmosphere, and sundry beverages of an alcoholic nature, in a brown cafe, the traditional Amsterdam watering hole. These old bars—centuries old in many cases—have seen plenty in their time, and still have space for more. Your first sip of *jenever* must be from a glass that's a "look, no hands" effort, leaning over the bar. See p. 226.
- **Walking on the Wild Side:** Stroll through the neighborhood known as De Wallen, to examine the quaint gabled architecture along its narrow 16th-century canals, peruse the shelves of its antiquarian and secondhand bookstores, and observe the everyday life of the inhabitants as they walk the dog, ride their bikes to the shops, take the kids to school. Oh, yes, and since this is the Red Light District, you might also notice certain minimally attired ladies watching the world go by through their red-fringed windows. See p. 165.
- **Boosting Ajax:** Should you somehow manage to wangle a ticket (saying you're a pal of the Queen *might* help), you can shout yourself hoarse for Amsterdam's soccer hotshots, Ajax, one of the all-time great clubs of world football, at their high-tech Amsterdam ArenA stadium, in the southeastern suburbs. See chapter 6.
- **Visiting a "Coffeshop":** Yes it's true—smoking marijuana is officially tolerated in Amsterdam's very special "smoking coffeshops." These places 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 is going to hassle you. See chapter 9.

## 2 Best Hotel Bets

For the full details on these hotels, see chapter 4.

- **Best Value:** Taking all factors into account—price, location, facilities, hospitality, Dutchness, and that indefinable something that makes a stay memorable—the **Estheréa**, Singel 303–309 (☎ 020/624-5146), is the best value in town. See p. 81.
- **Best Location:** Just off Leidseplein, the city's most lively square, close to theaters, cinemas, the casino, heaps of shops and restaurants, canal boats, street performers, trams, and general gusto, you find the **Crowne Plaza Amsterdam-American**, Leidsekaade 97 (☎ 020/556-3000). Location isn't everything, of course, but this is a fine hotel, and its Art Deco Café Américain is a city institution. See p. 83.
- **Best for Canalside Luxury:** No fewer than 24 old canal houses along the Prinsengracht were converted to create the **Hotel Pulitzer Amsterdam**, Prinsengracht 315–331 (☎ 020/523-5235)—which would ordinarily be considered a serious loss, except that the Pulitzer is a genuine prizewinner. See p. 78.
- **Best for Tradition:** **Die Port van Cleve**, Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal 176–180 (☎ 020/624-6429), is one of the city's oldest hotels, but has entirely modernized rooms, so you can celebrate the 17th century in 21st-century comfort. See p. 72.
- **Best for Families:** The **Crowne Plaza Amsterdam City Centre**, Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal 5 (☎ 020/620-0500), provides reliable accommodations and service in a family-friendly environment close to Centraal Station and the main public transportation links. You also get an indoor swimming pool. See p. 69.
- **Best for Business Travelers:** The **NH Barbizon Palace**, Prins Hendrikkade 59–72 (☎ 020/556-4564), is modern, luxurious, stylish, and efficient, and has an excellent location—opposite Centraal Station—and a full range of business facilities. See p. 74.
- **Best for Prestige:** The opulent **Amstel InterContinental Amsterdam**, Professor Tulpplein 1 (☎ 020/622-6060), has this in abundance and 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 some famous faces. See p. 91.
- **Best Unknown Hotel:** A combination of location, decor, personal service, enthusiastic owners, and general all-round quality wins the small and little-known **Seven Bridges**, Reguliersgracht 31 (☎ 020/623-1329), this accolade. See p. 81.
- **Best Budget Hotel:** Many cheap hotels in Amsterdam leave a lot to be desired. Not so the **Museumzicht**, Jan Luykenstraat 22 (☎ 020/671-2954), a plain, clean, and friendly hotel in a superb location across from the Rijksmuseum. See p. 90.

### 3 Best Dining Bets

For the full details on these restaurants, see chapter 5.

- **Best for Opulence:** Royalty eat at **La Rive**, in the Amstel InterContinental Amstel Hotel, Professor Tulpplein 1 (☎ 020/520-3264), as do movie stars, rock stars, opera stars, tennis stars, and even ordinary folks with well-padded pocketbooks. It's luxuriously opulent, the location is great, and the food is outstanding. See p. 129.
- **Best Value:** It breaks my heart to write this, because I know it will only make it harder to find a seat at **De Prins**, Prinsengracht 124 (☎ 020/624-9382). But duty calls. When you eat in this handsome, friendly, cozy, warm—in a Dutch word, *gezellig*—brown cafe-restaurant, you'll wonder why you paid twice as much for food half as good in that other place the evening before. See p. 115.
- **Best Decor:** **Café Américain**, in the Crowne Plaza Amsterdam-American Hotel, Leidsekaade 97 (☎ 020/556-3232), really ought to be on UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage list. We're talking Américain the beautiful; the Dutch Art Nouveau and Art Deco elegance includes magnificent chandeliers and velvet upholstery. See p. 118.
- **Best Alfresco Dining:** **Vertigo**, Vondelpark 3 (☎ 020/612-3021), is tucked behind the trees of Vondelpark, which lends a touch of the country to this busy and convivial venue that is backed up by some fine food. See p. 128.
- **Best Romantic Meal:** Ignore all those whose lips curl into a sneer at such a suggestion—"Why, the very idea!"—and clamber aboard an **Amsterdam Dinner Cruise**, run by Holland International (☎ 020/622-7788). I won't go so far as to say you'll never eat better, but you have the music, the candlelight, the canals, and maybe the moon over the water, too. See p. 130.
- **Best Ambience:** Short of smuggling french fries into a performance, you can't eat closer to the Concertgebouw than at **Bodega Keyzer**, Van Baerlestraat 96 (☎ 020/671-1441). Keyzer has some great stories, some great customers, some great looks, and some great food. See p. 124.
- **Best Grand Cafe:** The reviewer from *The New York Times* went so far as to call **Café Luxembourg** "one of the world's great cafes." But Luxembourg is great on an Amsterdam scale and in an Amsterdam style. That is to say cozy and kind of intimate, with little, if any, of the pretension that would normally go along with such world-class status. See p. 109.
- **Best Traditional Dutch:** It sounds contradictory to say that **D'Vijff Vlieghe** ("The Five Flies"), Spuistraat 294–302 (☎ 020/530-4060), is a tad touristy and still traditional Dutch, but somehow it manages to be both. See p. 106.
- **Best American:** Well, Tex-Mex. **Rose's Cantina**, Reguliersdwarsstraat 38–40 (☎ 020/625-9797), is more of a popular institution than a truly great eatery, though the food can be quite good. You'll probably have to wait a while for a table, during which time Rose's deploys its secret weapon—marvelous margaritas. See p. 110.
- **Best Steak:** They've been selling and counting steaks at **Brasserie De Poort**, Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal 176–180 (☎ 020/622-6429), for well over a century. Maybe you'll be the lucky one who gets number 7,000,000. See p. 107.

- **Best Vegetarian:** **Bolhoed**, Prinsengracht 60–62 (☎ 020/626-1803), takes this title for its *joie de vivre*, romantic atmosphere, and excellent and imaginative vegetarian cooking. See p. 112.
- **Best Fast Getaway:** You wouldn't expect a restaurant on a train station platform to be a good place to eat, but **1e Klas**, Platform 2, Centraal Station (☎ 020/625-0131), is just about worth missing your train for. It offers plenty of high quality choices. See p. 110.
- **Best Sandwich:** The only problem with **Sal Meijer**, Scheldestraat 45 (☎ 020/673-1313), is that it's a bit removed from the action. You can have them deliver, but their delicious authentic kosher sandwiches are well worth a tram ride. See p. 120.
- **Best Indonesian:** Amsterdammers seem to think they own Indonesian food (though not as much as denizens of The Hague do), and everyone has his or her own favorite place. With so many Indonesian restaurants in the city, it's hard to pick just one. Still, **Kantjil & de Tijger**, Spuistraat 291–293 (☎ 020/620-0994), has a restrained, refined character and consistently good food. See p. 108.
- **Best Brunch:** At **Café Luxembourg**, Spuistraat 22–24 (☎ 020/620-6264), you can read the international newspapers provided for you while drinking coffee that actually tastes like coffee and munching your way through an extensive range of breakfast plates, sandwiches, and snacks. See p. 109.
- **Best Business Lunch:** If it's a casual affair, many Amsterdam businesspeople will be perfectly happy with a snack from a seafood stall, but if you aim to impress, try the **Mangerie de Kersentuin**, in the Garden Hotel, Dijsselhofplantsoen 7 (☎ 020/570-5600). The cuisine is the perfect counterpart to the elegant, refined, yet unstuffy surroundings. See p. 130.
- **Best View:** The big picture windows at the **Excelsior**, in the Hôtel de l'Europe, Nieuwe Doelenstraat 2–8 (☎ 020/531-1777), provide an unsurpassed view of the Amstel River and Muntplein. See p. 103.
- **Best Kids' Spot:** For small diners with big appetites, there can be no better experience than the **Kinderkookkafé**, Oudezijds Achterburgwal 193 (☎ 020/625-3527), where kids even get to cook their own meals (carefully supervised). See p. 111.
- **Best Preheater Dinner:** A lot depends on what theater you're going to, of course. If you are bound for opera or dance at the Muziektheater, make it **Breitner**, Amstel 212 (☎ 020/627-7879), which has lots of practice at getting theatergoers fed and watered in style without adding to the stress factor. See p. 112.
- **Best Late-Night Dinner:** You can't help feeling a little sorry for the staff at **De Knijp**, Van Baerlestraat 134 (☎ 020/671-4248), when you saunter in round about midnight. They've been going hard for hours, but are ready, willing, and just about able to do it one more time. See p. 125.