

Planning Your Trip to Amsterdam

Amsterdam isn't hard to get to grips with even if you arrive there cold (in the preparedness sense). The city is foreign, of course, but not impossibly so, one reason being that so many Dutch speak English.

1 Visitor Information

TOURIST OFFICES

Before leaving for the Netherlands, you can obtain information on the country and its travel facilities by contacting the **Netherlands Board of Tourism (NBT)**, which maintains offices in countries around the world. Their Internet address is **www.goholland.com**, and the e-mail address is **info@goholland.com**.

For the **U.S.** and **Canada**, you can reach them at: 355 Lexington Ave., 19th Floor, New York, NY 10017 (☎ **888/464-6552** or 212/557-3500; fax 212/370-9507).

For **Britain** and **Ireland**, NBT has a mailing address only: PO Box 30783, London WC2B 6DH (☎ **020/7539-7950**; premium-rate brochure order line ☎ **09068/717777**; fax 020/7539-7953; **www.visitholland.com/uk**; **information@nbt.org.uk**).

You can also contact the umbrella organization in the Netherlands for the country's many local tourist information organizations: **Netherlands Board of Tourism (NBT)**, Vlietweg 15, Postbus 458, 2260 MG Leidschendam (☎ **070/371-5705**; fax 070/320-1654; **www.visitholland.com**; **info@nbt.nl**).

2 Entry Requirements & Customs

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Citizens of the U.S., Canada, U.K., Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand need only a valid passport for a visit to the Netherlands of less than 3 months. If you are a citizen of another country, be sure to check the travel regulations before you leave.

Amsterdam on the Web

The official site from the Netherlands Board of Tourism, www.visitholland.com, has useful advice. The most comprehensive site is VVV Amsterdam's www.visitamsterdam.nl. For a tighter focus on places to see and be seen, try www.amsterdamhotspots.nl. One of the best virtual tours on the Net is www.channels.nl—the images are clear, you can direct your own tour, and you can chat with others about Amsterdam. Visitors give their impressions of restaurants, hotels, museums, and hash houses.

For information on many of Amsterdam's more than 40 museums, go to www.hollandmuseums.nl. To book a hotel online, visit www.go-amsterdam.org. Good dining info is available from www.specialbite.nl.

No health and vaccination certificates are required, and drivers need only produce a valid driver's license from their home country.

CUSTOMS

WHAT YOU CAN BRING INTO THE NETHERLANDS

Visitors 17 years and older arriving from countries that are not members of the European Union may bring in duty-free 200 cigarettes or 100 cigarillos or 50 cigars or 250 grams of tobacco, 1 liter of liquor or 2 liters of wine, and 50 milliliters of perfume. Import of most other goods is unlimited, so long as import duty is paid and does not exceed a value of 250€. Forbidden products include firearms, counterfeit goods, banned narcotic substances, protected animals and plants, and products made from these.

Duty-free shopping has been abolished in the EU. Therefore, standard allowances do not apply to goods bought in another EU country and brought into the Netherlands.

At your port of entry you enter either the EU Citizens or Non-EU Citizens section at Passport Control, and then one of two Customs clearance aisles, red or green, depending on whether or not you have "goods to declare." There are no limitations on the amount of foreign currency you can bring into the country.

WHAT YOU CAN TAKE HOME FROM THE NETHERLANDS

Returning **U.S. citizens** who have been away for at least 48 hours are allowed to bring back, once every 30 days, \$800 worth of merchandise duty-free. You'll be charged a flat rate of duty on the next \$1,000 worth of purchases. Any dollar amount beyond that is dutiable at whatever rates apply. On mailed gifts, the duty-free limit is \$200. Be sure to have your receipts for purchases handy to expedite the declaration process.

For specifics, download the free pamphlet *Know Before You Go* online at **www.cbp.gov**. (Click on "Travel," and then click on "Know Before You Go! Online Brochure.") Or contact the **U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP)**, 1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20229 (☎ **877/287-8667**) and request the pamphlet.

For a summary of **Canadian** rules, write for the booklet *I Declare*, issued by the **Canada Customs and Revenue Agency** (☎ **800/461-9999** in Canada, or 204/983-3500; www.ccr-aadrc.gc.ca). Canada allows its citizens a C\$750 exemption, once a year and only after an absence of 7 days, and you're allowed to bring back duty-free one carton of cigarettes, 1 can of tobacco, 40 imperial ounces of liquor, and 50 cigars. In addition, you're allowed to mail unsolicited gifts to Canada valued at less than C\$60 a day, provided they don't contain alcohol or tobacco (write on the package "Unsolicited gift, under \$60 value"). All valuables should be declared on the Y-38 form before departure from Canada, including serial numbers of valuables you already own, such as expensive foreign cameras.

In essence, there is no limit on what **U.K.** citizens can bring back from another EU country like the Netherlands, as long as the items are for personal use (this includes gifts), and you have already paid the necessary duty and tax. However, the law sets out guidance levels. If you bring in more than these, you may be asked to prove that the goods are for your own use: 3,200 cigarettes, 200 cigars, 400 cigarillos, 3 kilograms of smoking tobacco, 10 liters of spirits, 90 liters of wine, 20 liters of fortified wine (such as port or sherry), and 110 liters of beer. For more information, contact HM Customs & Excise at ☎ **0845/010-9000** (from outside the U.K., 020/8929-0152), or consult their website at www.hmce.gov.uk.

The duty-free allowance in **Australia** is A\$400 or, for those under 18, A\$200. Citizens can bring in 250 cigarettes or 250 grams of loose tobacco, and 1,125 milliliters of alcohol. If you're returning with valuables you already own, such as foreign-made cameras, you should file form B263. A brochure available from Australian consulates or Customs offices is *Know Before You Go*. For more information, call the **Australian Customs Service** at ☎ **1300/363-263**, or log on to www.customs.gov.au.

The duty-free allowance for **New Zealand** is NZ\$700. Citizens over 17 can bring in 200 cigarettes, 50 cigars, or 250 grams of tobacco (or a mixture of all three if their combined weight doesn't exceed 250g); plus 4.5 liters of wine and beer, or 1.125 liters of liquor. Fill out a certificate listing the valuables you are taking out of the country; that way, you can bring them back without paying duty. Most questions are answered in a free pamphlet available at New Zealand consulates and Customs offices: *New Zealand Customs Guide for Travellers, Notice no. 4*. For more information, contact **New Zealand Customs**, The Customhouse, 17–21 Whitmore St., Box 2218, Wellington (☎ **04/473-6099** or 0800/428-786; www.customs.govt.nz).

3 Money

CURRENCY

The **euro** (€) is the currency in the Netherlands. There are 100 euro cents to each euro. Eight euro **coins** are in circulation: .01€, .02€, .05€, .10€, .20€, .50€ (1, 2, 5, 10, 20, and 50 euro cents, respectively), 1€, and 2€. The seven euro **notes** are: 5€, 10€, 20€, 50€, 100€, 200€, and 500€. The price conversions in this book are based on an exchange rate of 1€ = US\$1.25, and 1€ = £1.45. Bear in mind that exchange rates fluctuate daily. For up-to-the-minute currency conversions, go to www.xe.com/ucc.

It's a good idea to exchange some money—enough to cover airport incidentals and transportation to your hotel—before you leave home, so you can avoid lines at airport ATMs.

For details on **currency exchange**, see “Fast Facts: Amsterdam,” p. 37.

ATMs

The easiest and best way to get cash away from home is from an ATM (automated teller machine). The **Cirrus** (☎ **800/424-7787**; www.mastercard.com) and **PLUS** (☎ **800/843-7587**; www.visa.com) networks span the globe; look at the back of your bank card

to see which network you're on, then call or check online for ATM locations at your destination. Be sure you know your personal identification number (PIN) before you leave home and be sure to find out your daily withdrawal limit before you depart. Many banks impose a fee every time a card is used at a different bank's ATM, and that fee can be higher for international transactions. On top of this, the bank from which you withdraw cash may charge its own fee.

You can also get cash advances on your credit card at an ATM. Credit card companies try to protect themselves from theft by limiting the funds someone can withdraw outside their home country, so call your credit card company before you leave home. You'll pay interest from the moment of your withdrawal, even if you pay your monthly bills on time.

You can withdraw euros from ATMs at many locations in the city (see "Fast Facts: Amsterdam," p. 37, for more details).

TRAVELER'S CHECKS

These days, traveler's checks are less necessary because Amsterdam has plenty of 24-hour ATMs. However, since you will be charged an ATM withdrawal fee if the bank is not your own, if you're withdrawing money every day, you might be better off with traveler's checks, which will be replaced if lost or stolen. You can get traveler's checks at almost any bank, and from **American Express, Thomas Cook, Visa, and MasterCard.**

Euro **traveler's checks** are accepted at locations where dollar and pound checks may not be, but you'll have to reconvert any unused ones or keep them for a future trip to a euro-zone country.

CREDIT CARDS

Credit cards are a safe way to carry money. They also provide a convenient record of all your expenses, and they generally offer relatively good exchange rates. You can also withdraw cash advances from your credit cards at banks or ATMs, provided you know your PIN.

Visa and **MasterCard** (also known as **EuroCard** in Europe) are the most widely used cards in Holland. **American Express** is often accepted, mostly in the middle- and upper-bracket category. **Diners Club** is not as commonly accepted as American Express. Credit cards are not so commonly accepted as in the United States and Britain. Many restaurants and shops in Amsterdam, and some hotels, don't accept them at all, and others add a 5% surcharge for card payment.

4 When to Go

THE WEATHER

In Amsterdam, if you don't like the weather wait for a minute. The summertime temperature doesn't often rise above 75°F (24°C), making for a pleasant, balmy, urban climate. July and August are the warmest months. September usually has a few weeks of fine late-summer weather; and there are even sunny spells in winter, when brilliant, crisp weather alternates with clouded skies.

Although the temperature rarely dips below freezing in winter, remember that Amsterdam and much of Holland is below sea level, making fog, mist, and dampness your too-frequent companions. Throughout the year, you can also expect some rain. The average annual rainfall is 25 inches. Most of it falls November through January, though substantial showers can occur year-round.

Some pointers on being prepared for Amsterdam's often unpredictable weather: First, invest in a fold-up umbrella and hope you never have to use it; likewise, carry a raincoat (with a wool liner for winter). Second, pack a sweater or two (even in July) and be prepared to layer your clothing at any time of year. Don't worry: You're allowed to leave some space for T-shirts, skimpy tops, and sneakers.

Amsterdam's Average Monthly Temperature & Days of Rain

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Daily Temp. (°F)	36	36	41	46	54	59	62	62	58	51	44	38
Daily Temp. (°C)	2	2	5	8	12	15	17	17	14	11	7	3
Days of Rain	21	17	19	20	19	17	20	20	19	20	22	23

THE BEST TIMES TO GO

High season is the spring tulip season (early Apr to mid-May) and the school vacations in July and August. The city is very busy at both times, which means that hotel rooms are hard to find and bargains don't exist at all (but who wants to tiptoe through the tulips in November, or sit on a sidewalk cafe terrace in a snowstorm?). If you're planning to travel at these times, you should book several months in advance. Summer is also the best time for cycling, which is an essential Dutch experience; try a canal bike if you're squeamish about going on the roads.

In winter, room rates are generally cheaper, and cafes and restaurants are less crowded and more genuine in feel. You won't find such a big line to get into the Anne Frankhuis (though you'll still find a line); you'll be able to stand longer in front of Rembrandt's *The*

Night Watch and your favorite van Gogh; and you might get a chance to go skating on the canals. You also get a better view of those canals, because the trees that border them shed their screen of leaves in the winter; and as an added bonus, the lights from all those canalside windows, whose curtains are never closed, glow with Japanese-lantern charm on the inky surface.

There's no worst of times to visit Amsterdam: It's a year-round stimulation of the brain's pleasure center.

HOLIDAYS

A Dutch holiday can add a festive note to your trip, particularly if it involves a parade or special observance somewhere in the country. But expect banks, shops, and many museums to be closed, and public transportation to operate on Sunday schedules for the following holidays: **New Year's Day** (Jan 1); **Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Easter Monday; Koninginnedag** (Queen's Day: Queen Beatrix's official birthday, Apr 30); **Ascension Day** (Thurs, 40 days after Easter); **Pentecost Sunday** (7th Sun after Easter) and **Pentecost Monday; and Christmas Day** (Dec 25) and **December 26**.

In addition, there are two World War II "Remembrance Days," neither of which is an official holiday, though some establishments close: May 4 honors all those who died in the war; May 5 celebrates the Liberation.

AMSTERDAM CALENDAR OF EVENTS

The following listing includes events outside Amsterdam but relatively close by.

January

New Year, throughout the center, but mostly at the Dam and Nieuwmarkt. This celebration is wild, and not always so wonderful. Many of Amsterdam's youthful spirits celebrate the New Year with firecrackers, which they cheerfully—you could even say drunkenly—throw at the feet of passersby. This keeps hospital emergency departments busy. January 1.

February

Carnival. Amsterdammers' chance to show that they can party just as wildly as their southern compatriots at *their* carnivals in Maastricht and Den Bosch. An objective observer (one who's still sober) would have to report that the Amsterdammers fail miserably, mainly because the southerners are the true Dutch experts on the art of carnival. Contact **VVV Amsterdam** (☎ 0900/400-4040). Early February.

March

HISWA, RAI. The name might look like some strange hieroglyphic, but this refers to the annual Amsterdam Boat Show at the RAI Convention Center. Holland is big on boats, and this week you'll see just how big. Contact **RAI** (☎ 020/549-1212). Early March.

Stille Omgang. This silent procession along Kalverstraat is walked by Catholics every year to celebrate the "Miracle of the Host," which occurred in 1345. The procession begins at the Royal Palace on the Dam and goes from midnight to 2:30am. Contact the **Gezelschap voor de Stille Omgang** (☎ 020/524-5415). Sunday closest to March 15.

Opening of Keukenhof Gardens, Lisse. The greatest flower show on earth blooms with a spectacular display of tulips and narcissi, daffodils and hyacinths, bluebells, crocuses, lilies, amaryllis, and many other flowers at this 70-acre garden in the heart of the bulb country. There's said to be nearly eight million flowers, but who's counting? Contact **Keukenhof** (☎ 025/246-5555). Late March to mid-May.

April

National Museum Weekend. A weekend during which most museums in Amsterdam and many throughout the Netherlands offer free or reduced admission, and have special exhibits. April 9 to April 10, 2005; April 8 to April 9, 2006.

Koninginnedag (Queen's Day). This nationwide holiday for the House of Orange is vigorously celebrated in Amsterdam by a gigantic dawn-to-dawn street carnival, with the city center so jam-packed with people that it's virtually impossible to move. A street market all over the city features masses of stalls, run by everyone from individual kids selling old toys to professional market folk in town to make a killing. Orange ribbons, orange hair, and orange-painted faces are everywhere, as are Dutch flags. Street music and theater combine with probably too much drinking, but Koninginnedag remains a good-natured if boisterous affair. **Tip:** Wear something orange, even if it's only orange suspenders or an orange ribbon in your hair. Contact **VVV Amsterdam** (☎ 0900/400-4040). Gay and lesbian celebrations center on the city's main gay areas and the Homomonument (p. 120). There are stage performances, from belly-dancing to drag, stalls publicizing various gay and lesbian organizations, and food and drink. April 30.

May

Bevrijdingsdag (Liberation Day), throughout the city. A slightly less frenetic version of Koninginnedag (see "April," above), recalling the country's liberation from Nazi occupation at the end of World War II, on the anniversary of the surrender of German forces in the Netherlands. Canadian troops made it into the city first (2 days later), so Canadian flags are popular accessories. More street markets, music, and theater. Contact **VVV Amsterdam** (☎ 0900/400-4040). Gay and lesbian participation includes stage performances, from belly-dancing to drag, stalls publicizing various gay and lesbian organizations, and food and drink. May 5.

Oosterpark Festival. A multicultural festival of song and dance held at the Oosterpark in multiracial district Amsterdam Oost (East). Contact **VVV Amsterdam** (☎ 0900/400-4040). First week of May.

Drum Rhythm Festival, Westergasfabriek/Java Island. Feel the rhythm in your soul at this annual festival that attracts some good acts. Contact **Westergasfabriek** (☎ 020/581-0425). Mid-May.

Floating Amsterdam. Transforms the lower reaches of the Amstel River into an outdoor theater. Performances are held near the Muziektheater. Contact **VVV Amsterdam** (☎ 0900/400-4040) or **Amsterdam Uit Buro** (☎ 0900/0191). Last 2 weeks in May.

June

Echo Grachtenloop (Echo Canal Run). You can either watch or join in as thousands of footloose people run along the city-center canals. The routes are 5km, 10km, and 18km (3, 6, and 11 miles). Contact **Echo Grachtenloop** (☎ 020/585-9222). Last Sunday in May/first Sunday in June.

Kunst RAI. An annual arts fair at the RAI Congress Center, in which many Dutch art galleries participate. The theme is the art of a different country each year. Contact the **RAI** (☎ 020/549-1212). First half of June.

Vondelpark Open-Air Theater. Everything goes here: theater, all kinds of music (including full-scale concerts by the famed Concertgebouw Orchestra) and dance, even operetta. Contact **Canal-house Gardens in Bloom**, Herengracht, Keizersgracht, and Prinsengracht. If you wonder what the gardens behind the gables of all those fancy canalside houses look like, this is your chance to find out. A number of the best are open to the public for 3 days. Contact **Stichting De Amsterdamse Grachtentuin** (☎ 020/422-2379). Late June.

July

Arts Adventure, venues throughout the city. An extension of the cultural program through the previously dormant summer months—when most tourists visit the city. It includes more off-beat and informal events across the full range of the arts than would be the case with the main (Sept–June) cultural program of opera, ballet, and classical music. Contact **VVV Amsterdam** (☎ 0900/400-4040) or **Amsterdam Uit Buro** (☎ 0900/0191). July and August.

Over Het IJ Festival. Avant-garde theater, music, and dance are performed in Amsterdam-Noord, beside the IJ channel, at the old NDSM Wharf, TT Neveritaweg 15. Contact **Over Het IJ Festival** (☎ 020/624-6380). Around the last 2 weeks of July.

August

Amsterdam Pride. This is a big event in Europe's most gay-friendly city. A crowd of 150,000 people turns out to watch the highlight Boat Parade's display of 100 or so outrageously decorated boats cruising on the canals. In addition, there are street discos and open-air theater performances, a sports program, and a film festival. (The entire festival's future is in the balance, subject to the City Council not revoking its permission on "public order" grounds.) Contact **Gay Business Amsterdam** (☎/fax 020/620-8807). Early August. August 4 to August 7, 2005 (Boat Parade August 6); August 3 to August 6, 2006 (Boat Parade August 5).

Grachten Festival. A 5-day festival of chamber music, on a different theme each year, that plays at various intimate and elegant venues along the city's canals, and includes some on a pontoon in front of the Hotel Pulitzer Amsterdam. There's always a performance or two designed for children. Part of the festival is the exuberant Prinsengracht Concert (see below). Contact **Stichting Grachtenfestival** (☎ 020/421-4542; www.grachtenfestival.nl). August 17 to August 21, 2005.

Prinsengracht Concert. Chamber music floats up in the afternoon from an open pontoon moored in front of the Hotel Pulitzer Amsterdam, at Prinsengracht 315–331. Crowds pile in by boat, by bike, and on foot to take it in, jamming up the canal and both banks of the canal. The free concert, the highlight and culmination of the Grachten Festival (see above), begins at 4pm. If it rains, there's an alternative indoors venue. Contact **Stichting Grachtenfestival** (☎ 020/421-4542; www.grachtenfestival.nl). August 20.

Uitmarkt. Amsterdam previews the soon-to-open cultural season with this great 3-day open market of information on Museumplein and Leidseplein, and free performances at impromptu outdoor venues and theaters and concert halls. Both professional and amateur groups take part in the shows, which run the gamut of music, opera, dance, theater, and cabaret. Contact **Amsterdam Uitmarkt** (☎ 020/626-2656; www.uitmarkt.nl). Last weekend in August. August 26 to August 28, 2005; August 25 to August 27, 2006.

September

Jordaan Festival. This loosely organized festival in the trendy Jordaan neighborhood features food, games, fun, and lots of drinking and music in the street and in many cafes in the area. Contact **Stichting Jordaan Festival** (☎ 020/624-6908). Early September.

Bloemencorso, Aalsmeer to Amsterdam. Every year for nearly half a century, Amsterdam has been the final destination for the Flower Parade that originates in Aalsmeer. The parade features a large number of floats that carry a variety of in-season flowers (so don't expect to see tulips). The parade follows an established route and ends at the Dam. Contact **Stichting Bloemencorso** (☎ 029/793-9393). First Saturday in September: September 3, 2005; September 2, 2006.

Dam to Damloop (Dam to Dam Run). The most popular running event in the country starts at the Dam in the center of Amsterdam, heads out of town through the IJ Tunnel, to the center of Zaandam, and back again, for a distance of 16km (10 miles). Contact **Dam to Damloop** (☎ 072/533-8136; www.damloop.nl). Third Sunday in September; starts at noon.

November

Leather Pride is a growing happening of parties and other events for gays and lesbians from around the world. Contact **Leather Pride Nederland** (☎/fax 020/422-3737). First weekend of November.

Sinterklaas Arrives. Holland's equivalent of Santa Claus (St. Nicholas) launches the Christmas season when he arrives in the city by boat at the Centraal Station pier. Accompanied by black-painted assistants, called *Zwarte Piet* (Black Peter), who hand out sweets to kids along the way, he goes in stately procession through Amsterdam before being given the keys to the city by the mayor at the Dam. Contact **VVV Amsterdam** (☎ 0900/400-4040). Third Saturday of November.

Tips Staying Safe in Amsterdam

You shouldn't be afraid to do the things you want to do here—Amsterdammers aren't—but be mindful of a few safety tips:

- Watch out for pickpockets on trams, buses, and Metro trains, and in train and Metro stations. A backpack worn on the back is an open invitation to thieves.
- Lock up your bikes; bicycle theft is a big problem here!
- Be leery of walking alone after dark through narrow alleyways and along empty stretches of canal.
- Don't use ATMs at night in quiet areas.
- It's wise to stay out of Vondelpark at night, but there are cafes on the edge of the park that are busy until closing time.
- It's safe for groups of women to go around in the city's notorious Red Light District, but a young woman on her own may be verbally harassed as a "working girl."
- Amsterdam has some weird folks who may lock onto you for one reason or another. If you can't shake them off, go into a cafe or hotel and either wait until they leave or call a taxi to take you away.

Spiegelkwartier Open House, Spiegel Quarter. Amsterdam's famous art and antiques quarter throws open its doors to all for 2 days—of course, you won't be locked out at other times either. Late November or early December.

December

Sinterklaas, throughout Holland. Saint Nicholas's Eve is the traditional day in Holland for exchanging Christmas gifts. Join some Dutch friends or a Dutch family if possible. December 5.

5 Specialized Travel Resources

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Most disabilities shouldn't stop anyone from traveling. There are more options and resources out there than ever before.

The old center of Amsterdam—filled with narrow cobbled streets, steep humpback bridges, zillions of little barrier pillars called *Amsterdammertjes*, and bicycles parked all over the place—can be hard going. But many hotels and restaurants provide easy access for

people with disabilities, and some display the international wheelchair symbol in their brochures and advertising. It's always a good idea to call ahead to find out just what the situation is before you book; in particular, bear in mind that many older hotels have no elevator and have steep, narrow stairways. Many, but not all, museums and other sights are wheelchair accessible, wholly or partly, and some have adapted toilets. Always call ahead to check on accessibility at sights you wish to visit.

The Netherlands Board of Tourism issues a *Holland for the Handicapped* brochure. Schiphol Airport has a service to help travelers with disabilities through the airport. Not all trams in Amsterdam are easily accessible for wheelchairs, but the new trams being introduced on some routes have low central doors that are accessible. The Metro system is fully accessible, but that's not as good as it sounds because few Metro stations are near places where visitors want to go. Taxis are also difficult, but new mini-van taxis are an improvement. Or, call ahead to book with **Boonstra Taxis** (☎ 020/613-4134), which has wheelchair-accessible cabs. There's comprehensive assistance for travelers on **Netherlands Railways** (☎ 030/235-5555) trains and in stations. If you give them a day's notice of your journey by visiting a station or calling ahead, they can arrange for assistance along the way.

Two good sources of information in the Netherlands are **NIZQ** (☎ 030/230-6603), and **ANWB Disabled Department** (☎ 070/314-1420).

Many travel agencies offer customized tours and itineraries for travelers with disabilities. **Flying Wheels Travel** (☎ 507/451-5005; www.flyingwheelstravel.com) offers escorted tours that emphasize sports and private tours in minivans with lifts. **Access-Able Travel Source** (☎ 303/232-2979; www.access-able.com) offers extensive access information and advice for traveling around the world with disabilities. **Accessible Journeys** (☎ 800/846-4537 or 610/521-0339; www.disabilitytravel.com) caters specifically to slow walkers and wheelchair travelers and their families and friends.

Organizations that offer assistance to disabled travelers include **MossRehab** (www.mossresourcenet.org), which provides a library of accessible-travel resources online; **SATH (Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality)** (☎ 212/447-7284; www.sath.org; annual membership fees: \$45 adults, \$30 seniors and students), which offers a wealth of travel resources for all types of disabilities and informed recommendations on destinations, access guides, travel agents, tour operators, vehicle rentals, and companion services; and

the **American Foundation for the Blind (AFB)** (☎ 800/232-5463; www.afb.org).

For more information specifically targeted to travelers with disabilities, the community website **iCan** (www.icanonline.net/channels/travel/index.cfm) has destination guides and several regular columns on accessible travel. Also check out the quarterly magazine **Emerging Horizons** (\$15 per year, \$20 outside the U.S.; www.emerginghorizons.com); and **Open World** magazine, published by SATH (see above; subscription: \$13 per year, \$21 outside the U.S.).

The Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR), Unit 12, City Forum, 250 City Rd., London EC1V 8AF (☎ 020/7250-3222), publishes three holiday “fact packs” for £2 each or £5 for all three. The first one provides general information, including planning and booking a holiday, insurance, and finances; the second outlines transportation available when going abroad and equipment for rent; the third covers specialized accommodations.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

In Amsterdam, you can get information, or just meet people, by visiting **COC**, Rozenstraat 14 (☎ 020/626-3087; www.cocamsterdam.nl), the Amsterdam branch of the Dutch lesbian and gay organization. On the premises there is a daytime cafe serving coffee and quiches, a meeting space for special interest groups, weekend discos (mainly men on Fri, women on Sat), and a special ethnic evening called Strange Fruit on Sundays. The **Gay and Lesbian Switchboard** (☎ 020/623-6565; www.switchboard.nl), open daily from 10am to 10pm, can provide you with all kinds of information and advice.

You shouldn't have much trouble finding information about gay and lesbian bars and clubs because they are well publicized (also see “Gay & Lesbian Bars” on p. 169). The free biweekly listings magazine **Shark** is a great source of cultural information, in particular for the off-beat and alternative scenes, and comes with a centerfold pullout, titled *Queer Fish*, which has excellent lesbian and gay listings. **Gay News Amsterdam** and **Gay & Night**, competing monthly magazines in both Dutch and English, are available free in gay establishments around the city.

The International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) (☎ 800/448-8550 or 954/776-2626; www.iglta.org) is the trade association for the gay and lesbian travel industry, and

offers an online directory of gay- and lesbian-friendly travel businesses; go to their website and click on “Members.”

Many agencies offer tours and travel itineraries specifically for gay and lesbian travelers. **Above and Beyond Tours** (☎ 800/397-2681; www.abovebeyondtours.com) is the exclusive gay and lesbian tour operator for United Airlines. **Now, Voyager** (☎ 800/255-6951; www.nowvoyager.com) is a well-known San Francisco-based gay-owned and operated travel service.

You'll find a variety of gay-themed travel guides at most travel bookstores and gay and lesbian bookstores, or you can order them from **Giovanni's Room** bookstore, 1145 Pine St., Philadelphia, PA 19107 (☎ 215/923-2960; www.giovanнисroom.com).

SENIOR TRAVEL

Mention the fact that you're a senior citizen when you make your travel reservations. Sightseeing attractions and entertainments in the Netherlands often offer senior discounts, but some of these places offer these reductions only to Dutch citizens, on production of an appropriate ID. Be sure to ask when you buy your ticket.

Members of **AARP** (formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons), 601 E St. NW, Washington, DC 20049 (☎ 888/687-2277; www.aarp.org), get discounts on hotels, airfares, and car rentals. AARP offers members a wide range of benefits, including *AARP: The Magazine* and a monthly newsletter. Anyone over 50 can join.

Many reliable agencies and organizations target the 50-plus market. **Elderhostel** (☎ 877/426-8056; www.elderhostel.org) arranges study programs for those aged 55 and over (and a spouse or companion of any age) in the U.S. and in more than 80 countries around the world. Most courses last 5 to 7 days in the U.S. (2–4 weeks abroad), and many include airfare, accommodations in university dormitories or modest inns, meals, and tuition.

Recommended publications offering travel resources and discounts for seniors include: the quarterly magazine *Travel 50 & Beyond* (www.travel50andbeyond.com); *Travel Unlimited: Uncommon Adventures for the Mature Traveler* (Avalon); *101 Tips for Mature Travelers*, available from Grand Circle Travel (☎ 800/221-2610 or 617/350-7500; www.gct.com); and *Unbelievably Good Deals and Great Adventures That You Absolutely Can't Get Unless You're Over 50* (McGraw-Hill).

6 Getting There

BY PLANE

In 2004, the Netherlands flag carrier KLM Royal Dutch Airlines merged with Air France, in what was widely interpreted as being in effect a takeover of the Dutch airline by the French one. It remains to be seen what effect control by the lumbering, state-controlled French giant would have on the services of a formerly lean and efficient, but small for a would-be global player, KLM.

FROM THE U.S. & CANADA Carriers with frequent flights to Amsterdam from cities that include Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Memphis, Montréal, Newark, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Toronto, Vancouver, and Washington, D.C., are: **Air Canada** (☎ 888/247-2262; www.aircanada.ca), **Delta Airlines** (☎ 800/221-1212; www.delta.com), **KLM Royal Dutch Airlines** (☎ 800/374-7747; www.klm.com), **Northwest Airlines** (☎ 800/447-4747; www.nwa.com), and **United Airlines** (☎ 800/538-2929; www.united.com).

FROM THE U.K. **British Airways** (☎ 0870/850-9850; www.britishairways.com), **bmi** (☎ 0870/607-0555; www.flybmi.com), **Easy Jet** (☎ 0870/600-0000; www.easyjet.com), and **KLM Royal Dutch Airlines** (☎ 08705/074074; www.klm.nl) and its subsidiaries (same phone number and Web address) **KLM Cityhopper** and **KLM uk** (www.klmuk.com), fly to Amsterdam from cities that include Aberdeen, Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds/Bradford, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle, Norwich, and Teesside.

FROM IRELAND **Aer Lingus** (☎ 01/886-8888; www.aerlingus.com) flies daily from Dublin to Amsterdam.

FROM AUSTRALIA **KLM** (☎ 1300/030-3747; www.klm.com) flies from Sydney to Amsterdam 3 days a week. **Qantas** (☎ 800/227-4500; www.qantas.com.au) flies the same route twice a week.

FROM NEW ZEALAND **Air New Zealand** (☎ 0800/737-000; www.airnewzealand.com) flies from Auckland to London, where you can transfer for Amsterdam.

ARRIVING AT AMSTERDAM AIRPORT SCHIPHOL

An airliner descending into **Amsterdam Airport Schiphol** (☎ 0900/0141 for general and flight information; www.schiphol.nl), 13km (8 miles) southwest of the city center, has to descend a

little further than would be the case for most any other airport on earth, because the runway is 4.5m (15 ft.) below sea level on the floor of what was once a lake. Schiphol (pronounced *skhip-ol*) is the main airport in the Netherlands, handling just about all of the country's international arrivals and departures. It's easy to figure out why frequent travelers regularly vote Schiphol one of the world's favorite airports, for its ease of use and its massive duty-free shopping center.

After you deplane at one of the three close-together terminals (numbered 1, 2, and 3), moving walkways take you to the Arrivals Hall, where you pass through Passport Control, Customs, and Baggage Reclaim. Facilities like free luggage carts, currency exchange, ATMs, restaurants, bars, shops, baby-rooms, restrooms, and showers are available. Beyond these is Schiphol Plaza, which combines rail station access, the Airport Hotel, a mall (sporting that most essential Dutch service—a flower store), bars and restaurants, restrooms, baggage lockers, airport and tourist information desks, car-rental and hotel reservation desks, and more, all in a single location. Bus, shuttle, and taxi stops are just outside.

For tourist information and to make hotel reservations, go to the **Holland Tourist Information (HTI)** desk in Schiphol Plaza (☎ 0900/400-4040), open daily from 7am to 10pm.

GETTING INTO TOWN FROM SCHIPHOL

Netherlands Railways **trains** for Amsterdam Centraal Station depart from Schiphol Station, downstairs from Schiphol Plaza, and stop at De Lelylaan and De Vlugtlaan stations in west Amsterdam on the way. Frequency ranges from six trains an hour at peak times to one an hour at night. The fare is 2.95€ one-way; the trip takes 20 minutes.

An alternative rail route serves both Amsterdam Zuid/WTC (World Trade Center) station and RAI station (beside the big RAI Convention Center). Be sure to check which route is best for your hotel (including any tram or bus interchange). If you're staying at a hotel near Leidseplein, Rembrandtplein, in the Museum Quarter, or in Amsterdam South, this route may be a better bet for you than Centraal Station. The fare is 2.95€ one-way; the trip takes around 15 minutes. From Amsterdam Zuid/WTC, take tram no. 5 for Leidseplein and the Museum Quarter; from RAI, take tram no. 4 for Rembrandtplein.

The **Connexxion Hotel Bus** (☎ 0900/9292) shuttles between the airport and Amsterdam, serving 16 top hotels directly and many

more that are close to these stops. The fare is 8.50€ one-way and 13€ return to the contracted hotels, and 11€ one-way and 19€ return to non-contracted hotels. No reservations are needed and buses depart from in front of Schiphol Plaza every 20 minutes from 7am to 5pm, every 30 minutes from 5 to 7pm, and every hour from 7 to 9pm. If you're not staying at one of the contracted hotels, the clerks from the Connexxion Desk inside Schiphol Plaza can tell you which shuttle stop is closest to your chosen lodgings. In addition, some individual hotels near the airport and in town have their own shuttle service.

Bus no. 197 departs every half hour from in front of Schiphol Plaza for Amsterdam's downtown Marnixstraat bus station. Line 199 serves the Amstel railway station in Amsterdam South. On both buses the fare is 3.40€, and buses depart every 30 minutes at peak time, and every hour at other times. These buses are a lot slower than both the train and the Connexxion hotel bus.

Taxis are expensive, but they're the preferred choice if your luggage is burdensome or if there are two or more people to share the cost. You find taxis waiting at the stands of **SchipholTaxi** (☎ 020/653-1000) in front of Schiphol Plaza. Taxis from the airport are all metered. Expect to pay around 45€ to the Center. Remember, a service charge is already included in the fare.

BY BOAT FROM BRITAIN

DFDS Seaways (☎ 08705/333111 in Britain; 0255/534-546 in Holland; www.dfdsseaways.co.uk) has daily car ferry service between Newcastle in northeast England and IJmuiden on the North Sea coast west of Amsterdam. The overnight trip time is 15 hours. From IJmuiden, you can either go by train to Amsterdam Centraal Station, or by jet-foil with Fast Flying Ferries to a pier behind Centraal Station.

P&O Ferries (☎ 08705/202020 Britain; 0181/255-555 Holland; www.poferries.com) has daily car-ferry service between Hull in northeast England and Rotterdam (Europoort). The overnight trip time is 10 hours. Ferry company coaches shuttle between the Rotterdam Europoort terminal and Rotterdam Centraal Station, from where there are frequent trains to Amsterdam.

Stena Line (☎ 08705/707070 Britain; 0174/389-333 Holland; www.stenaline.com) has twice-daily fast car-ferry service between Harwich in southeast England and Hoek van Holland (Hook of Holland) near Rotterdam. The trip time is 3 hours 40 minutes. Frequent trains depart from Hoek van Holland to Rotterdam and Amsterdam.

BY CRUISE SHIP

You arrive at the cruise-liner dock, the **Passenger Terminal Amsterdam**, Oostelijke Handelskade 9 (☎ 020/418-6854; www.pt.amsterdam.com; tram: IJ-tram), on the IJ waterway just east of Centraal Station and within easy walking distance.

BY TRAIN

Rail service to Amsterdam from other cities in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe is frequent and fast. International and Inter City express trains arrive at Centraal Station from Brussels and Paris, and from several German cities and from more distant locations in eastern Europe, Spain, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy. There's also the Amsterdam/Brussels Inter-City train, and connections can be made in Brussels to the North Express, the Oostende-Vienna Express, the Oostende-Moscow Express, and the Trans-Europe Express. **Nederlandse Spoorwegen** (Netherlands Railways; www.ns.nl) trains arrive in Amsterdam from towns and cities all over Holland. Service is frequent to many places around the country and trains are modern, clean, and run on time. Schedule and fare information on travel by train and other public transportation (*openbaar vervoer*) in the Netherlands is available from ☎ 0900/9292, or visit www.9292ov.nl; for international trains, call ☎ 0900/9296.

The distinctive burgundy-colored **Thalys** (www.thalys.com) high-speed train, with a top speed of 300kmph (186 mph), connecting Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, and (via Brussels) Cologne, has cut travel times from Paris to Amsterdam to 4¼ hours, and from Brussels to 2¼ hours—figures that will be reduced to closer to 3¼ hours and 1¾ hours respectively when the high-speed rail lines in Holland are operational. For Thalys information and reservations in France, call ☎ 08/3635-3536; in Belgium, ☎ 0800/95-777; in Germany, ☎ 0221/19419; and in Holland, ☎ 0900/9296. Tickets are also available from main railway stations and travel agents. One-way weekday first-class (Comfort 1) fares from Paris to Amsterdam in late 2000 were about \$120; tourist class (Comfort 2) one-way tickets were about \$80; on weekends the respective one-way fares were \$75 and \$68. Four Thalys trains run between Paris and Amsterdam every day via Brussels.

Britain is connected to the Continent via the Channel Tunnel. On the **Eurostar** (www.eurostar.com) high-speed train (top speed 258kmph/160 mph), the travel time between London Waterloo

Station and Brussels Midi Station (the closest connecting point for Amsterdam) is 3¼ hours. On weekends the respective one-way fares were £140 and £100. Departures from London to Brussels are approximately every 2 hours at peak times. For Eurostar reservations, call ☎ **08701/606600** in Britain, and ☎ **020/423-4444** in Holland.

ARRIVING AT AMSTERDAM CENTRAAL STATION

Whether you arrive by Thalys high-speed train from Brussels or Paris, by ordinary international train, or by Netherlands Railways train from elsewhere in Holland, you'll likely find yourself deposited at Amsterdam's Centraal Station, built in 1884–89 on an artificial island in the IJ channel.

An office of VVV Amsterdam tourist information is inside the station on platform 2 and another office is right in front of the station on Stationsplein; both offices have hotel reservation desks. Other facilities include a GWK Bureau de Change, where you can exchange traveler's checks, U.S. dollars, and other currencies (see "Currency Exchange" in "Fast Facts: Amsterdam," p. 37), ATMs, train info center, luggage lockers, restaurants and snack bars, newsstands, and other small specialist stores. The station is a departure point for Metro trains, trams (streetcars), buses, taxis, passenger ferries across the IJ waterway and around the harbor, water taxis, canal-boat tours, and the Museum Boat and the Canal Bus. Outside, on Stationsplein, there's usually street musicians performing, and a barrel organ or two. The **Smits Coffee House NZH** (☎ **020/623-3777**), has a pleasant waterside terrace overlooking the inner harbor from where you can watch the canal boats glide by.

A less welcoming aspect of the station is the pickpocket convention that's in full swing at all times. Keep your money under wraps.

An array of tram stops are on either side of the main station exit—virtually all of Amsterdam's hotels are within a 15-minute tram ride from Centraal Station. The Metro station is downstairs, just outside the main exit. City bus stops are to the left of the main exit, and the taxi stands are to the right. At the public transportation Tickets & Info office on Stationsplein, you can buy a *strip-penkaart* or *dagkaart* for trams, Metros, and buses. (You'll find details on public transportation within the city under "Getting Around," p. 28.)

BY BUS

International coaches—and in particular those of **Eurolines** (www.eurolines.com)—arrive at the bus terminal opposite Amstel rail station (Metro: Amstel) in the south of the city. **Eurolines** operates coach service between London Victoria Bus Station and Amstel Station (via ferry), with up to five departures daily in the summer. Travel time is just over 12 hours. For reservations, contact Eurolines (☎ **08705/808080** in Britain, or 020/560-8788 in Holland). From here you can go by train and Metro train to Centraal Station, and by tram no. 12 to the Museumplein area and to connecting points for trams to the Center. For the Leidseplein area, take the Metro toward Centraal Station, get out at Weesperplein, and go above ground to take tram lines 6, 7, or 10.

BY CAR

Holland is crisscrossed by a network of major international highways. European expressways E19, E35, E231, and E22 converge on Amsterdam from France and Belgium to the south and from Germany to the north and east. These roads also have Dutch designations; as you approach the city they are, respectively: A4, A2, A1, and A7. Amsterdam's ring road is A10. Distances between destinations are relatively short, traffic is invariably heavy but road conditions are otherwise excellent, service stations are plentiful, and highways are plainly signposted.

If you want to drive from Britain to Amsterdam, you can use the fast and efficient **Le Shuttle** auto transporter through the Channel Tunnel from Folkestone to Calais (a 35-min. trip), and drive up from there. Le Shuttle has departures every 15 minutes at peak times, every 30 minutes at times of average demand, and every hour at night. In late 1998, fares ranged from £120 to £190 (\$190–\$290) per car, depending on the day, time, and other variables. The cheapest transits are usually midweek between 2 and 5am. For information, call ☎ **0990/353-535** for Le Shuttle reservations in Britain, ☎ **03/21-00-61-00** in France, ☎ **020/504-0540** in Holland. Reserving in advance makes sense at the busiest times, but the system is so fast, frequent, and simple that you may prefer to retain travel flexibility by just showing up, buying your ticket, waiting in line for a short while, and then driving aboard.