

Dutch treat

Ancient
Amsterdam
is a city with
youthful ways

By Phil Tripp



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IT IS the contrast that first strikes visitors to Amsterdam, a time-spanning leap from the charm of tree-lined concentric canals and 17th and 18th century architecture at its heart to modern suburbs crammed with futuristic apartment buildings. Fleets of bicycles weave their way along cobblestone streets and alleys, mostly ridden by rosy-cheeked youngsters who shun cars in favor of this healthy mode



of transport. Amsterdam has all the attributes of a well-preserved antique yet it is a city where young people, seemingly always in motion, predominate. The Dutch have a reputation for working and playing hard, being industrious yet indulgent. Even retirees look spry, fit and ready for action. And if it's action you're seeking there is no shortage of it in Amsterdam, a city frequently described as the world's most liberated.

The Netherlands' best-known metropolis, whose city fathers have always legislated for freedom and tolerance, has attracted migrants and non-conformists for centuries. The result today is a city aglow with red lights in windows displaying prostitutes, green-windowed soft-drug cafes featuring marijuana and hashish, and glaring neon advertising sex clubs. Tolerance of radical ideas, alternative lifestyles, political movements and youth is the benchmark of society in Amsterdam.

An added enticement of the Netherlands for North Americans, Australasians and Britons is that English is the main language of its vastly multicultural society. You will hear Dutch spoken among natives but when English-speaking visitors ask for directions the response almost invariably comes in a perfect English with a lilting, florid accent.

Another Amsterdam drawcard is the tulips, which are sold from floating markets along the canals. In season, they are a blaze of color, adorning, it seems, every nook of the city. The Centrum area of streets and avenues, radiating like a half-wheel from the Central Station rail hub, is criss-crossed by canals once crowded with barges that supplied the warehouses. In their place today are glass-topped tourist boats that cruise the waterways, providing sightseers with vantage points from which to view the city's stately homes.

There is parkland all over the city, the largest area being Vondelpark, a fantasyland of trees and flowers that rivals any European city park for serenity and beauty. Because the city is blessed with abundant water and fair skies, even through most of winter, it is relatively easy for authorities to keep the parks fresh and green. Vondelpark seems to have a scent all of its own.

Amsterdam, like so much of the Netherlands, stands on land reclaimed from the North Sea. It was settled in the 12th century by dam-building farmers and fishermen who tamed the swamps around the Amstel River with a series of dykes and ditches that later became canals. The artisans of water flow created a series of locks and channels that still flush the canal system. The initial purpose of these waterways was to facilitate trade but now they are a feast of attractions.

In the 13th century, Amsterdam was an important centre for trade between the people of the North and Baltic seas. Its golden era was from 1580 to 1740, a period in which its trading rival, Antwerp, was taken over by the Spanish. In the 1700s, money gradually overtook trade as the city's major industry and the merchants' houses reflected this in grandeur and design.

Cruising along the canals or when walking among the city's the buildings, visitors will be struck by two features of 17th-century architecture. The houses, most of them narrow structures, were constructed to lean out over the canals or alleys at a slight, yet perceptible, angle. This was so that exterior, gable-mounted hoists or pulleys could be used to lift any-

thing from groceries to pianos without harming the cargo or the building.

Second, most of the buildings feature huge, vertically hung windows that open outwards. This was in order to get large furniture or other items into the houses as well as to allow the sun to stream into the deeper recesses. Many visitors are awestruck by these immense palaces along the canals and by their ornate carvings, gilded accents and rich design work from centuries past.

Getting around Amsterdam is simple. A grid of electric tram lines are easily followed with the use of a map or tram-stop display. Taxis are also easy to find. Like most things Dutch, they are spotless, polished and efficient. They are also expensive. Cost-conscious tourists should use the glass-walled trams in town and the clean and safe rail system for airport and intercity runs. Better still, hire a bike. The city is perfect for bike riding because its streets and alleys are so flat.

Amsterdam Travel & Tours offers daily inexpensive walking with English commentary, from March to November. There is a two-hour bicycle tour of the city on Saturdays. Bookings should be made the day before.

The best way to view the waterfront palaces built by 17th century merchants and traders is from the open or glass-domed canal boats that cruise the waterways. At night the canals are illuminated by fairy lights over the bridges and by the gorgeous lighting of the residences. Canal Bus operates two waterway routes with six stops (at which passengers can hop on and off all day). Onboard commentary comes in a variety of languages.

Exhibits in the city's museums vary widely in taste and time. They include old masters, modern impressionists, displays of drugs and torture forms down the ages. The Tourist Information Office (VVV) and many museums sell a card (a *Museumjaarkaart*) that provides entry to most museums in Holland for 12 months. At about \$45, it is good value for those with museums on their minds. (Many museums provide English-language audio guides without charge.)

Not to be missed is the Rijksmuseum, a vast complex with 150 rooms housing Dutch masterpieces,



Scenes of a liberated city: Rembrandt's *Night Watch* is the Rijksmuseum's most popular painting; the bicycle rules the streets; Queensday festivities on the waterways; and the *Lion with Wings* statue

including works by Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals, as well as paintings and artefacts from other European and Asian cultures.

The Van Gogh Museum has a permanent display of hundreds of the artist's paintings and drawings as well as the famed correspondence between Vincent and his brother Theo. The museum is closed for remodelling until April this year, although some of its art is on show in the Zuidvleugel (south wing) of the Rijksmuseum. Rembrandt's *Night Watch* is the most popular painting in the Rijksmuseum and the tragic scenery of van Gogh's *Crows in the Cornfield* draws many viewers.



The Woonbootmuseum (Houseboat Museum) opened in 1997 enables tourists to see how people live on the 2000 boats that ply the canals. One boat in the museum, the 1914 Hendrika Maria, complete with furniture, is typical of the industrial river barges that have been converted into dwellings.

Perhaps the most bizarre collection is at the Marijuana Museum, where exhibits include ancient smoking paraphernalia from Asia and the Middle East and a display that distinguishes between various types of plants. Instructions are even offered on how to cultivate the plants. Live examples are on display but there are no samples and picking is not allowed.

The Heineken Brewery offers daily tours of its plant (during which free samples are handed out). To experience authentic Dutch drinking, head for the old-world ambience of a brown cafe. Much like taverns, these are not named after the color of the ale but for their walls, which are stained by centuries of tobacco smoke.

Lively with chat, they teem with business people who alternate between nips of homegrown *jenever* gin (flavored with juniper berries), fine *eaux de vie* from France or a spectrum of brews from across Europe. Brown cafes are on nearly every street corner.

There is no shortage of fine dining in Amsterdam,

Amsterdam, a maze of canals, roads and alleys, is best scene by boat or bicycle

especially the hearty Dutch fare of stick-to-your-ribs meat dishes with thick gravies, potatoes and bean soups complemented with equally heavy beers and devastating desserts.

D'Vijff Vlieghen is one of the best restaurants even though its name directly translates as The Five Flies. This eatery occupies five canal houses and has been operating for two centuries. There is a story about each of its six dining rooms, including the Rembrandt Room and Glass rooms, and these legends are related to diners by attentive (and apparently well-fed) waiters.

The In de Waag eatery is another Dutch treat. Built in 1430 as the gatehouse to the city, it served for a couple of centuries as the weigh station for goods coming into Amsterdam. Today it is an elegant cafe and restaurant with newspapers and Internet connections supplied. Its breakfast muffins are superb and its dinners are a feast. Reservations are not taken.

The other cuisine for which Amsterdam is famous is Indonesian (Indonesia until the late 1940s was a Dutch colony). An ideal meal is the *rijstafel* (rice table), a galaxy of Indonesian dishes married to sturdy Dutch meat and vegetables. The best choice of restaurant for this style of eating is the simply named Indonesia.

For those seeking respite from international-style hotels, it is difficult to go past the Pulitzer or The Grand Amsterdam. The Pulitzer is not so much a hotel as two dozen 17th-century houses that have been linked into one rambling, spectacular property that faces both the Prinsengracht and Keizergracht canals. The magnificent hallways show off a superb collection of art and sculptures and interior gardens are prominent in a central atrium. The guest rooms feature vaulted ceilings and antique furniture.

Antiques are also the showpiece of the 14th-century group of buildings that comprise the Grand Amsterdam (not to be confused with the Grand Krasnipolski on the Dam Square). The Grand Amsterdam was originally built as a cloister and then it served as an inn for dukes and princes until 1808, when it became the Amsterdam Town Hall for 170 years. The rooms are lush with damask and floral-print furnishings, many in a deep relaxing burgundy.

Built like a stone castle on the inside, the Grand Amsterdam is replete with mahogany latticework, Gobelin tapestries, Jugendstil stained-glass windows, and, in the cafe, a mural by Karel Appel created early in his career to repay a debt to the city. Its Cafe Roux restaurant, the creation of British master chef Albert H. Roux, should not be missed by touring gourmets.

Contacts (ISD prefixes 0011 31 20): Amsterdam Travel & Tours, phone 627-6236; D'Vijff Vlieghen, Spuistraat 294-302; phone 624 8369; In de Waag, Nieuwemarkt 4; phone 557 9898; Indonesia, Korte Leidsedwarstraat 18, just off Leidseplein; phone 623 2035; Pulitzer, Prinsengracht 315 331; phone 523 5235, fax 627 6753; The Grand Amsterdam, Oude Zijds Voorburgwal 197; phone 555 3111; fax 555 3222; Website: www.grandwestin.nl. ■