

AMSTERDAM

Known equally for its high-brow music, museums and other cultural offerings as it is for its, ahem, more "colourful" streetwise aspects, Amsterdam will certainly entertain, amaze and enlighten every visitor. **WORDS** ALBERT EHRNROOT **IMAGES** AGENCY

AMSTERDAM has something to offer everyone; culture vultures thrive in the historic centre, romantics swoon at the sight of the pretty canals, shoppers never tire of the quirky boutiques and the party crowd is effortlessly entertained in the many clubs, cafés and coffee shops.

Amsterdam is an ideal playground for the young, but with maturity comes the appreciation of the charm and the rich cultural heritage. That is if you care to look behind the façades. I lived and partied here some 20, 30 years ago and took the beauty for granted, but only since returning as a visitor do I recognise the real qualities of this city.

Nowadays I always put aside time to leisurely stroll along Amsterdam's *grachtengordel*, which is Dutch for Canal Belt. There are many smaller canals but the four major arteries are formed in the shape of a half circle and they perfectly encompass the old city centre with its wealth of 17th and 18th century buildings. The Brouwersgracht is probably the most picturesque canal but the Golden Bend of the Herengracht is unsurpassed when it comes to stateliness. Here the canal-side houses are twice the normal size and absolutely splendid whilst somehow remaining discreet.

Be prepared for an emotional ride when you visit the Anne Frank Huis on Prinsengracht 217. The German-Jewish diarist hid with her family for two years in the canal house's 'secret annex' before they were all betrayed and taken to different concentration camps.

Mokum (the nickname for Amsterdam) is very walkable but if your feet fail you or the weather closes in, you can always ride on a tram. Alternatively hire a bike, but watch out for the local cyclists who are a bigger threat than the cars. The true miracle of Amsterdam is that it has survived pretty much intact for 400 years despite wars and countless demolition plans. The squatters and anarchists seemed to rule in the '80s but since then many of the historic exteriors have been cleaned up or renovated.

I could wax lyrical about typical Dutch architectural features like stepped and neck gables, but I instead I want to point out the typical *Amsterdamsche* gable stone which is a sculptured plaque set a few metres up into

the wall of a house. The most decorative ones combine a picture with a pious quotation or motto that instantly gives you a glimpse into the life of the first, 17th century owner of the building.

Amsterdam was a booming town with Europe's busiest harbour in the early 17th century. The merchant ships of the Dutch East India Company and the West India Company were trading all over the world and these multinationals were the first to issue stocks as well as pay investors an annual dividend. The East India Company's shares were particularly in demand and as a consequence, the world's first stock exchange was established in Amsterdam in 1602. The wealthy middle classes had a lot of disposable income generated through the trade in spices, textiles, wood, porcelain and many other luxury items. To mark their newly acquired affluence the Burgers bought prestigious art to decorate their palaces and canal houses and hence supported artists such as Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals.

One visit to the Rijksmuseum will make it clear that Holland also produced more than its fair share of the world's most highly regarded painters. Most of the Rijksmuseum is closed for renovation for the foreseeable future but the smallish Philips wing continues to exhibit the best of the masterpieces of Netherlandish art. This is a blessing in disguise, as it saves you traipsing around for hours on end and allows you to focus on the 'must sees' such as Rembrandt's enormous *The Nightwatch*.

Only Vincent van Gogh could possibly eclipse the glory of the Dutch Golden Age and a suitable shrine to his stellar achievements was therefore built next door to the 'Rijks'. The Van Gogh museum is unmissable and its curators always strive to organise temporary exhibitions that show off the many different facets of Van Gogh and his contemporaries.

The Concertgebouw is within shouting distance of these museums and its Great Hall boasts acoustics to die for. The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, with its principal conductor Mariss Jansons, was recently ranked the world's best by ▶

DESTINATION FILE

Where: The Netherlands, Northwestern Europe

Average temperature:

Winter -1-5°C

Summer 12-22°C

Population: 751,000

Currency: Euro



Language: Dutch

Best time to visit:

The warmest weather is from June to August, although Amsterdam experiences mild temperatures all year. Peak tourist season is July and August, however most cultural events take place between September and May.

Visas: Australians do not need visas for visits of up to three months



The best way to experience Amsterdam: follow the water canals and discover the vibrancy, the colour, and the way of life this fascinating pocket of Europe has to offer



The Nemo is the biggest science centre in the Netherlands



The famous Rijksmuseum, a must-see on every itinerary



The quintessential view of Holland: windmills and tulips



The elegant canals of Amsterdam are the arteries of the city: they are both functional and beautiful and lead to unexpected delights as visitors explore the historic city

Gramophone magazine. Look out for the free lunchtime concerts.

On the other side of town, back in the old centre, the Muziektheater offers world class ballet and De Nederlandse Opera regularly surprises with its innovative productions. The postmodern building is part of the Stopera complex and quite striking with its curved glass frontage and the great views of the river Amstel.

This is a good area for shopping, drinking and eating. You can explore the famous Waterlooplein flea market (open daily except Sundays) and then make a stop at the Rembrandthuis, which is where the artist lived until he went bankrupt in 1656.

The Dutch are a creative lot and if you are after the very essence of modish design you have come to the right place. Just round the corner from Rembrandt House you will find a narrow street that sums up both the old fashioned cute and the cool cutting-edge side of Amsterdam. De Staalstraat is home to the headquarters of the groundbreaking Droog Design Collective. Their shop with its sassy, witty and expensive objects and accessories pulls in the crowds.

This city is still the world capital of cacao trading and hence some of the best chocolate can be

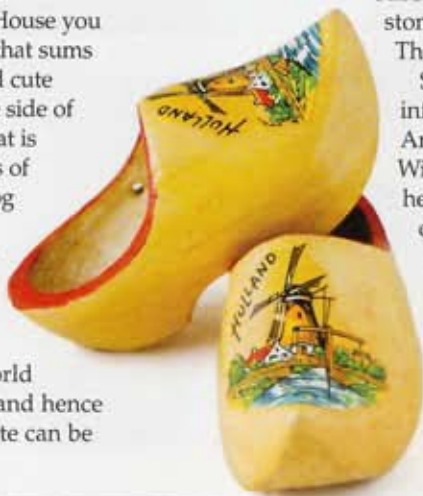


Tulip time:

April and May are the best months to visit if you're a fan of the bright flowers

Souvenir city:

No holiday to Amsterdam would be complete without some tacky and traditional clogs!



found here. Puccini Bomboni (Staalstraat 17) is a chocoholic's heaven with a rich choice of either handmade confectionery containing traditional ingredients or more adventurous varieties with herbs and spices.

For a while the Dutch also had the coffee trade market cornered, but if you spot the word 'Café' on the window of a venue, it is basically a 'bar' because they primarily serve alcoholic drinks and meals. Try the old style café De Doelen on the aforementioned street or for some classy views of the river De Jaren further up the road.

You probably already know that the 'coffee shops' in this country serve neither coffee nor alcohol. Tea is drunk, hash is served in cakes and you can inhale substances. Yes, nowhere is the stoned age more alive than in The Netherlands.

Speaking of useful tourist information, De Wallen is Amsterdam's Red Light District. Window-shopping still goes on here despite City Hall's efforts to clean up the prostitute business. Most girls plying their trade in the windows look utterly bored, but some do a convincing 'come hither' routine. After this sinful gawping it would be only appropriate to stumble into

a local gothic church. You can't miss Amsterdam's oldest parish church, the Oude Kerk, which remains pretty much unchanged since Rembrandt's days. His wife Saskia was buried here in 1642 and a small exhibition about the painter will help you find the gravestone. From here you could make your way back to Dam Square for a good look at the curiously shaped monument and above all the magnificent Royal Palace.

Amsterdam indeed has the lot: a curious and heady mix of sex, drugs, the arts and history. **1**

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A memorial to Holocaust victim Anne Frank