

DAY TRIPS

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If you're like many residents, you'll have trouble tearing yourself away from Amsterdam. But you can't say you've really seen the Netherlands until you venture beyond the city gates. There's a wealth of beauty, history and tradition within easy reach, and the slower pace of life seems a world away from the Dutch capital.

Prepare yourself for a region awash in clichés – the pointy laced hats, wooden clogs, tulips, cheese and windmills that define the Dutch to the outside world. Still, these items are more than decoration. If you look more closely you'll find a heritage still alive today, proving there's more to it all than skilful marketing (though there's plenty of that too).

The urban belt around the capital is called the Randstad, literally the 'rim city' that takes in a large portion of the Dutch population. These cities boast their own art, architecture and atmosphere that rival anything Amsterdam has to offer. Big industry looms in the south, and if you fly over at night you can't miss the radiant glow of greenhouses that nurture tomatoes, cucumbers and flowering plants.

But large swathes of this area are also surprisingly rural, with wide expanses of meadow interspersed with patches of pine forest. Stocks of cattle roam freely on the polders, the flat, marshy lands laced with drainage canals. Between the cities, nature-lovers are in their element: the polders make an ideal habitat for wild birds such as swans, herons or warblers, many of which nest in the tall grasses along the canals.

The fast, efficient Dutch railway network makes it a snap to get around. Cycle paths are everywhere, but don't bother to bring your own – most train stations have bike-rental shops charging around €7 per day, though you'll need to book ahead. Don't forget that discounts are available for holders of rail tickets.

All the following destinations lie within an hour's journey from Amsterdam by train (and if need be, by connecting bus). Get an early start and you might 'do' two locations without feeling rushed.

CITIES & ART

Fine paintings can be found in collections across the Netherlands, and it's worth noting that first-rate galleries even a stone's throw from Amsterdam tend to be less crowded than in the capital. The cities following all have historic quarters and museum treasures that invite you to explore.

It's hard to know where to start, but the 17th-century heart of lovely **Haarlem** (p228), less than 20 minutes away, is always a good wager. At one time the city was more important in the art world than Amsterdam, so it's no surprise that Haarlem possesses one of the country's finest assemblies of Dutch paintings, at the Frans Hals Museum. There are also examples of the CoBrA art movement in museums nearby. The city will seem bite-sized after the capital, and most sites of interest are within a short stroll of the lively main square, Grote Markt, and its attractive cathedral.

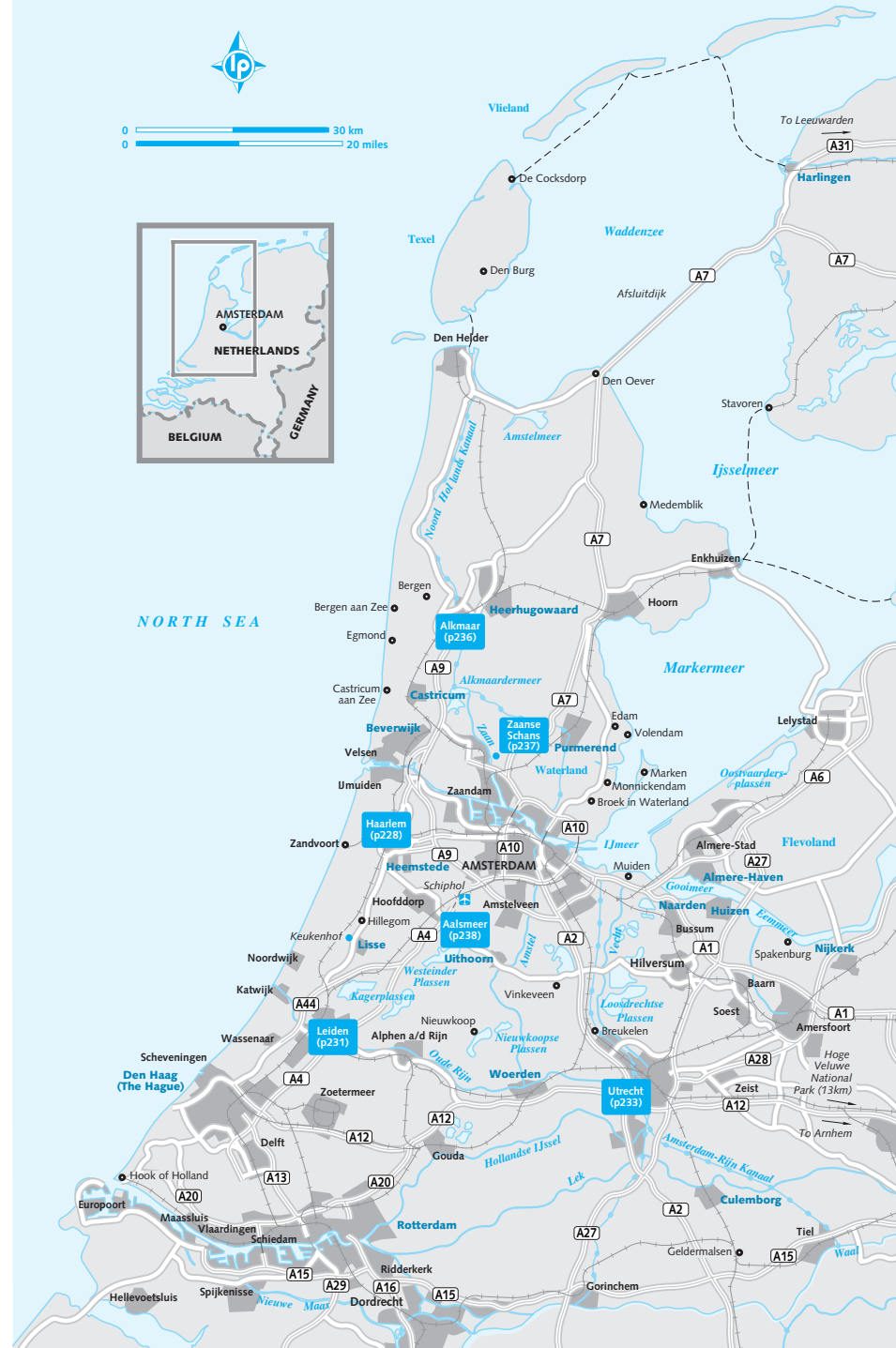
Rembrandt's birthplace, **Leiden** (p231), is an easy-going university town with several first-class museums, the world's oldest botanical garden, and a wealth of lively student pubs.

In the 17th century, the pilgrim fathers settled in Leiden before beginning their epic voyage to the New World. Some of its key artworks stem from the Renaissance era, such as the impressive triptych of *The Last Judgment* at the Lakenhal museum.

One look at the impressive canals of **Utrecht** (p233) and you'll believe it was a trading hub long before Amsterdam. Its soaring Domtoren recalls the church's formidable power in the Middle Ages. An outstanding collection of medieval art is housed in the Museum Het Catharijneconvent, while the Centraal Museum nearby has superb 16th-century portraits of the Civic Guard.

CHEESE & WINDMILLS

Forget the cutesy postcards: this unlikely pair of icons helped make Holland what it is today, namely rich and dry. The first big wheels of Gouda and rubbery balls of Edam were originally produced near Amsterdam, and travelled well on sea voyages. The curds are still supplied by Frisian cows – inspiration for many a black-and-white milk jug – and these



cows graze on land that was once drained by windmills. Many of these graceful structures are listed monuments, and open as museums or shops throughout the region.

So, feel like doing the rounds? Then the Saturday cheese market at **Alkmaar** (p236), one of the last bastions of the traditional cheese guilds, is just the ticket. If it's windmills you crave, the place to feed the urging is at **Zaanse Schans** (p237), a kitschy but comely open-air museum village. Here you'll find a half-dozen of them twirling their arms in the air and churning out mustard, oil and dye.

FLOWERS

The lovely tulip has been seducing Europeans since the 16th century, when an enterprising Dutch ambassador brought back (read: smuggled out) the first precious bulbs from the Near East. The Netherlands is now a major world supplier of all kinds of colourful and exotic blooms, and most thrive in the cool wet climate. They're much more than a commodity; the 'flower culture' means you'll see droves of people with a bunch tucked under one arm.

The sprawling bulb gardens of the **Keukenhof** (a former royal garden taken over by the flower trade – see the boxed text, p233) erupt into a riot of colour between March and May, and you'll find tulip fields scattered throughout North and South Holland. You can also visit the world's biggest flower auction that is held not far south of the capital, in the town of **Aalsmeer** (p238).

HAARLEM

It's hard not to be enthusiastic about Haarlem, which has retained more of its 17th-century heritage than even Amsterdam. The wealth of historic buildings, leafy *hofjes* (courtyards) and old-world antique shops give the centre a real sense of history and grandeur, and its pretty bridges and winding alleys are just as charming as any in the Dutch capital.

The name Haarlem derives from *Haarloheim*, meaning a wooded place on high, sandy soil. You won't get nosebleeds from the altitude, but it's worth noting that the surrounding area used to be a huge lake, the Haarlemmermeer. The counts of Holland set up a toll post here and Haarlem quickly became the top inland port after Amsterdam. When the Spanish invaded in 1572, virtually the entire population was slaughtered after a

seven-month siege, but, against the odds, the community recovered quickly. Haarlem then soared into the prosperity of the Golden Age, attracting painters and artists from around Europe.

If you arrive by train, your first sight will be **Haarlem Centraal**, a glorious Art Deco masterpiece and hands-down the country's most beautiful train station. Walk to the old centre along Kruisstraat, and the town's wealth and elegance becomes apparent by the exclusive stores, art galleries and antique shops.

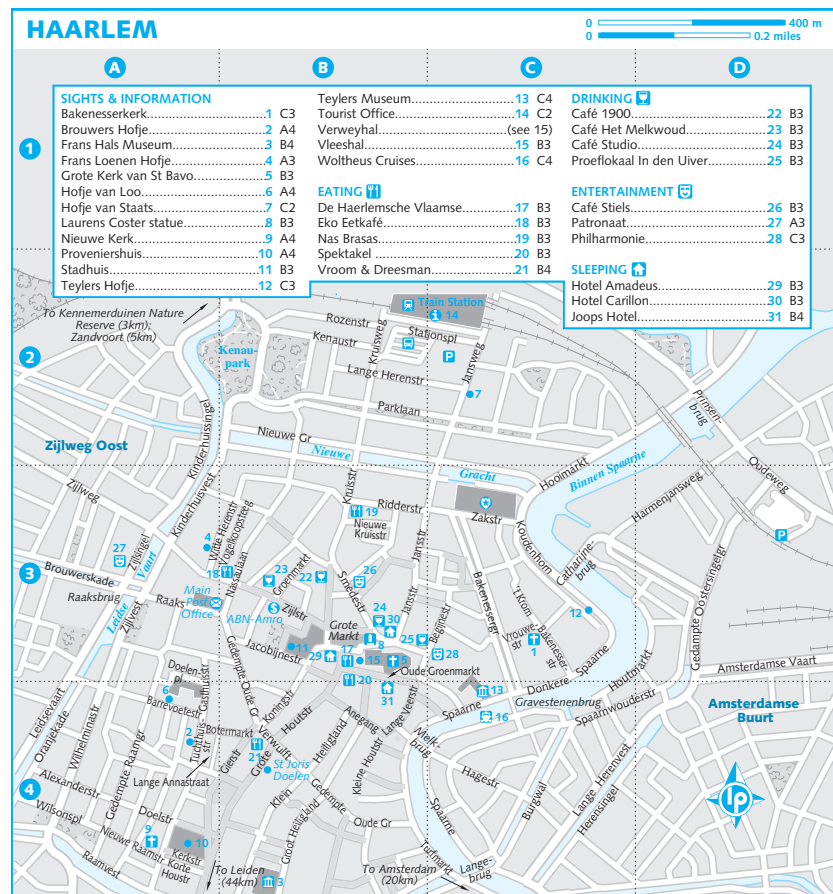
Lined with lovely cafés and restaurants, the Grote Markt is the city's beating heart. It's fronted by the 14th-century **Stadhuis** (Town Hall), which features a balcony where judgments from the high court were pronounced. The Counts' Hall contains some amazing 15th-century panel paintings, and if it's open you can take a peek.

Across from the Stadhuis looms the **Grote Kerk van St Bavo** (adult/child €2/1.25; ☎ 10am–4pm Mon–Sat), the Gothic cathedral with a 50m-high steeple. It contains some fine Renaissance artworks, but the star attraction is its **Müller organ** – one of the most magnificent in the world and played by both Mozart and Handel. There are tours in English on request, and free organ recitals take place at 3pm on Thursday July to early September and at 8.15pm every Tuesday from mid-May to mid-October. The organ stands 30m high and has about 5000 pipes, and the acoustics are terrific.

The square focuses on **De Hallen** (☎ 023-511 57 75; Grote Markt 16; adult/child €5/free; ☎ 11am–5pm Tue–Sat, noon–5pm Sun), halls including the 17th-century **Vleeshal**, a former meat market, and the **Verweyhal**; today they are annexes of the Frans Hals Museum. The Verweyhal contains the museum's collection of modern art, including Dutch impressionists and CoBrA artists. On the square north of the Grote Kerk is the **Laurens Coster statue**, whom Haarlemmers believe has a claim, along with Gutenberg, to be called the inventor of moveable type.

Off Grote Houtstraat to the south stands the **Proveniershuis**, the former headquarters of the Joris Doelen (Civic Guards of St George), which started life as an almshouse. Its wonderful old *hofje* is one of Haarlem's prettiest, and like all *hofjes* it provides clues about the origins of the Dutch social state.

Others *hofjes* worth a look include the **Brouwers Hofje** (Tuchthuisstraat 8), which lodged the brewers' guild; the **Frans Loenen Hofje** (Witte



TRANSPORT: HAARLEM

Direction 20km west

Travel time 15 to 20 minutes

Train Services to Haarlem are frequent (€3.60, up to six per hour); the Grote Markt is a 500m walk to the south.

Car From the ring road west of the city, take the N200 which becomes the A200

Herenstraat 24), pared out of a merchant's estate; the **Hofje van Loo** (Barvoetstraat 7), a former women's hospital; the **Hofje van Staats** (Jansweg 39), one of the town's largest and still occupied by older women; and the unusually grand **Teylers Hofje** (Koudenhorn 144), built by the founder of the Teylers Museum. Most *hofjes* are open 10am to 5pm Monday to Saturday.

Haarlem has two excellent museums that can be visited in a day. A short stroll south of Grote Markt, the **Frans Hals Museum** (☎ 023-511 57 75; www.franshalsmuseum.nl; Groot Heiligland 62; adult/child €9.50/free; ☎ 11am–5pm Tue–Sat, noon–5pm Sun) is a must for anyone interested in the Dutch masters. Kept in a poorhouse where Hals spent his final years, the collection focuses on the 17th-century Haarlem School; its pride and joy are eight group portraits of the Civic Guard that reveal Hals' exceptional attention to mood and psychological tone. Look out for works by other greats such as Pieter Brueghel the Younger and Jacob van Ruysdael.

Among the museum's other treasures are the works of Hals' teacher, Flemish artist Carel van Mander: stunning illustrations of the human anatomy, all ceiling-high with biblical and mythological references.

Leiden is right up there with the great historic cities of the Netherlands. As you get further south from its supermodern Centraal Station, the city's traditional character unfolds. A five-minute walk takes you into Leiden's district of historic waterways, the most notable being the Oude Rijn and the Nieuwe Rijn. They meet at Oudegracht to form a canal, simply called the Rijn.

De Burcht (admission free; ☀ sunrise-sunset), an 11th-century citadel on an artificial hill, lost its protective functions as the city grew around it. Now it's a park with lovely places to view the steeples and rooftops, and a wonderful café at its base.

The **Rijksmuseum van Oudheden** (National Museum of Antiquities; ☎ 0900 660 06 00, per min €0.10; Rapenburg 28; adult/child 4-17yr €8.50/5.50; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, noon-5pm Sat & Sun) has a world-class collection of Greek, Roman and Egyptian artefacts, the pride of which is the extraordinary Temple of Taffeh, a gift from former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat to the Netherlands for helping to save ancient Egyptian monuments from flood.

A sister collection, the **Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde** (National Ethnology Museum; ☎ 071-516 88 00; Steenstraat 1; adult/child 4-12yr €7.50/4; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, noon-5pm Sat & Sun), focuses on the former Dutch colonies and the cultures of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, much like Amsterdam's **Tropenmuseum** (p128).

The lush **Hortus Botanicus** (☎ 071-527 72 49; Rapenburg 73; adult/child €4/2.50; ☹ 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar), Europe's oldest botanical garden (1587), is home to the country's oldest descendants of the Dutch tulips. It's a wonderful place to relax, with explosions of tropical colour and a fascinating steamy greenhouse.

The 17th-century **Lakenhal** (Cloth Hall; ☎ 071-516 53 60; Oude Singel 28-32; adult/child under 18yr €4/free; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, noon-5pm Sat & Sun) houses the Municipal Museum, with an assortment of works by Old Masters, as well as period rooms and temporary exhibits. The 1st floor has been restored to the way it would have looked when Leiden was at the peak of its prosperity.

Leiden's landmark windmill museum, **De Valk** (The Falcon; ☎ 071-516 53 53; 2e Binnenvestgracht 1; adult/child €2.50/1.50; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1-5pm Sun), has been carefully restored, and many consider it the best example of its kind. Its arms are free to turn 'whenever possible' and can still grind the ol' grain.

A stuffed elephant greets you at **Naturalis – Nationaal Natuurhistorisch Museum** (National Museum of Natural History; ☎ 071-568 76 00; Darwinweg 2; adult/child 4-12yr €9/5; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, to 6pm Sat & Sun), a large, well-funded collection of all the usual dead critters and, notably, the million-year-old Java Man discovered by Dutch anthropologist Eugene Dubois in 1891. It's 300m west of the town centre.

Leiden University was an early centre for Dutch medical research. You can see the often-grisly results (five centuries of pickled organs, surgical tools and skeletons) at the **Museum Boerhaave** (☎ 071-521 42 24; Lange St Agnietenstraat 10; adult/concession €6/3; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun).

There are leisurely one-hour canal boat tours of the channel around the old town centre with **Rederij Rembrandt** (☎ 071-513 49 38; www.rederij-rembrandt.nl; Beestenmarkt; adult/child €6/4; ☹ 11am-5.30pm Mar-Oct) with commentary (English available). For a more intimate experience, hire a canoe or kayak and navigate the canals yourself with **Botenverhuur 't Galgewater** (Boat Hire Galgewater; ☎ 071-514 97 90; www.galgewater.nl; Galgewater 44a; per hr €5; ☹ 11am-6pm Oct-May, 11am-10pm Jun-Sep). It also has a quirky little café selling coffee and lemonade.

INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 0900 222 23 33, per min €0.50; www.hollandrijnland.nl; Stationsweg 2d; ☹ 11am-5.30pm Mon, 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4.30pm Sat year-round, 11am-3pm Sun mid-Apr–Aug)

EATING

Café Einstein (☎ 071-512 53 70; Nieuwe Rijn 19; mains lunch €2.75-10, dinner €12.75-20; ☹ lunch & dinner) It's a relaxed café with a student vibe, river views and lovely waterside setting. There's a French menu except for Sunday and Monday, when it goes Thai.

De Kwebbelen (☎ 071-512 61 90; Noordeinde 19; mains €12-20, 3-course menu €19.50; ☹ dinner) The most fun restaurant in Leiden, with a kitschy menu ('Jack the Ripper' spare ribs) but always worth the ride.

Frezza (☎ 071-512 21 15; Rembrandtstraat 2; mains €8; ☹ dinner) A bit of a Leiden hot spot, Frezza has tasty dishes such as oven-baked quail in honey-thyme sauce for only €8; just imagine what deliciousness the Menu Frezza (€29) holds.

DETOUR: KEUKENHOF FLOWER GARDENS

Covering some 32 hectares, the **Keukenhof** (☎ 025-246 55 55; www.keukenhof.nl; Stationsweg 166, Lisse; adult/child/senior €13/6/12; ☹ 8am-7.30pm late March-late May, last entry 6pm) is the world's largest bulb-flower garden, attracting nearly 800,000 visitors during a mere eight weeks every year. The virtues of the online ticket facility should be obvious.

The gardens were opened in 1949 with the idea of having a showplace for European growers to show off their hybrids. This isn't just any old trade show, however. Nature's talents are combined with artificial precision to create a wonder of landscaping where millions of tulips, narcissi and daffodils blossom perfectly in place and exactly on time. You can easily spend half a day here filling your camera's digital memory.

If the temps have been wilting, don't worry – fresh blooms are planted by helping hands for the duration of the season. Special exhibits are held in the pavilions around the site, and there are cafés and refreshment stands throughout.

Opening dates vary slightly from year to year, so check before setting out. During opening season, Connexion runs special Keukenhof Express buses from Leiden Centraal Station (six 'strips' on the *strippenkaart*, 20 minutes, three times hourly).

In den Doofpot (☎ 071-512 24 34; Turfmarkt 9; mains lunch €8-12, dinner €12-30; ☹ lunch & dinner) There's little chance you'll walk away hungry from this elegant eatery named after a clever Dutch pun. Expect twists on Dutch home-style cooking with French touches.

Noodl (☎ 071-513 92 73; Breestraat 88a; dishes €8-16; ☹ lunch & dinner) Trendy little dim-sum joint usually buzzing with students.

DRINKING

Café l'Esperance (☎ 071-512 16 00; Kaiserstraat 1) Long, dark and handsome, all decked out in nostalgic wood panelling and overlooking the canal, ooh...this place is pumping with people in summer and often has live music.

Het Koethuis (☎ 071-512 16 88; Burgsteeg 13) On a sunny day, it's hard to beat the terrace tables just outside the grand Burcht gate where all of humankind gathers for an afternoon coffee or *borrel* (drinkingpoo of your choice).

North End (☎ 071-512 15 41; Noordeinde 55) This superb English-style pub is full of warmth, cosy nooks and character. It comes complete with its very own 'bourbon alley' (not very English, granted) and patented beer *strippenkaart* (strip ticket).

ENTERTAINMENT

Café de WW (☎ 071-512 59 00; Wolsteeg 6) On Friday and Saturday, live rock can expand to an impromptu stage in the alley with crowds trailing up to the main street. On other nights there's a DJ.

Jazzcafé the Duke (☎ 071-566 15 85; Oude Singel 2) 'If we don't have it, you don't need it', is its motto, and amid this cool-cat interior of yellow, vintage jazz posters, the fine live jazz never makes you doubt it.

SLEEPING

Hotel de Doelen (☎ 071-512 05 27; www.dedoelen.com; Rapenburg 2; s/d €75/95; ☹) It has a slightly faded air of classical elegance; some canalside rooms are larger and better appointed.

Hotel Mayflower (☎ 071-514 26 41; www.hotelmayflower.nl; Beestenmarkt 2; s/d/tr €65/80/95; ☹) These spacious quarters are bright and inviting, with comfy furnishings and lots of trimmings along the pilgrim theme.

Hotel Nieuwe Minerva (☎ 071-512 63 58; www.nieuwminerva.nl; Boommarkt 23; s/d €80/110; ☹) Located in six 16th-century canalside houses, this central hotel has themed rooms, including a room with a bed in which King Lodewijk Bonaparte (aka Louis Bonaparte) slept.

UTRECHT

Breathe in the history in the Netherlands' oldest city, picturesque Utrecht. A major political and religious centre during the Middle Ages, it had some 40 magnificent churches dotting the city. Today the French Gothic cathedral, the Domtoren, with 50 melodious bells, towers above the town. It's the tallest in the Netherlands, and the views from the panoramic tower (stretching as far as Amsterdam) are spectacular.

Find your way through the building dust (Utrecht's centre is a major work site through to 2013) and you'll emerge into a beautiful and vibrant old-world city, ringed by striking canal wharves going back to the 13th century. Well below street level, the wharves are unique in all of the Netherlands, and the streets alongside brim with shops, restaurants and cafés.

In summer, Utrecht is festival central, with offerings such as jazz (with musicians seemingly on every corner) and the Netherlands Film Festival in September. On top of that,

UTRECHT

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ENTERTAINMENT

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SLEEPING

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TRANSPORT: UTRECHT

Direction 40km southeast

Travel time 30 minutes

Train NS runs about five services per hour (€6.40)

Car From the Amsterdam ring road, take the A2

the city's student community of 40,000 is the largest in the country, making it one very infectious place.

The striking **Domtoren** (Cathedral tower; ☎ 030-236 00 10; Domplein 9-10; adult/child/concession €7.50/4.50/6.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, noon-5pm Sun & Mon, guided tours at 2pm, 4pm & 6pm) is 112m high, and you can climb its 465 steps for a magnificent view. Several hundred years ago you would have seen nearly 40 cathedrals from this vantage point, all laid out in the shape of a cross. The tower took

some 300 years to complete, and definitely had staying power: in 1674 the North Sea winds reached hurricane force and the nave, which wasn't quite as robust, blew down and opened up the gap on today's square where the cathedral resides. You can see the old extents of the nave, and visit the **Domkerk**, the surviving chancel of the cathedral with a few tombs within.

Another key point of interest is the undeniably photogenic canal, **Oudegracht**, the scene of many a wedding photo. At night, the bend in this canal is illuminated by lamplight. Stretching down toward the southern tip of the old town, the canal is at its most evocative, and the streets are unexpectedly quiet. A section of the Singel called the Stadsbuitengracht has its own turn as a lovely canal on the eastern side of the old quarter, where it follows parkland along the site of the old fortifications.

Of over a dozen museums, the **Museum Het Catharijneconvent** (☎ 030-231 72 96; Nieuwegracht 63; adult/child/senior €8.50/4.50/7.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun) is the leader, with the finest collection of medieval religious art in the Netherlands. All but the most jaded art-lover will marvel at the beautiful illuminated manuscripts, carvings and robes.

Others include the **Centraal Museum** (☎ 030-236 23 62; Nicolaaskerkhof 10; adult/concession €8/6; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun), covering applied arts and Utrecht School paintings. There's a bit of De Stijl to boot, including the world's most extensive collection of Gerrit Rietveld's works, a feast for minimalists. There's even a 12th-century Viking longboat that was dug out of the local mud.

The **Universiteitsmuseum** (☎ 030-253 80 88; Lange Nieuwstraat 106; adult/child 4-17yr €7/3.50; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) has a re-created 19th-century classroom, historic dentistry tools (is it safe?) and way too many models of medical maladies. You can find solace out back in **De Oude Hortus**, the old botanical garden, along with all the other visiting dentophobes. The venerable garden has trees and plants collected by the Dutch during their world exploits.

The **National Museum van Speelklok tot Pierement** (National Museum from Musical Clock to Street Organ; ☎ 030-231 27 89; Steenweg 6; adult/child/senior €7/4/6; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has a splendid assembly of musical machines from the 18th century onward. These are demonstrated with gusto during the hourly tours. Most impressive are the street and fairground organs from around Europe.

Just east of town, the **Rietveld-Schröderhuis** (☎ 030-236 23 10; Prins Hendrikklaan 50; adult/child under 13yr/child 13-18yr €16/8/13; ☎ 11am-5pm, reservations strongly advised) is a Unesco-protected landmark, adhering to the 'form follows function' creed with amazing invention.

Boat trips with **Lovers Utrecht** (☎ 030-272 01 11; nr Lange Vijfstraat & Oudegracht; 1hr boat trip adult/concession €7/5) trace a circular route through the deep canals of the old town. The tours provide a unique perspective on the city, not least because the water lies a couple of metres below street level.

INFORMATION

Tourist Office (VVV Utrecht; ☎ 0900 128 87 32, per min €0.50; www.utrechtyourway.nl; Vinkenburg 19; ☎ noon-6pm Mon, 10am-6pm Tue, Wed & Fri, 10am-8pm Thu, 9.30am-5pm Sat, noon-5pm Sun Apr-Sep)

EATING

Blauw (☎ 030-234 24 63; Springweg 64; set menu from €21; ☎ dinner) Blauw has worked hard to make

Indonesian food trendy in Utrecht, or at least popular. Quality is the key, and the rice table, comprising 14 tasty little dishes, is a winner.

Deeg (☎ 030-233 11 04; Lange Nieuwstraat 71; 3-course menu €31; ☎ dinner) Acclaimed as much for its fresh, organic, creative cooking as the stylish décor, it's in a quiet area south of the action.

Café le Journal (☎ 030-236 48 39; Neude 32; mains €10-22; ☎ lunch & dinner) This classy grand café is made for people-watching on the busy square, with its crispy fresh salads a running favourite.

Oudaen (☎ 030-231 18 64; Oudegracht 99; mains €10-23; ☎ lunch & dinner) The best choice along this popular stretch of canal, the Oudaen is set in a restored 14th-century banquet hall. It offers salads, steaks and succulent seafood, as well as its own in-house brew.

Polman's (☎ 030-231 63 88; nr Jansdam & Keistraat; mains €19.50, 3-course menus from €32.50; ☎ dinner) Diners are welcomed in an elegant former ballroom with ceiling frescoes, a hangover from its days as an elite gentlemen's club. The French and Italian meals are honed for the discriminating palate.

DRINKING

Café België (☎ 030-231 26 66; Oudegracht 196; snacks €3-8) An absolute mecca for beer-lovers, the België stocks examples from very many of Benelux's brewers. Order nuts under the inflatable shark.

Café Ledig Erf (☎ 030-231 75 77; Tolsteegbrug 3) This classy pub overlooks a confluence of canals at the southern tip of town. Patrons gather on tables around the oversized chessboard on the terrace.

Winkel van Sinkel (☎ 030-230 30 30; Oudegracht 158) This 19th-century building houses a grand café, nightclub and restaurant with a divine interior. It was once the Netherlands' first department store – check out the green statues of females that buckled the loading cranes.

ENTERTAINMENT

Tivoli (☎ 030-231 14 91; Oudegracht 245) This former monastery, now a cavernous dance hall with medieval chandeliers, remains a fixture on Utrecht's student music scene.

Springhaver Theater (☎ 030-230 30 30; Springweg 52) This Art Deco complex houses intimate cinemas that screen art-house and independent films, and has a great in-house café.

SLEEPING

Grand Hotel Karel V (☎ 030-233 75 55; www.karelv.nl; Geertebloerker 1; s/d from €210/230) This place is a lavishly converted 14th-century building, with flawless service.

Strowis Budget Hostel (☎ 030-238 02 80; www.strowis.nl; Boothstraat 8; s & d €57.50, dm €14.50-17.50) A 17th-century building and former squat that's been lovingly restored.

ALKMAAR

If ever there was a cheese town, Alkmaar is it. Most visitors come to this picturesque town for the traditional **cheese market** (Waagplein; ☎ 10am-12.30pm Fri Apr-early Sep), dating back to the 17th century.

But the city is more than just a purveyor of curdled milk. It holds a special place in Dutch hearts as the first town, in 1573, to repel occupying Spanish troops, by opening the locks and flooding their hapless assailants with seawater.

On Friday mornings, waxed rounds of *kaas* (cheese) are ceremoniously stacked on the main square. Soon, porters appear in colourful hats (denoting the cheese guild),

and dealers in white smocks insert a hollow rod to extract a cheese sample, and sniff and crumble to check fat and moisture content. Once deals are struck, the porters whisk the cheeses on wooden sledges to the old cheese scale, accompanied by a zillion camera clicks. It's primarily for show – nowadays the dairy co-ops have a lock on the cheese trade. Still, as living relics go it's a colourful show.

Lording over this spectacle, the **Waagebouw** (Weigh House, 1390) also houses the tourist office where you can pick up a walking tour of Alkmaar's historic buildings (€2) covering historical sights. Inside you'll also find the **Hollands Kaasmuseum** (Dutch Cheese Museum; ☎ 072-511 42 84; adult/concession €2.50/1.50; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Thu,

9am-4pm Fri, 10am-4pm Sat late Mar-early Nov), a reverential display of cheese-making utensils, photos and a curious stock of paintings by 16th-century female artists. The mechanical tower **carillon** (☎ 6.30pm & 7.30pm Thu, noon & 1pm Sat, 11am & noon Fri mid-Apr–mid-Sep) with jousting knights still springs to life.

Across the square, the **Nationaal Biermuseum** (☎ 072-511 38 01; Houttil 1; adult/child €3/1.75; ☎ 1-5pm Tue-Fri, 1-4pm Sat & Sun) has a decent collection of beer-making equipment and wax dummies showing how the suds were made. The rare video of Dutch beer commercials since the 1950s is a real howler. Choose from 30 beers (eight on draught) in the friendly bar after your tour.

The **Stedelijk Museum** (☎ 072-511 07 37; Canadaplein 1; adult/child €4.50/free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 1-5pm Sat & Sun) is overlooked by many visitors, which is a shame because its collection of oils by the Dutch masters is first-rate. There are life-sized portraits of Alkmaar nobles and historic scenes of the city in decline after the Golden Age. In the upstairs gallery, Charley Toorop's painting of the cheese bearers with grotesque features still stirs controversy.

The **Grote Kerk** (Kerkplein; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun; admission Jun-Aug €4, Sep-May €2.50) reminds us that Noord Hollanders are organ-lovers. The most famous here is the little 'Swallow Organ' (1511) in the north ambulatory. The 17th-century organ built by Jaco van Campen dominates the nave. Organ recitals take place from noon to 12.30pm and 1pm to 1.30pm June to August, and Wednesday evenings in July and August.

The **Stadhuis** (Town Hall) dates from the Renaissance.

Canal boat tours (☎ 072-511 77 50; www.woltheuscruises.nl; adult/child €6.50/3.50; ☎ every 20min from 9.30am Apr-Oct) with multilingual commentary depart from Mient near the Waag.

INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 072-511 42 84; www.vvvalkmaar.nl; Waagplein 2; ☎ 1-5pm Mon, 10am-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat).

EATING

De Tromp Kaashuis (☎ 072-511 34 22; Magdalenestraat 11) If you're looking to grab some cheese after seeing so much of it, check out this quality certified shop with Dutch and French cheeses stacked everywhere you look.

Het Hof van Alkmaar (☎ 072-512 12 22; Hof van Sonoy 1; lunch €3.50-13, dinner mains €16-20; ☎ lunch & dinner

Tue-Sun) This place offers creative cuisine in a former 15th-century monastery, with courtyard seating.

Henry's Grand Café (☎ 072-511 32 83; Houttil 34; lunch €3-12, dinner mains €10-23; ☎ lunch & dinner) A grand café overlooking the main square with a comprehensive menu and good range of local beers.

Pâtisserie Culinaire (☎ 072-511 29 58; Houttil 13; mains €5-16) This buzzing, artsy café offers freshly made filled rolls, quiche and big salads that spill off your plate. It's the perfect spot to sip a coffee and watch the world go by.

DRINKING

Café Vrije Vogelhuis (☎ 072-511 24 58; Houttil 20) The place for beer and billiards with rollicking Dutch folk music (eg 'Tante Leen') and top-40 hits.

Café Lindeboom (☎ 072-512 17 43; Verdrongenoord 114) Over by the old fish market is this cosy bar where talkative locals linger on the canal terrace.

ZANSE SCHANS

This kitsch open-air museum on the Zaan River is a bit of a guilty pleasure. It's undeniably touristy and tacky in parts, but picturesque because of its gardens and canal setting, so it's still a lot of fun.

The six working **windmills** along the riverbanks are the highlight and apart from the villagers, who actually live and earn their keep here, are the most authentic thing about the place. It was once the world's first light-industrial region, with more than 700 windmills powering flour and paint production.

One mill sells fat jars of its freshly ground mustard, while the others turn out pigments,

TRANSPORT: ZANSE SCHANS

Direction 10km northwest
Travel time 20 to 30 minutes

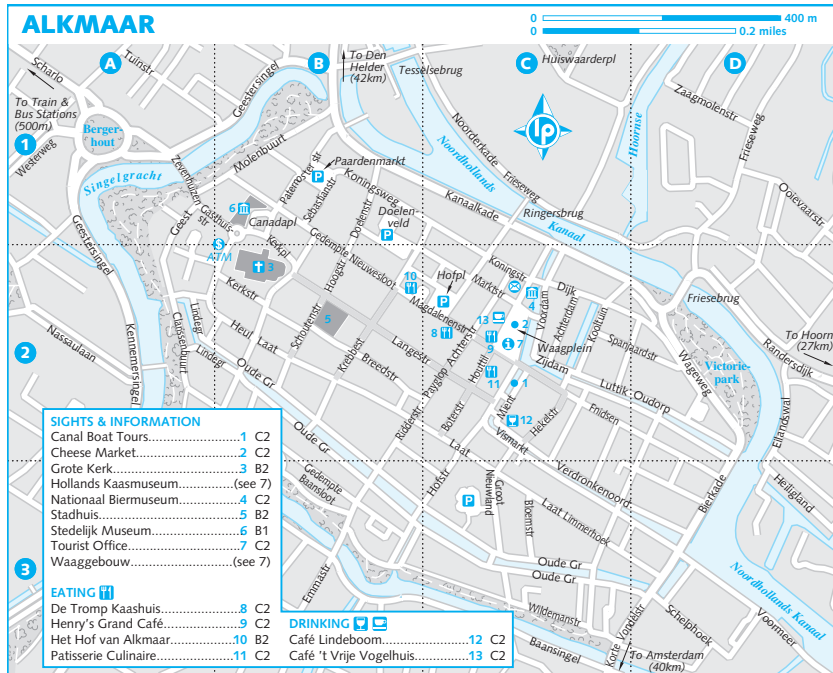
Train In summer, take the Connexion bus 91 from Amsterdam Centraal (€2.50, 20 minutes, hourly). The rest of the year board the train towards Alkmaar and get off at Koog Zaandijk (€2.80, 20 minutes, four times hourly), and walk the 1km to Zaanse Schans.

Car Travel to the northwestern side of the city on the A10 ring road, and take the A8 turn-off. Exit at Zaandijk.

TRANSPORT: ALKMAAR

Direction 35km northwest
Travel time 30 to 40 minutes

Train Services run at least twice per hour from Amsterdam (€6.40, 40 minutes); the canal-bound centre is 500m southeast of the train station
Car Take the A9 in the west of Amsterdam, which goes directly to Alkmaar



oils, meal and sawed planks. Most are open for inspection, and it's a treat to clamber about the creaking works while the mills shake in the North Sea breeze.

The other buildings have been brought here from all over the country to re-create a 17th-century community and, understandably, some of them look out of place. There is an early Albert Heijn market, a cheese maker and a popular **dog factory** that turns out wooden shoes as if grinding keys. The engaging pewter smith will explain the story behind dozens of tiny figures while the soft metal sets in the moulds. The spanking new **Zaans Museum** (☎ 075-616 28 62; adult/child €4.50/2.70; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) shows how the harnessing of wind and water was done.

Admission to the re-created community site is free, but some buildings charge a small admission. The information centre sells area maps for €1. Once you've finished poking about the village, a **tour boat** (adult/child €5/2.50, 🕒 Tue-Sun Apr-Sep) does a 45-minute spin on the Zaan River several times a day.

AALSMEER

This town is home to the world's biggest **flower auction** (Bloemenveiling; ☎ 39 39 39; www.vba-aalsmeer.nl; Legmeerdijk 131; 🕒 7-11am Mon-Fri), the

TRANSPORT: AALSMEER

Direction 22km southwest

Travel time 50 minutes

Bus Connexion bus 172 from Amsterdam Centraal Station to Aalsmeer VBA stop (four times hourly)

Car Take the A4 a short way to Haarlemmermeer then left (southeast) onto the N201

Bloemenveiling. Make sure you're in the viewing gallery by 9am to catch the first flower-laden carts go to auction. Selling is conducted – surprise! – by Dutch auction, with a huge clock showing the starting price. From the starting bell, the hand keeps dropping until someone takes up the offer and a deal is struck. There's a self-guided audio tour that will let you peek into the auction rooms and see arrangers prepping the blooms for display.

The auctions takes place in Europe's largest commercial complex (one million sq metres), and one look at the parking lot and truck fleets will tell you why so much space is necessary. Some 90 million flowers and two million plants change hands here every single day, racking up nearly €7 million in business. More and more transactions are taking place online, so catch the action while it's still here. Mondays are the busiest time, Thursdays the quietest.

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