

INTRODUCING AMSTERDAM

THIS IMAGE
NOT AVAILABLE
IN PICK & MIX

You're nursing a drink in a canal café when you hear Bach. A man with a wild hairdo is playing organ *and* trumpet on a nutshell of a boat, while his feet do the steering. Only in Amsterdam...

... and back by popular demand. After a few years' pout, this beautiful city has found its old self – quirky, creative and open-minded. Yet beneath the self-assured exterior, mental notes are everywhere. Not long ago the Netherlands swung towards the right, with crackdowns on immigration, religious freedom and red-light districts. Even in freewheeling Amsterdam, people were asking themselves: is too much tolerance a bad thing?

You can breath easy: the soul-searching is over. The core values of Dutch society that we knew and loved have emerged intact. Newcomers who integrate are welcome; practising a faith is OK, as is the right to turn away from it. You like reefer madness? Fine, let's hit a coffeeshop. A studded jockstrap for skate night? No problem, that's crazy enough. Tolerance hasn't gone out of fashion, it's just had a makeover.

The city's gorgeous looks haven't faded either. The moments you spend ogling the old merchants' villas, the Jordaan's charming lanes or the lush Vondelpark are as magical now as in centuries past. The cafés are full, the museums are littered with Golden Age art and everyone still parties like there's no tomorrow. Amsterdam is a delight to visit any time of year, but it's hard to trump Queen's Day, the world's biggest party-cum-garage sale. In summer there's an endless parade of festivals and events such as the Holland Festival, the Roots Music Festival and the outrageous Gay Pride parade, as well as delightful concerts on canal stages.

This city is too relaxed to stop being fun. To join in, all you need to pack is a few days' attitude.

AMSTERDAM LIFE

Scene: a café terrace near the Spui. Our friend Wim, the graphic designer, has just signed up for a fancy new flat in Amsterdam-Noord, and despite the snickers around the table ('Noord's sooo downmarket!') he's in the mood to celebrate. The Dutch economy is purring, and Wim has taken an interest-free mortgage with plans to resell in a few years. As do most people here tonight, but no-one says so – talking personal finances is in bad taste. But everyone agrees that long before it's finished, the new Metro line is already boosting real estate across the city.

Somebody lights a cigarette, and barkeeper Jan brings by a clean ashtray, saying enjoy it while it lasts. He's referring to the new smoking ban in cafés and restaurants, due to come into force in the summer of 2008. Cheer up, says Joke (her real name, pronounced yo-ke), dabbing her *bitterballen* in the mustard, people will always come to watch football. On the bar TV, there's AT5 sports news, with Real Madrid's plans to buy yet another Dutch player from either Ajax or Feyenoord; later Jan will switch over to Golden Cage II, the hit reality show.

Barbara, the media consultant, clothes designer and all-round multitasker, has only just arrived, trains from Utrecht being delayed again. She opens her laptop to hotspot her email, and the screen lights up her blouse composed of little CCTV logos, something she threw together for a club theme night. She has another one showing Bokito the ape in police uniform, baton at the ready under a Zeedijk sign. Why don't you do a shirt about Geert Wilders? asks Chris, the American fashion photographer over here for International Fashion Week. After all, he's the politician Amsterdammers spend most time worrying about. Wilders of the PVV party has just called, again, for the Koran to be banned in the Netherlands. Most people don't agree but his remarks grab the headlines.

Did you hear taxes for the Waterstaat (water and dam ministry) are going up, Wim complains. The government needs to spend more on the dykes, to soothe global warming fears. Chris grumbles they should be spending more on catching those supposed 'ethnic foreigners' from the news reports who beat up gays. It's giving Amsterdam *and* foreigners a bad rap. And how dare the mayor forbid gay events during major football games, in the name of conflict prevention!

By now it's early evening; this grand café is phasing from after-work drinks to restaurant mode. Where shall they go next? Café Danté? De Jaren? *Nee*, why not head over to the Nes; there's a drama festival on, the places will be hopping. A Dutch-American consensus is reached, and off they go.

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GETTING STARTED

Amsterdam is so incredibly well organised that you won't need to plan ahead (much). Getting there is a cinch, the handsome canal-laced centre is compact and easy to explore, and regardless of the season there'll be oodles of things to do. The city is extremely popular with visitors, so booking accommodation is likely to be your most demanding task. A key thing to bear in mind: while it's possible to 'do' the Dutch capital on a busker's income, you'll breathe easier with a medium-sized wallet.

WHEN TO GO

Try as you will, there's not really a bad time to visit Amsterdam. In any given month the festivals and celebrations will keep you going nonstop, and in a rare lull there are plenty of museums and exhibitions to hold your interest. When the weather warms up, Amsterdammers rejoice by flocking into the streets, canals and parks, and cafés happily move their seating outdoors.

The summer agenda teems with open-air concerts, theatre and festivals, often free. The party to end all orange parties is Queen's Day on 30 April, an unforgettable experience. Major cultural events include the Holland Festival and Roots Music Festival in June, Julidans in July and the Uitmarkt in August. Outdoors enthusiasts will want to take in National Cycling Day or one of the road races throughout the year.

A few of the events listed in the following section are out of town but are worth the trip. See [p246](#) for a list of public holidays – when the city has a tendency to shut down. Accommodation is cheapest from November to December, and can fall to ludicrously low levels in the bigger hotels in January and February.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The annual calendar is a never-ending procession of parties, exhibitions, concerts, festivals, sports challenges and other events almost without let-up during the entire year. Things slow down a little after New Year's as the city nurses its collective head.

January

JUMPING AMSTERDAM

[www.jumpingamsterdam.nl](#)

One of the top equestrian sports events in Europe, held at the RAI ([p131](#)) convention centre in late January.

ELFSTEDENTOCHT (ELEVEN CITIES' JOURNEY)

[www.elfstedentocht.nl](#)

If it's cold enough for long enough, this 200km skating marathon through the northern province of Friesland draws thousands of participants. This marathon is now such a rare event that its mere announcement creates a buzz around the country.

February

CARNAVAL

[www.carnaval.in.nl](#)

Enjoyed with extreme gusto in southern Holland, Carnival is a Catholic tradition that goes down well with Amsterdammers who happen to like partying in silly costumes.

COMMEMORATION OF THE FEBRUARY STRIKE

Held on 25 February, wreaths are laid at the Dockworker monument in the former Jewish quarter, in memory of the 1941 general strike against the Nazis.

March

STILLE OMGANG (SILENT PROCESSION)

On the Sunday closest to 15 March, Catholics walk along the Holy Way (the street 'Heiligeweg' is a remnant) to commemorate the Miracle of Amsterdam (see the boxed text, [p73](#)).

April

NATIONAL MUSEUM WEEKEND

Usually held on the second weekend of April, with free entry to all museums and the crowds to match.

KONINGINNEDAG (QUEEN'S DAY)

[www.koninginnedagamsterdam.nl](#)

Celebrated on 30 April – actually the birthday of Juliana, mother of the current Queen Beatrix – Queen's Day is an uproarious madhouse and highlight of the annual calendar. A 'free market' is held throughout the city, meaning anyone can sell anything they like, and the vast terrain of sidewalks (staked out by vendors well ahead of time) becomes a comical open-air showroom of items ranging from precious heirlooms to outright junk. Grab your orange wig and suspenders and hang on tight for musical revelry, rivers of beer and about two million happy visitors. And expect to walk a lot, as the streets are too packed for the buses and trams to run.

WORLD BOOK CAPITAL

[www.amsterdamwereldboekenstad.nl](#)

As Unesco's World Book Capital of the year, Amsterdam plays host to a gaggle of literary events such as exhibitions, a children's parade and readings by famous authors in crowded bookshops. From 23 April 2008 through to 22 April 2009.

WORLD PRESS PHOTO

[www.worldpressphoto.org](#)

Pictures shot by the best photojournalists on the planet, on display at the Oude Kerk from late April till early June.

May

REMEMBRANCE DAY

Held on 4 May for the victims of WWII.

Queen Beatrix lays a wreath at the Nationaal Monument on the Dam and the city observes two minutes' silence at 8pm.

LIBERATION DAY

The end of German occupation in 1945 is commemorated with speeches, concerts and street parties on 5 May. The Vondelpark is a good place to be.

LUILAK ('LAZY-BONES')

In the early hours on the Saturday before Whit Sunday, children go around ringing door bells, making noise and waking up people who haven't bought earplugs. Luilak is a hold-over from a pre-Christian festival celebrating the awakening of spring.

NATIONAL WINDMILL DAY

Held on the second Saturday in May, 600 windmills throughout the country unfurl their sails and welcome the public into their innards.

NATIONAL CYCLING DAY

Held in mid- to late May, and includes family cycling trips along special routes.

PINKPOP

[www.pinkpop.nl](#)

This three-day outdoor rock festival held around Pentecost (May/June) takes place near Landgraaf, about 135km southeast of Amsterdam. Past events have featured bands such as the Smashing Pumpkins and the Arctic Monkeys.

June

HOLLAND FESTIVAL

[www.hollandfstvl.nl](#)

For all of June the country's biggest music, drama and dance extravaganza practically takes over Amsterdam. Highbrow and pretentious meet lowbrow and silly.

VONDELPARK OPEN-AIR THEATRE

[www.openluchttheater.nl](#)

A popular Amsterdam tradition featuring classical music, dance, musical theatre, cabaret and children's shows in a wonderful park setting. Early June through to mid-August.

OPEN GARDEN DAYS

[www.opentuinendagen.nl](#)

On the third weekend in June, the public has a unique opportunity to view some 30 gardens of private homes and institutions along the canals.

ROOTS MUSIC FESTIVAL

[www.amsterdamroots.nl](#)

A lively, week-long extravaganza of world music, theatre, dance and film held at the Tropenmuseum, Concertgebouw and other key venues in late June.

PARKPOP

[www.parkpop.nl](#)

Europe's largest free pop festival is also one of its best organised and, with crowds of up to 200,000 partying fans, it needs to be. Last Sunday in June, at Den Haag's Zuiderpark.

INTERNATIONAL THEATRE SCHOOL FESTIVAL

www.itsfestival.nl

For 10 days around the end of the month, Dutch and international drama students strut their stuff.

July

JAZZ OP HET DAK

www.e-nemo.nl

High-flying concerts pull big talent to the sloping roof of the NEMO museum (p69). First weekend of July.

5 DAYS OFF

www.5daysoff.nl

Electronic music festival with dance parties at the Melkweg, Paradiso and the Heineken Music Hall the first week of the month.

OVER HET IJ FESTIVAL

www.overhetij.nl

Large-scale theatre, music and fine arts do, in off-beat venues at the NDSM shipyards in Amsterdam-Noord, for 10 days in early July. Always fresh and exciting.

JULIDANS

www.julidans.nl

Renowned dance festival with influential choreographers. It draws some 20,000 visitors during the first half of July, all the more remarkable given it takes place at small venues around town.

NORTH SEA JAZZ FESTIVAL

www.northseajazz.nl

The world's largest indoor jazz festival takes place in Rotterdam's renowned Ahoy complex in mid-July. The performers' list reads like a 'who's who' of jazz, and many of the musicians play venues in Amsterdam as well.

ROBECO SUMMER CONCERTS

www.robecozomerconcerten.nl

Annual showcase of classical concerts featuring up-and-coming talent and a spate of events in the Concertgebouw (p199). Mid-July through August.

INTERNATIONAL FASHION WEEK

www.amsterdamfashionweek.com

The Netherlands' top fashion event features catwalks, films and parties galore

during the last 10 days of the month; it takes place on Museumplein and in the Westergasfabriek.

August

AMSTERDAM PRIDE FESTIVAL

www.weareproud.nl

The rainbow flag blankets Amsterdam the first weekend of the month, with oodles of parties and special events. The climax, the Gay Pride Parade, is the world's only waterborne spectacle of its flesh-bearing kind.

PARADE

www.mobilearts.nl

In the first half of the month, this old-time funfair and theatre festival at Martin Luther King Park is a magnet for small fry and parents alike.

DANCE VALLEY

www.dancevalley.nl

Held mid-August on a fairground at Spaarnwoude, near Amsterdam. Tens of thousands groove in circus tents as celebrity DJs spin their spells.

GRACHTENFESTIVAL (CANAL FESTIVAL)

www.grachtenfestival.nl

This music festival delights with classical concerts around the Canal Belt in the second half of August. The Prinsengracht Concert takes place on barges in front of the Hotel Pulitzer.

HARTJESDAGEN ZEEDIJK

www.zeedijk.nl

Held on the third Monday and the weekend before it, this festival, dating back to medieval times, features street theatre, a transvestite parade and all kinds of costumed extroverts on Zeedijk and Nieuwmarkt.

UITMARKT

www.uitmarkt.nl

For the last weekend of August, local troupes and orchestras present their forthcoming repertoires free of charge in the Eastern Docklands. It's a bit like Koningsinnedag in April, but Uitmarkt is more relaxed.

SINTERKLAAS

Every year on 6 December, the Dutch celebrate Sinterklaas in honour of St Nicholas (Klaas is a nickname for Nicholas, or Nicolaas in Dutch). Historically St Nicholas was the bishop of Myra in western Turkey around AD 345, but he's better known as the patron saint of children, sailors, merchants and pawnbrokers – not to mention the city of Amsterdam.

In mid- to late November the white-bearded saint, dressed as a bishop with mitre and staff, arrives in Amsterdam by steamboat from 'Spain' and parades down the Damrak on horseback to receive the city keys from the mayor. He is accompanied by a host of mischievous servants called Zwarte Pieten (Black Peters), Dutch helpers in blackface (or politically correct blue- or greenface) who throw sweets around and carry sacks in which to take naughty children away. Well-behaved children get presents in a shoe that they've placed by the fireplaces with a carrot for the saint's horse (which stays on the roof while a Black Peter climbs down the chimney).

On the evening of 5 December, people give one another anonymous and creatively wrapped gifts accompanied by funny or perceptive poems about the recipient written by Sinterklaas. The gift itself matters less than the wrapping (the greater the surprise, the better) and poetry (the more the recipient is put on the spot, the better).

The North American Santa Claus evolved from the Sinterklaas celebrations at the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam, which eventually became New York.

September

OPEN MONUMENTENDAG

www.openmonumentendag.nl

Registered historical buildings are thrown open to the public on the second weekend of September.

JORDAAN FESTIVAL

www.jordaanfestival.nl

The third weekend of September, with music, amateur contests and other festivities around the Westerkerk and elsewhere in the charming Jordaan district. Hundreds of small boats take to the canals.

DAM TOT DAMLOOP

www.damloop.nl

This is a 16km foot-race between the Dam in Amsterdam and the Dam in Zaandam. Expect up to 20,000 runners and many times that in spectators. Third Sunday of the month.

ROBODOCK FESTIVAL

www.robodock.org

Powerhouse theatre and multimedia events with a postindustrial flavour. Third weekend of September.

AMSTERDAM UNDERGROUND FESTIVAL

www.amsterdamunderground.nl

A four-day celebration of the subterranean city at the end of September, with theatre, music, film, dance and art events. Its sunken locations have included the interiors of bridges, a tunnelling site for the

North-South metro line and a mysterious passage directly beneath the IJ river tunnel.

October

AMSTERDAM MARATHON

www.amsterdammarathon.nl

Thousands of runners lope along the canals in this epic race that begins and ends at the Olympic Stadium. Held mid-month, with several types of runs.

November

MUSEUM NIGHT

www.n8.nl

Some 40 museums stay open late with live music, DJs and a liver-wilting array of after-parties. First Saturday of the month.

CANNABIS CUP

www.hightimes.com

Hosted by *High Times* magazine, this far-out festival doles out awards for the nicest grass, biggest reefer and the best 'pot comedian'. Held in mid-November, complete with hemp expo and fashion show.

SINTERKLAAS PARADE

St Nicholas arrives by boat from Spain in mid- to late November (see the boxed text, above).

December

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Organised fireworks displays over the Amstel and elsewhere around town. The

Dutch are absolutely mad about pyrotechnics, making even the most informal celebrations a spark-showing spectacle (try Nieuwmarkt).

COSTS & MONEY

The cost of living is about average for a northern Europe city, but less expensive than London or Paris. If you're coming from the UK, prices may look the same numerically but the exchange rate on the pound usually makes Amsterdam a bargain. That said, it's disturbingly easy to spend more money than you planned on, though with a few simple measures you can stop the rot.

Accommodation will likely be your major expense. Although budget lodging can be relatively inexpensive, you'll pay dearly for anything of quality. Booking package deals, taking advantage of internet discounts and visiting in the low season can drastically cut your hotel bill. Prices ease slightly in the budget and midrange brackets as you move away from the old centre, and though you're slightly further away from the action, the standard of facilities tends to go up.

The majority of hostels charge around €20 to €25 for a bed, though at rock-bottom you can find digs from around €17. Budget hotels charge around €55 to €80 for a basic double. A room in a midrange hotel or B&B goes for €80 to €160 for a standard double, with the average somewhere around €125. For a flashy boutique or luxury hotel, expect to pay from €160, though things start to get really comfy around €200 (see also p211).

HOW MUCH?

Litre of bottled water: €0.57

Litre of unleaded petrol/gasoline: €1.40

Glass of Heineken: €2

Kroket sandwich at van Dobben: €2

One hour of parking: €3.50

Strippenskaart (15-strip ticket for public transport): €6.80

Cinema ticket: €8

Robust bicycle lock: €13

Rijsttafel dinner at Tuhuh Maret Indonesian restaurant: €23.50

Tip in a public toilet: €0.50

As for food, you'll find lots of cafés and restaurants with three- or four-course meals anywhere from €18 to €40, though most will be around €25 to €35, and the bill can easily be more in swanky places. You can economise by taking your main meal at lunchtime, as €5 to €10 or so will buy a daily special and a drink, and then having a snack for dinner. Self-catering is an attractive option, as delis and supermarket chains like Albert Heijn stock sandwiches and prepared meals (see p158). A consolation is the reasonable price of drinks in bars and cafés, though wine tends to be overpriced in a land of beer-lovers.

Museums can be a drain on resources at about €10 a pop for the top exhibitions, but discounts are available – see p245 for discount cards, special passes and packages. Remember that many of the summer festivals cost nothing to attend (see p16), and some cultural institutions offer free treats such as the lunchtime concerts at the Concertgebouw (p199).

Public transport is remarkably cheap, costing from €0.90 per regular journey in the city centre using a *strippenkaart* or *OV-chipkaart* (see p243), and bicycle rental will only set you back €7 to €10 per day. If you're looking to save money, avoid taxis! Fares vary but are generally €3.40 at the drop and another €1.94 per kilometre, and the total bill mounts quickly. Petrol (gasoline) is among the priciest in Europe at around €1.40 per litre of unleaded but, then again, you'll hardly need a car once you're in Amsterdam.

To sum up, budget travellers staying in hostels or cheap hotels, eating in modest restaurants and visiting a museum or two should be able to scrape by on €40 to €60 a day. Staying in midrange hotels and eating in midrange restaurants equates to €80 to €100 a person per day in peak season. From around €150 per day, you can stay in four- and five-star hotels, dine at fancy restaurants and hire a private boat, provided a few others chip in.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Amsterdam is a pretty switched-on place and the web, eureka, is a fertile source of information. Here's a selection of relevant sites, some for practical planning, others for feeding your head.

<http://homepage.mac.com/schuffelen> Dutch pronunciation (MP3s to download).

www.amsterdamtourist.nl The tourist board's answer to iamsterdam.com.

ADVANCE PLANNING

Before you head to Amsterdam, note that hotels book up fast in high season or around big events like trade fairs, so try to book your accommodation well ahead of time. The hotel-booking function at www.iamsterdam.com gives a quick idea of availability on a certain date, although as with most online hotel services, not all places are listed.

Read the *Amsterdam Weekly* (www.amsterdamweekly.nl) to see what's on in the way of festivals and special events. You might also check the sked at the RAI convention centre (p131), which puts on interesting trade fairs. Football fans scan for matches of leading Dutch teams on www.soccerway.com. Apart from the events themselves, you'll get clue about the crowd levels in town and the demand for hotel rooms.

Be sure to check the weather reports and tailor your activities (eg rain = museums, sun = canal-hopping). Pack layers of clothing and a raincoat, bearing in mind the Dutch weather is notoriously fickle and there can be chilly spells even in summer.

When planning to dine out it pays to reserve ahead in popular restaurants, sometimes several days ahead of time (see p157). And last but not least, take a pair of earplugs to ensure a good night's sleep.

www.amsterdamweekly.nl Good feature articles and catch-all listings.

www.bma.amsterdam.nl Amsterdam Heritage and its historical buildings.

www.expatica.com For expats and all those who strive to be one.

www.iamsterdam.com Excellent site run by the city of Amsterdam.

www.iens.nl Top dining-out pages with ratings and reviews.

www.panoramsterdam.com For 360-degree views of your favourite city.

www.startamsterdam.com Link-rich site for art, culture and places of interest.

www.underwateramsterdam.com Alternative listings, with a bit of everything.

SUSTAINABLE AMSTERDAM

Amsterdammers are acutely aware of the strains on their fair city, and though visitors

aren't expected to go overboard, your contribution to a cleaner environment will be much appreciated. You can start by keeping your 'carbon footprint' as small as possible (ie by taking a low-emission train to your destination, or ride-sharing by car).

The petite city centre is tailor-made for bicycles and foot traffic. Once you're here there's little need for a car, which anyway is more a curse than a blessing in the quaint but perennially clogged lanes of the Canal Belt. The efficient web of bus, tram and metro lines is a much better option and feeds seamlessly into the national transport system. Amsterdam's long-standing policy of curbing motor-vehicle use reduces not only congestion, but air pollution (electric cargo trams are being launched in 2008 for the very same reason).

Most glass bottles carry a deposit, returnable to supermarkets for a refund. Disposable bottles (both glass and plastic) can be deposited into bottle banks located around town. Recyclable paper containers are becoming more common too (see p43).

THE AUTHOR

Jeremy Gray



Born in Louisiana of English parents, Jeremy went to university in Texas and has since lived in Britain, Germany and the Netherlands. When he first visited Amsterdam in 1998, it immediately felt like home, so he upped

and moved to a flat in the Eastern Islands. Soon Jeremy was lingering with the locals in brown cafés, bumping on his bike along the canals and toe-tapping to jazz at the Bimhuis. He admires the Dutch for their bubbly *gezelligheid*, spontaneity and openness – and fondly recalls how a near-stranger revealed that she was the test-tube child of his landlord’s girlfriend’s father. The only Calvinist finger-wag came from his barber, for not supporting the local pub. Jeremy now lives in Berlin, where he divides his time between travel writing, photography and documentary film. He returns to Amsterdam as often as possible just to see gorgeous canals. You can find more of his work at www.jeremygray.com.

JEREMY’S TOP AMSTERDAM DAY

There’s no beating an early stroll when the old merchants’ homes of the Canal Belt glow softly in the morning light. First stop is a café in the Negen Straatjes district, to say *dag* to the owner and catch up on the papers before

poking round the interesting shops nearby. The organic stalls are open at the lovely Noordermarkt, so I can pick up kitchen herbs, ripe Gouda and a *bosje* (bunch) of flowers; all go in the bicycle basket. Got bread and some *osseworst* as well so I phone the sweetie and meet in the Vondelpark for an impromptu picnic. In the afternoon we check out a photo exhibition at FOAM. Then it’s off to the shop Concerto to pick up a CD, followed by a *biertje* at a café in the Utrechtsestraat where we end up staying for dinner. A concert at club Paradiso, followed by a cocktail at a bar-nightclub near Leidseplein, rounds off an ideal day in the canal city.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Will Salter

In the last 12 years, Will has worked on assignment in over 50 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Antarctica and the Pacific. He has produced a body of award-winning work that includes evocative images of travel, portraits and sport. He sees photography as a privilege, a rare opportunity to become intimately involved in people’s lives. Will is based in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife and two children.

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