

The Netherlands

Everyone thinks they've got the Netherlands sussed, but it's not all about Amsterdam – is it? Sure, the Dutch capital is among the most distinctive of all European cities; it's certainly one of the most beautiful. It may very well be the most eccentric. But it's not the Netherlands' only claim to fame. Not by a long shot.

Den Haag (The Hague), Leiden, Haarlem and Delft are beguiling, sumptuous, historical cities. Maastricht is a hybrid of European influences, hemmed in by Belgium and Germany near the southernmost border. Rotterdam rivals Amsterdam for the title of the Netherlands' 'first city'; destroyed during WWII, it rebuilt itself with inimitable architecture and an earthy attitude. In the north, Friesland boasts an exclusive language and lifestyle.

How's that for starters? Best of all, the Netherlands is small and served by an efficient rail network – from north to south takes just three hours. It's a day-tripper's paradise.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 41,526 sq km
- **Capital** Amsterdam
- **Currency** euro (€); A\$1 = €.60; ¥100 = €.67; NZ\$1 = €.50; UK£1 = €1.48; US\$1 = €.78
- **Famous for** doing a lot with a little, extraordinary paintings, unearthly footballers, cheese, liberal attitudes
- **Official Languages** Dutch, Frisian
- **Phrases** *hallo* (hello); *dag* (goodbye); *ja* (yes); *nee* (no); *alsjeblieft* (please); *bedankt* (thanks)
- **Population** 16.4 million
- **Telephone Codes** country code 📞 31; international access code 📞 00



HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak up one of Europe's most beautiful and eccentric cities, **Amsterdam** (p850).
- Immerse yourself in the exhilarating urban vibe of **Rotterdam** (p867).
- Lose yourself in heady, cosmopolitan **Maastricht** (p877).
- Day trip to sumptuous **Delft** (p866) or classy **Den Haag** (p863).
- Take time out on **Texel** (p875) and **Ameland** (p875) in the windswept Frisian island chain.

ITINERARIES

- One week** Spend three days bike riding, museum-hopping, and café-swooping in Amsterdam. Rotterdam's gritty appeal will easily occupy two days, and Maastricht's grandeur deserves at least equal time.
- Two weeks** Allow four days for Amsterdam's many delights, then add a day trip each to beautiful Delft and the regal Hague, three days in Rotterdam, a few days on a couple of Frisian islands of your choice, and three days in Maastricht.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The warmest months are June to September. July and August are the wettest months. See p1100 for Amsterdam's climate chart. Daffodils bloom in April and tulips from late April to mid-May. High season is June to

HOW MUCH?

- Midrange hotel double bed** €50-125
- Canal boat tour** €10
- Joint from an Amsterdam coffee shop** €2.50
- Cup of coffee** €2.50
- Bicycle hire** €8 per day

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- 1L petrol** €2.50
- 1L bottled water** €2
- Can of beer** €0.50
- Souvenir clogs** €22.50
- Vlaamse frites (Flemish fries)** €2.50

August and shoulder seasons mid-March to May and September to mid-October. Easter is busy, and tourists swarm throughout the country in summer; if driving, be wary of traffic in the last weekend of July, when seasonal crowds are heaviest. School holidays fall around mid-February, early May, most of July and August, and the second half of October.

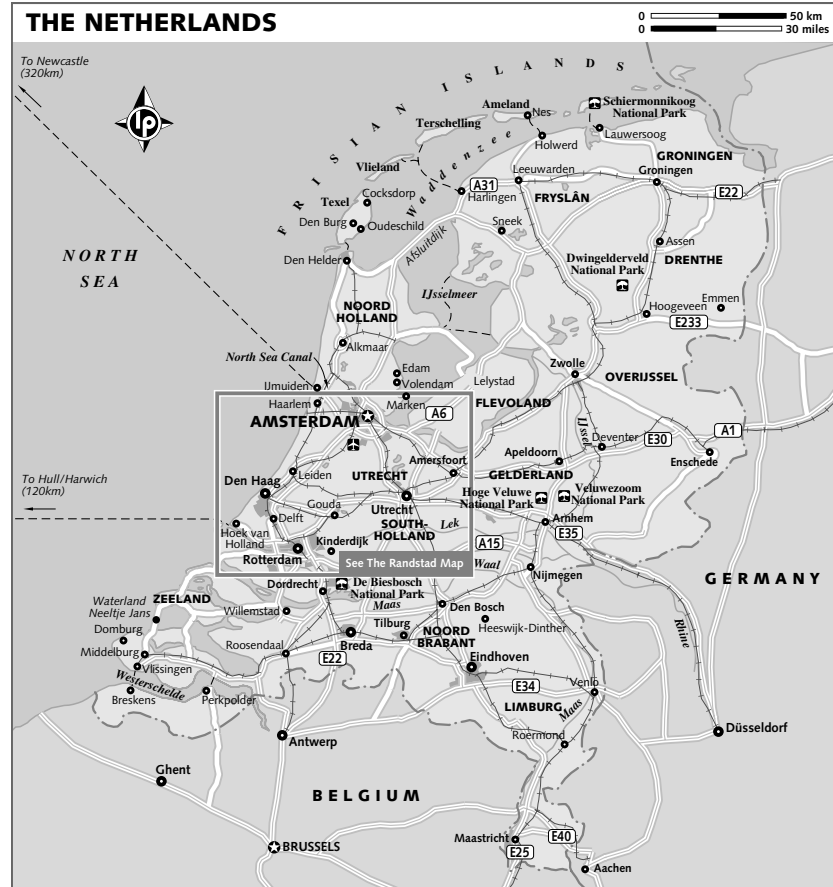
HISTORY

Although the Netherlands is geographically tiny, it has been a major player in world affairs throughout the ages – often unwittingly. While the nation's borders have been repeatedly sliced and diced, the Dutch themselves have blazed distant lands. Away from conflict, the Netherlands has made a stellar contribution to the visual arts and has initiated many world firsts in 'social engineering'.

The Netherlands' early history is bound with that of Belgium and Luxembourg – the three were known as the Low Countries until the 16th century. In 1579 provinces in the northern Low Countries formed the United Provinces, which was the basis for the Netherlands today. They were opposed to the Spanish rule that was in place, while the southern regions, which eventually became Belgium, were open to compromise. The United Provinces fought the Spanish in the 80-year-long Revolt of the Netherlands, which ended in 1648 with a treaty that recognised them as an independent republic.

The Netherlands' Golden Age lasted from about 1580 to 1740. The era's wealth was generated by the Dutch East India Company, which sent ships to the Far East for spices and other exotic goods, while colonising the Cape of Good Hope and Indonesia and establishing trading posts throughout Asia. Later the West Indies Company sailed to West Africa and the Americas. A number of Caribbean islands were also captured in a bid to thwart the Spanish. One unfortunate by-product of Dutch colonisation was the extinction of the dodo in Mauritius, largely due to introduced species.

The wealthy merchant class supported scores of artists including Vermeer, Steen, Hals and Rembrandt. The sciences thrived: Christiaan Huygens, for example, discovered Saturn's rings and invented the pendulum clock.



In 1795 the French invaded. When occupation ended in 1815, the United Kingdom of the Netherlands – incorporating Belgium and Luxembourg – was born. Earlier that year prostitution was legalised in the Netherlands by Napoleon (who wanted to control STDs), though it took until 1988 for the Dutch to define it as a legal profession and to allow prostitutes to join trade unions.

In 1830 the Belgians rebelled and became independent, and Luxembourg was split between Belgium and the Netherlands. Nine years later the Dutch part gained independence and officially became Luxembourg.

The Netherlands stayed neutral in WWI and tried to repeat the feat in WWII, only to be invaded by the Germans. Rotterdam

was levelled, Dutch industry was commandeered for war purposes, and thousands of Dutch men were sent to work in Nazi factories in Germany. Most of the country's Jews were murdered.

Indonesia won independence from the Netherlands in 1949, despite Dutch military opposition. Surinam followed, peacefully, in 1975. The Antilles has close ties with the Netherlands but is self-ruled.

In 1953 a high spring tide and severe storm breached Zeeland's dikes, drowning 2000 people. Under the Delta Plan (p873) a massive engineering project was built to prevent the tragedy from repeating.

In the 1960s Amsterdam became Europe's radical heart, giving rise to the riotous

scatters' movement and the promiscuity that lingers today.

Although cannabis was decriminalised in the Netherlands in 1976, it took 27 years for this ruling to be taken to its logical conclusion; in 2003 the Netherlands became the first country to legalise prescriptions of medicinal cannabis, intended as a pain reliever for cancer and multiple sclerosis sufferers, among others.

Perhaps because of the devastating Nazi occupation, the Dutch have largely embraced European integration. In 1992 European Community members met in Maastricht to sign the treaty that created the EU.

In 1993 the Netherlands became the first country to regulate doctor-assisted euthanasia, and in 2000 the practice was legalised under stringent guidelines. That year the Netherlands also became the first nation in the world to legalise same-sex marriages.

As the Netherlands has become ever more crowded, immigration has become a political hot potato. Admission is now subject to rigid guidelines, and a bill has been passed to deport 26,000 immigrants (including long-term residents) from the country.

In 2002 right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn, an advocate of zero immigration, was shot dead a few days before the Dutch general election. Fortuyn became a post-humous candidate and his party, Lijst Pim Fortuyn, went on to win 17% of the seats in the lower house of parliament.

Unbelievably, in 2004 there was another high-profile assassination. On 2 November in Amsterdam the inflammatory filmmaker and columnist Theo van Gogh was shot repeatedly before being stabbed several times; a note was impaled to his body with the knife, threatening the government, Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Jewish groups. The murderer was an Islamic Moroccan; when he died, Van Gogh was finishing off a film about Pim Fortuyn.

Van Gogh was known for his controversial statements about Muslims, and he had received death threats after he made a short film, *Submission* (written by ex-Muslim Hirsi Ali), detailing the abuse of Muslim women. He dismissed the warnings, saying, 'Who would kill the village idiot?'

Ethnic tensions have been simmering in Amsterdam ever since, with a series of arson

and bomb attacks from both sides – on Islamic schools and Christian churches.

In October 2005, 11 detainees died in a fire at an Amsterdam centre housing illegal immigrants and soon-to-be-deported drug runners.

PEOPLE

Nine-tenths of the population are of Dutch stock, and around half live in the western loop around Amsterdam, Den Haag and Rotterdam. Ethnic communities are concentrated in the Randstad cities (p860). Hindus and Muslims began arriving in the mid-20th century from former Dutch colonies Indonesia and Surinam, and a second wave of immigrants since the 1960s included people from Morocco and Turkey.

Around 400,000 people in Friesland speak their own language, Frisian.

RELIGION

Nearly 40% of Dutch people over 18 years of age claim they have no religious affiliation. Of the remainder, 31% are Catholic, 21% are Protestant, 5.5% are Muslim and the remaining 2.5% are split among other denominations.

The Islamic community has almost doubled in size in the last decade to 920,000. There are more than 300 mosques.

ARTS

Literature

Dutch literature flourished in the 17th century with writers such as Vondel (the Dutch Shakespeare), Bredero and Hooft. Postwar literature was dominated by Willem Frederik Hermans, Harry Mulisch and Gerard Reve and, later, Jan Wolkers, Maarten 't Hart and Frederik van der Heijden.

Tim Krabbé writes dark, complex novels about love, suffering and utter futility. *The Golden Egg* was made into a frightening Dutch film, *Spoorloos*, and later a limp Hollywood remake.

Amsterdam: A Traveller's Literary Companion, edited by Manfred Wolf, features 17 stories set in Amsterdam by leading Dutch writers.

Cinema & TV

The Netherlands' film industry is humble, producing around 20 feature films a year. Yet the Dutch have won four Best Foreign

BIG BROTHER

Many people are surprised to learn that the reality-TV franchise *Big Brother* is a Dutch invention, when it seems quintessentially American. But if you delve into the undercurrents of the Dutch social order, the concept of peering into the lives of a group of strangers makes sense. The Netherlands is Europe's most densely populated country, and while this adds immeasurably to its vibrancy, it can often seem that your neighbour is looking right over your shoulder. Maybe that's why many Dutch leave their curtains open at night so all can see inside: with space at such a premium, there's nowhere to hide, really. No doubt the admirable Dutch trait of tolerance stems from this fact, too: when you're standing cheek-by-jowl, 'love thy neighbour' is a very sensible motto.

Language Film Academy Awards – the third-best tally in Oscars history.

Joris Ivens won an international peace prize for *Song of the Rivers* (1954), a global comparison of workers' conditions.

In the 1970s Paul Verhoeven made earthy films including *Turks Fruit*, the Netherlands' most popular film. He later moved to Hollywood, serving up the sardonic, ultraviolent satires *Robocop* and *Starship Troopers*, and the ultimate revenge thriller, *Basic Instinct*.

The murder mysteries of Dick Maas, a former cartoonist, have been compared to Dario Argenti's – fascinating to look at, but riddled with plot flaws. *Amsterdammed* (1988) features a murderer who uses Amsterdam's canals to escape.

The films of Theo van Gogh (see opposite) are slick, stylish and confrontational.

The Rotterdam International Film Festival is held in February, the Amsterdam Fantastic Film Festival in April, Utrecht's Netherlands Film Festival in September and Amsterdam's International Documentary Film Festival in December.

Dutch TV is saturated with foreign programming, but one notable local product is the reality series *Big Brother*, now a worldwide franchise (see the boxed text, above).

Music

The North Sea Jazz Festival, the world's largest jazz fest, is held each summer; it recently moved from Den Haag to Rotterdam.

Rotterdam, Maastricht and Den Haag have a full calendar of performances by local orchestras and groups, and Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra frequently performs abroad.

Herman Brood burst onto the pop scene in the '70s, morphing into a professional

junkie/rock-and-roll star and later killing himself.

The Nits formed in 1974 and have since released a varied body of work, flirting with '60s pop, '80s New Wave, and electronica stylings.

In the early '90s gabber was unleashed, an extreme mutation of techno originating in Rotterdam. Gabber raised beats per minute to heart-attack levels, giving the finger to purists with its sheer fetishisation of sensation.

The Dutch have a major presence in the populist world DJ rankings with the likes of Tiësto.

Pop festivals flourish in the warmer months, including Pinkpop in Landgraaf, Parkpop in Den Haag and Dynamo Open Air at Neunen. Dance Valley near Haarlem pulls more than 100 bands and even more DJs to one of Europe's biggest open-air dance fests. Lowlands is a three-day alternative-music fest held at Six Flags in Flevoland.

Arling & Cameron, a duo from Amsterdam, have thrilled hipsters in recent years with downtempo lounge tunes, uptempo techno-pop and squelchy 'music for imaginary soundtracks'.

Architecture

Few countries have exerted more influence on architecture than the Netherlands.

Thick walls, small windows and round arches are some of the major characteristics of the Romanesque style (900–1250).

Pointed arches, ribbed vaulting and dizzying heights were trademarks of the Gothic era (c 1250–1600).

The Netherlands excelled in Mannerism (1520–1600), a sort of toned-down baroque.

From the mid-17th century onwards Dutch architecture began to influence France and England, but during the 1700s Dutch architects deferred to all things French, except during the Napoleonic Wars in the late 18th century when designers, influenced by Greek and Roman blueprints, came up with neoclassicism, known for its order, symmetry and simplicity.

Many big projects from the 1850s onward were neo-Gothic, harking back to the grand Gothic cathedrals. One of the leading architects of this period was Pierre Cuyper, who built Amsterdam Centraal Station and the Rijksmuseum.

As the 20th century approached Hendrik Petrus Berlage, the father of modern Dutch architecture, unleashed on the nation spartan, utilitarian designs that did away with frivolous ornamentation.

Functionalism (1927–70) drew influence from Germany's Bauhaus School, the American Frank Lloyd Wright and France's Le Corbusier.

Since the 1980s numerous 'isms' such as structuralism, neorationalism, postmodernism and supermodernism have taken root, especially in Rotterdam, where city planners have encouraged bold designs that range from Piet Blom's startling cube-shaped apartments to Ben van Berkel's graceful Erasmus Bridge. Rotterdam is also home to Rem Koolhaas, perhaps the best-known contemporary Dutch architect.

Visual Arts

The Netherlands claims a superb artistic heritage: many non-Dutch would be able to name at least one famous Dutch painter.

From the 15th century, Hieronymus Bosch's nightmarish works can be seen as an antecedent of surrealism.

During the Golden Age, Rembrandt emerged with the brightest glow of all, creating shimmering religious scenes, in-demand portraits and contemplative landscapes; Frans Hals (1582–1666) captured his subjects in unguarded moments; and Jan Vermeer (1632–75) concentrated on everyday occurrences in middle-class homes, giving a proto-cinematographic quality to his compositions.

Vincent van Gogh's (1853–90) revolutionary use of colour, coarse brushwork and layered contours established him on a

higher plane than his contemporaries, yet he only sold one work while alive.

Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), along with Theo van Doesburg, founded the De Stijl movement; his style of abstract rectangular compositions came to be known as neoplasticism.

MC Escher's (1902–72) graphic art still has uncanny power: a waterfall simultaneously flows up and down; a building folds in on itself. It's popular with mathematicians and stoners alike.

WWII gave birth to the CoBra group (Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam), who saw the conflict as pitching civilised society into severe moral decline. Their antidote was to embrace the mindset of children and the mentally ill in their art.

Documentary is a speciality of contemporary Dutch photographers. Ed van der Elksen's most famous work is *Love on the Left Bank* from 1954, a photographic novel featuring a cast of Paris bohemians. Anton Corbijn is famous for his portraits of top-shelf artists and celebrities.

Theatre & Dance

The Dogtroep theatre company tours abroad and stages fancy and unpredictable 'happenings' in quirky venues such as Amsterdam's ship passenger terminal.

Robodock, featuring robots and choreographed pyrotechnics, has moved back to Amsterdam after a stint in Rotterdam.

The Dutch are world leaders in modern dance. Den Haag's Nederlands Dans Theater troupe was established in 1959, melding modern dance with classical ballet. In Rotterdam, Dansacademie is the nation's largest dance school. Amsterdam's National Ballet performs mainly classical ballets, as well as 20th-century Dutch works.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

The Netherlands' land mass now encompasses 41,526 sq km, roughly half the size of Scotland, and half of it lies at or below sea level in the form of polders (stretches of land reclaimed from the sea). If the Netherlands lost its 2400km of dikes and dunes the large cities would be inundated, so pumping stations run around the clock to drain off excess water. The danger of floods is most acute in Zeeland, a sprawl-

ing estuary for the Schelde, Maas, Lek and Waal Rivers.

The Netherlands' highest point, the Vaalserberg, is in the province of Limburg, at a grand elevation of 321m.

Wildlife

Human encroachment has meant few wildlife habitats are left intact. Birds offer the greatest breadth of species, now heavily protected in sanctuaries and nature reserves. The Netherlands is a paradise for bird-watchers and the wetlands are a major migration stop for European birds, particularly in the Frisian Islands, Flevoland and the Delta.

National Parks

Some 1065 sq km (nearly 3%) of the Netherlands is protected in the form of national parks. The first publicly funded national park was established in 1984 and most average 5000 hectares. Little of the Netherlands is left untouched, so the Dutch cherish what's left.

Environmental Issues

Private car ownership has risen to about 50% over late-1980s levels. Do your bit to ease congestion by riding bikes and taking the efficient trains – there's no compelling reason for travellers to hire a car in the Netherlands.

Winters have become shorter and milder; three of the warmest years on record occurred in the past decade. If sea levels rise, the Netherlands could suffer annual flooding. Dikes and storm barriers will be extended if necessary.

Pressure from the government and Greenpeace has forced Shell and the like to invest heavily in developing clean energy. Wind parks in Flevoland and Noord Holland generate a significant amount of electricity.

FOOD & DRINK Staples & Specialities

Dutch food is hearty and designed to line the stomach; dishes include *stamppot* (mashed pot) – potatoes mashed with kale, endive or sauerkraut and served with smoked sausage or pork strips. *Hutspot* (hotchpotch) is similar, but with potatoes, carrots, onions and braised meat.

The Dutch consume 16.5kg of cheese per person per year (nearly two-thirds of it is Gouda).

Vlaamse frites (Flemish fries) are french fries made from whole potatoes. They're typically smothered in mayonnaise.

Seafood is found at street stalls, including raw, slightly salted herring cut into bite-sized pieces and served with onion and pickles. Smoked eel and *kibbeling* (deep-fried cod parings) are also popular.

International Food

Lebanese and Turkish snack bars specialise in shwarma, pitta bread filled with sliced lamb from a spit, and falafel.

The Netherlands' colonial legacy has introduced Indonesian and Surinamese cooking to the Dutch palate, and the cuisines of many other nations are also well represented, notably Japanese and Greek.

A popular Indonesian dish is *rijsttafel* (rice table), an array of savoury dishes such as braised beef, pork satay and ribs served with white rice.

Surinamese dishes blend African and Indian flavours with Indonesian; chicken, lamb and beef curries are common.

Where to Eat & Drink

As well as restaurants, there are *eetcafés*, which are affordable, small and popular publike eateries.

'Café' means a pub, also known as a *kroeg*. They generally serve food, and many have outdoor terraces. The most famous type is the cosy *bruin café* (brown café) – the name comes from smoke stains on the walls, although pretenders make do with brown paint.

Grand cafés are more spacious, have comfortable furniture and are very popular.

Theatre cafés are also popular and there are also a few *proeflokalen* (tasting houses), where you can sample dozens of *jenever*s (gins) and liqueurs.

Broodjeszaken (sandwich shops) and snack bars are everywhere.

Vegetarians & Vegans

Many restaurant menus may have one or two veggie dishes, but they might not be 100% meat- or fish-free (meat stock is a common culprit). Vegetarian restaurants often rely on organic ingredients and

generally make everything from bread to cakes in-house.

Habits & Customs

The Dutch eat dinner early – popular places fill up by 7pm. You could aim for the ‘second sitting’, around 8.30pm to 9.30pm, although many kitchens close by 10pm.

Lunch tends to be more of a snack, and just a half-hour break is common. Coffee breaks are frequent.

Service is included in the bill and tipping is at your discretion, though most people round up 5% to 10%. In cafés and pubs it’s common to put drinks on a tab and pay when you leave.

Many restaurants don’t accept credit cards.

AMSTERDAM

☎ 020 / pop 743,000

Amsterdam’s always been a liberal place, ever since the Golden Age, when it led European art and trade. Centuries later, in the 1960s, it again led the pack – this time in the principles of tolerance, with broad-minded views on drugs and same-sex relationships taking centre stage. Today the cannabis coffee shops and the Red Light District are still the city’s top drawcards, even if that can sometimes wear thin for the locals. Quite simply, Amsterdam’s more than just an X-rated theme park for Weekend Warriors and Hooray Henrys – it’s also one of Europe’s most breathtakingly scenic cities, with beautiful, heritage-protected 17th-century housing and some of the Continent’s best museums and galleries. It has enough sensory delights to keep the shortest attention spans occupied, and it’s compact and user-friendly, too. Walk or ride a bike around the canal grid, down the historic lanes of the Jordaan district, or through the Plantage and bask in the many worlds-within-worlds that make the ‘Dam so thoroughly addictive.

ORIENTATION

Centraal Station is the hub. From the station the streets radiate outward across the network of canals. Dam Square is the heart, a 10-minute walk from Centraal Station. Leidseplein is the centre of (mainstream)

Amsterdam nightlife, and Nieuwmarkt is a vast cobblestone square with open-air markets and popular pubs. The Red Light District is bound by Zeedijk, Nieuwmarkt and Kloveniersburgwal in the east; Damstraat, Oude Doelenstraat and Oude Hoogstraat in the south; and Warmoesstraat in the west.

INFORMATION

Discount Card

I Amsterdam Card (per 24/36/72hr €33/43/53) Available at VVV offices and some hotels. It gives admission to most museums, canal boat trips, and discounts and freebies at shops, attractions and restaurants. Also includes a GVB (Gemeentevervoerbedrijf; Municipality Transport Company of Amsterdam) Transit Pass.

Internet Access

Centrale Bibliotheek (Main Library; ☎ 523 09 00; Prinsengracht 587; ☎ 1-9pm Mon, 10am-9pm Tue-Thu, to 5pm Fri & Sat, 1-5pm Sun) Free Internet.

Internet City (☎ 620 12 92; Nieuwendijk 76; per hr €3; ☎ 10am-midnight)

Medical Services

Centrale Doktersdienst (Central Doctors Service; ☎ 592 33 33; ☎ 24hr) Doctor, dentist or pharmacy referrals.

Onze Lieve Vrouwe Gasthuis (☎ 599 91 11; Oosterpark 9) A 24-hour public hospital.

Money

American Express (Amex; ☎ 504 87 77; Damrak 66; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat)

GWK (Grenswisselkantoor; ☎ 0900 0566; Centraal Station; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-10pm Sun) Converts travellers cheques and makes hotel reservations; also at Schiphol.

Thomas Cook Dam (☎ 625 09 22; Dam 23-25; ☎ 9am-7pm); Damrak (☎ 620 32 36; Damrak 1-5, opposite Centraal Station; ☎ 8am-8pm); Leidseplein (☎ 626 70 00; Leidseplein 31A; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-7.30pm Sun)

Post

Main post office (☎ 330 0555; Singel 250; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Wed & Fri, to 8pm Thu, 10am-1.30pm Sat)

Tourist Information

Tourist office (VVV; ☎ 0900-400 40 40; www.vvvamsterdam.nl) Stationsplein 10 (☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri); Centraal Track 2 (Centraal Station; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun); Leidseplein 1 (☎ 9.15am-5pm Sun-Thu, to 7pm Fri & Sat)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Medieval Centre

The **Stedelijk Museum** (☎ 573 29 11; www.stedelijk.nl; 2nd & 3rd fl, Post CS Bldg, Oosterdoksade 5; adult/7-16 yr/senior/under 7 €9/5/5/free; ☎ 10am-6pm) features around 100,000 pieces including impressionist works from Monet, Picasso and Chagall; sculptures from Rodin and Moore; De Stijl landmarks by Mondrian; and pop art from Warhol and Lichtenstein. This is a temporary home – the original is undergoing renovation until 2008.

Just north of the Royal Palace, the late-Gothic basilica **Nieuwe Kerk** (New Church; ☎ 638 69 09; www.nieuwekerk.nl; Dam; admission adult/6-15 yr/under 6 €5/4/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Fri-Wed, to 10pm Thu) is the coronation church of Dutch royalty, with a carved oak chancel, a bronze choir screen, a massive, gilded organ and stained-glass windows. It’s now used for exhibitions and organ concerts.

Amsterdam’s oldest building, the **Oude Kerk** (Old Church; ☎ 625 82 84; www.oudekerk.nl; Oudekerksplein 23; adult/child €4/3.50; ☎ 11am-5pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun) was built to honour the city’s patron saint, St Nicholas. Inside there’s a dramatic Müller organ, gilded oak vaults and impressive stained-glass windows. In one of Europe’s great moral contradictions, the tower commands a magnificent view – of the Red Light District. Oooh, vicar...

The **Red Light District** (see the boxed text, p854) retains the power to bewilder, even if near-naked prostitutes propositioning passers-by from black-lit windows is the oldest Amsterdam cliché. If you feel a prick of desire, it’s around €50 for 20 minutes.

There are some mildly interesting artefacts at the **Sexmuseum Amsterdam** (☎ 622 83 76; Damrak 18; admission €2.50; ☎ 10am-11.30pm) – 14th-century Viennese erotica, for example. But with sensor-fitted plastic derrières farting at passers-by and an animatronic flasher accosting all-comers, it’s more like a tribute to Benny Hill. A sign warns, ‘You could be shocked’. Pull the other one.

The **Guan Yin Shrine** (Fo Guang Shan He Hua Temple; ☎ 420 23 57; www.ibps.nl; Zeedijk 106-118; admission free; ☎ noon-5pm Tue-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) is Europe’s first Chinese Imperial-style Buddhist temple (completed in 2000). It’s dedicated to Guan Yin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy. Images on the many-armed, long-eared statue include a prayer bell and a lotus flower.

AMSTERDAM IN TWO DAYS

Begin at the **Anne Frank Huis** (below), then scoot across town to the **Rijksmuseum** (below) and the **Van Gogh Museum** (p853). Dive into the **Albert Cuypmarkt** (p858), before coming up for air (and lunch) at **Bazar** (p855). In the afternoon, stop off for a smoke at **Siberië** (p856), then follow the conga line to the **Red Light District** (p854). When the dope’s worn off, order a *mojito* (rum-based cocktail) at **Café Cuba** (p856), before dining at the sumptuous **Blauw aan de Wal** (p855). On the second day, hire a **bike** (p859) and see where you end up – it’s all good, and well you know it.

Nieuwmarkt

The wonderfully restored **Museum Het Rembrandthuis** (Rembrandt House Museum; ☎ 520 04 00; www.rembrandthuis.nl; Jodenbreestraat 4; adult/student/6-15 yr/under 6 €7.50/6/1.50/free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) is where Rembrandt van Rijn ran the Netherlands’ largest painting studio, only to lose the lot when profligacy set in, enemies swooped, and bankruptcy came knocking. The museum has almost every etching he made (around 250) and holds daily etching demonstrations.

Canal Belt

The **Anne Frank Huis** (Anne Frank House; ☎ 556 71 00; www.annefrank.org; Prinsengracht 267; adult/child/under 10 €7.50/3.50/free; ☎ 9am-9pm Apr-Aug, to 7pm Sep-Mar), where Anne wrote her famous diary, lures almost a million visitors annually with its secret annexe, reconstruction of Anne’s melancholy bedroom, and her actual diary, with its sunnily optimistic writing tempered by quiet despair. Consider going in the early morning or evening when crowds are lightest.

FOAM (Fotografie Museum Amsterdam; ☎ 551 65 00; www.foam.nl; Keizersgracht 609; adult/student/senior/under 12 €6/5/5/free; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Wed, to 9pm Thu & Fri) is an impressive museum devoted to painting with light. Two storeys of changing exhibitions feature world-renowned photographers such as Sir Cecil Beaton, Annie Leibovitz and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Museumplein

To paraphrase Scharwzenegger, ‘Get your ass to Rijks’. **Rijksmuseum** (☎ 674 70 47; www.rijksmuseum.nl; Stadhouderskade 42; adult/under 19 €9/free;

WINDOW SHOPPING

You're not fooling anyone; you know you'll end up here. Everyone does at some stage, even if they think they're too hip, too prudish, too old...the curiosity value is just too strong. But it's not just rubberneckers and pleasure seekers who flock to the Red Light District: Amsterdam's approach to prostitution has generated reams of socioeconomic analysis, along with a raft of facts and figures – and some contradictions.

Prostitution was legalised in the Netherlands in 1815 (although brothels were only legalised in 2000). Unsurprisingly, less than 5% of Dutch prostitutes work illegally in the Netherlands. Dutch 'working girls' pay taxes and they have their own union. Pimping is against the law, but the girls are not on their own: their quarters are fitted with panic buttons in case of trouble. Should they press the button, it won't be the cops who come running.

An estimated 5% of Amsterdam prostitutes are born in the Netherlands, and there's around 1000 to 1200 working approximately 380 windows daily, in day, evening and night shifts. The girls must rent their window at a cost of between €40 and €100 per day, depending on location. Do the maths: the typical base cost for 'oral favours' or a 'quickie' is €30; the average base cost for both is €50. 'Encounters' typically last 20 minutes.

Dutch customers are most likely to visit on a Monday morning – that's when many businesses and most shops are closed. Of the international clientele, almost half are British – we don't dare speculate why.

What about the men? A few years back, three chaps installed themselves behind windows as prostitutes, a sociological experiment that generated feverish media coverage. In the end, the guys were warned not to give up their day job: no women took the bait. Rubbing salt into the wound, one of the female prostitutes even dismissed the whole incident as 'filthy'. Now, that's harsh.

funky, Middle Eastern-style décor, Aivengo is a winner. Party animals take very careful note: there's a 4am curfew.

Hans Brinker Budget Hotel (☎ 622 06 87; www.hans-brinker.com; Kerkstraat 136; dm from €21; 📺) There's a jacked-up 'Animal House' feel to the Brinker, with its bouncy bar and disco. Its website takes the art of self-mockery to uniquely Dutch extremes, offering Brinker wallpaper: 'Your home will soon have the unmistakable feeling of the Hans Brinker Budget Hotel,' it says, 'without the tangy smell, strange gargling noises, and the moaning'. Or is that the Black Tulip (opposite)?

Hotel Winston (☎ 623 13 80; www.winston.nl; Warmoesstraat 129; dm/s/d from €22/45/56) How to make a lot out of a little: take some functional rooms and get local artists to theme them with motifs including Arabian typography, jigsaw puzzles, and, fittingly for the Red Light location, bizarre sex. There's a jolly 24-hour bar and the Winston's own club (p856) next door.

Midrange

Hotel Quentin (☎ 626 21 87; www.quentinhotels.com; Leidsekaade 89; s/d from €45/60) This 19th-century mansion has a nice lobby and rooms done up in bright murals and handmade furni-

ture, although singles tend to be small and functional. If you're lucky you might get a balcony and a canal view.

Budget Hotel Clemens (☎ 624 60 89; www.demenshotel.com; Raadhuisstraat 39; s/€55, d/€70-110, tr/€125-150; 📺) The Clemens is a friendly place with eight warm, cosy rooms, some done up in creams and yellows, some in gold and red. Deluxe rooms have antique furniture and marble fireplaces, and all have minifridges. Rooms at the front, though on a noisy street, make up for it with balconies that overlook the Westermarkt.

Hotel Fantasia (☎ 623 82 59; www.fantasia-hotel.com; Nieuwe Keizersgracht 16; s/d €67/86; 📺) This one's perfect for moo-ching around. Pull the udder one. No, really – the owner grew up on a farm and has parlayed that into a workable obsession: this bovine-themed 18th-century house. Prints and cow motifs decorate the rooms and breakfast area, complementing the canalside location.

Lloyd Hotel (☎ 561 36 36; www.lloydhotel.com; Oostelijke Handelskade 34; d €80-300; 📺) The fabulous Lloyd is an enigma. It used to be a hotel for migrants back in the '20s, and it retains many of the original fixtures in among the contemporary flourishes. Rooms range from basic to plush.

Hotel Arena (☎ 850 24 00; www.hotelarena.nl; 's Gravesandestraat 51; d/tr from €100/165; 📺) The Arena, bordering lush Oosterpark, was once a chapel, an orphanage and a backpackers hostel. Now it's a chic 121-room hotel with a stylish restaurant, café and a well-regarded nightclub. Rooms are an ode to minimalism, while the large, split-level doubles are sun-drenched. Tip: sections A, B, E and F tend to be quieter.

Black Tulip Hotel (☎ 427 09 33; www.blacktulip.nl; Geldersekaade 16; s/€115, d from €145; 📺) Exclusively for gay chaps, the Black Tulip's nine rooms feature a full range of bondage equipment: slings, cages, hooks, chairs, black leather and latex. It's a professional and clean operation. All rooms have private facilities, fridge and minibar.

Top End

Amstel Intercontinental Hotel (☎ 622 60 60; www.amsterdam.intercontinental.com; Professor Tulpplein 1; r from €575; 📺 📺 📺) Everything about this five-star monument is simply spectacular, from its magnificent colonnaded lobby to its hefty room prices and its royal and rock-star clientele. It's a favourite of the Strolling Bones, and the lavishly decorated rooms overlook the Amstel, the river that (according to legend) Mick Jagger nearly fell into when Charlie Watts punched him out perilously close to a window.

EATING

Restaurants

Nieuw Albina (☎ 379 02 23; Albert Cuypstraat 49; mains €4.50-11.50; 📺 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) If you're curious about Surinamese food, try Nieuw Albina's bold and brassy flavours. The *moksi meti* (roast mixed meats over rice) is an undisputed highlight.

Bazar Amsterdam (☎ 675 05 44; www.bazaramsterdam.nl; Albert Cuypstraat 182; mains €8-14; 📺 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Like its Rotterdam counterpart, Bazar Amsterdam is a genuine high flyer. In a glorious former Dutch Reformed church, the light-filled, Middle Eastern-style décor and tangy, tantalising North African cuisine – mixed grills, kebabs, falafels, pitta bread, tabbouleh, Turkish pizza – sees to that.

De Bolhoed (☎ 626 18 03; Prinsengracht 60-62; mains €10-15) Amsterdam's best-known vegetarian restaurant has a prime canalside location. The food is fresh, organic, and often Mexican- and Italian-inspired: pan-

cakes, salads, burritos, homemade breads, biological wines, organic beers and cakes.

Mamouche (☎ 673 63 61; Quellijnstraat 104; mains €14.50-22; 📺 dinner Tue-Sun) 'Sexy' is a word that tends to get bandied about when people talk about Mamouche. The case for: the seriously good modern Moroccan food – think couscous, lamb and fish – and the serious minimalism of the décor, all exposed flooring, mottled walls and beamed ceilings. Reservations are essential.

Tempo Doeloe (☎ 625 67 18; www.tempodoeloe.restaurant.nl; Utrechtsestraat 75; mains €18-22; 📺 dinner) The name means 'The Old Days' (ring a bell to gain entry) and the spice levels range from mild to *very* hot. Yet all the subtle flavours remain intact. Extraordinary. It does a top-notch version of the classic rice table (see p849). Reservations are essential.

Blauw aan de Wal (☎ 330 22 57; Oudezijds Achterburgwal 99; mains €24-27; 📺 dinner) Tucked away in a little alley in the Red Light District, this charming 17th-century herb warehouse (complete with exposed brick and steel weights) is the setting for a French-Italian-inspired menu and a sumptuous wine list. The leafy courtyard backs onto a monastery.

Bordewijk (☎ 624 38 99; Noordermarkt 7; mains €24-29; set menus €37-52; 📺 dinner Tue-Sun) Locals love Bordewijk: they don't come for the sparse interior, but for the super French-Italian cooking. Apparently lamb's testicles were once on the menu, but sheepish customers needn't worry – vegetarians are willingly catered to.

Christophe (☎ 625 08 07; www.christophe.nl; Leliegracht 46; mains €31-53; 📺 dinner Tue-Sat) Jean Christophe's subtly swanky French restaurant lives up to its two Michelin stars with its lobster dishes, duck-liver terrine and an unusual elegance. The attentive service is also a cut above.

Cafés

Puccini (☎ 626 54 74; www.puccini.nl in Dutch; Staalstraat 21; mains €5.50-12.50; 📺 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Refuel on Italian *panini* rolls and salads with sun-dried ingredients; Puccini's handmade chocolate and cake shop next door induces rapture.

Foodism (☎ 427 51 03; www.foodism.nl; Oude Leliestraat 8; mains €6-10) A groovy little lounge. All-day breakfasts, healthy filled sandwiches and salads, wild and wicked pasta dishes.

Quick Eats

Vlaams Friteshuis (Voetboogstraat 31) The city's best-loved fries joint since 1887. Heed the words of Vincent Vega (*Pulp Fiction*): 'You know what they put on french fries in Holland? Mayonnaise. And I don't mean a little bit on the side – they fuckin' drown 'em in it.' True, but Vlaams offers an arsenal of alternatives, including green peppercorns.

DRINKING

Café Cuba (☎ 627 4919; Nieuwmarkt 3) This place maintains fidelity to Fidel, Che and '50s Cuba, with low lighting, indoor palms, faux faded elegance, rum posters, and cane chairs and tables. Try Papa Hemingway's favourite cocktail, the *caipirinha* (a Brazilian cocktail made with a rumlike liquor), and the ubiquitous *mojito* (a rum- and lime-based cocktail). The outdoor seating is perched right on Nieuwmarkt.

Hoppe (☎ 420 44 20; Spuistraat 18) This gritty *bruin café* has been luring drinkers for more than 300 years. It has one of Amsterdam's highest beer turnovers – some achievement in a city of hops freaks. In summer the energetic crowd spews out from the dark interior and onto the Spui.

Lime (☎ 639 30 20; Zeedijk 104) Lime is cool and hip but friendly and laid-back; you won't get the stink-eye in here. The décor comes on like a Stereolab album cover – all dots and loops and browns and oranges – and the cocktails are superb.

Absinthe (☎ 320 6780; www.absinthe.nl; Nieuwe zijds Voorburgwal 171) This place is devoted to the brain-lesioning liquor reputed to be the cause of Van Gogh's self-mutilation. There is multiethnic décor with rather awkward seating arrangements, and the staff can teach you all about the signature drink. You will leave with ears intact – it's not as potent as it was in the old days.

Proeflokaal Wijnand Fockinck (☎ 639 26 95; www.wynand-fockinck.nl in Dutch; Pijlsteeg 31) This fantastic little tasting house, dating from 1679, serves scores of *jenever*s and liqueurs made on-site. There's an appealing courtyard for lunch and snacks.

ENTERTAINMENT

Coffee Shops

'Café' means 'pub' throughout the Netherlands; 'coffee shops' are where one procures cannabis.

Siberië (☎ 623 59 09; Brouwersgracht 111) With a lounge-room feel, canal views and ultra-casual atmosphere, this is an addictive place that draws smokers of all ages for the friendly staff, the wicked weed, and the chance to play stoner chess with total strangers. 'Queen takes Bish...that castle thing. Ah, forget it. I resign.'

Barney's (☎ 625 97 61; www.barneys.biz; Haarlemmerstraat 98 & 102) The very popular Barney's, with its trippy biomechanical décor, has beloved all-day breakfasts as well as quality smoke (100% organic).

Nightclubs

Jimmy Woo (☎ 626 31 50; www.jimmywoo.nl; Korte Leidsedwarsstraat 18) With its uberstylish, black-lacquered, Oriental décor, Jimmy Woo is as hip as the bony projection of a femur. Plus it has a big focus on hip-hop and extracting cash from hip pockets. It's exclusive (no hippies allowed) so good luck getting in; try going with some Dutchies for best results.

Sinners in Heaven (☎ 620 13 75; www.sinners.nl; Wagenstraat 3-7) Along with Jimmy Woo, jet-set, celebrity-riddled Sinners heads the A-list of Amsterdam clubs. It serves up hip-hop, funk, beats and breaks and it's possibly harder than Woo to get into: there's always a 'guest list', and by all accounts the door bitch has quite the acid tongue. Try sleeping with a famous footballer for best results.

Winston International (☎ 623 13 80; www.winston.nl; Warmoesstraat 125) Next to the Hotel Winston (p854), it has everything from electronica to spoken word to punk to graffiti art. On Sundays there's Club Vegas, where the dress code is 'jet set' (sequins, suits, stilettos, bow ties, tiaras) and the music is lounge. Kooky fun.

To Night (☎ 694 74 44; www.hotelarena.nl; 's-Gravenlandestraat 51) Each night here is different – everything from dance classics to salsa. It's worth a visit just for the magnificent interior; the chapel of this one-time orphanage has been given a solid redo, including the toilets. It's at the Hotel Arena.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

COC Amsterdam (☎ 623 40 79; www.cocamsterdam.nl; Rozenstraat 14) The Amsterdam branch of the national gay and lesbian organisation holds a variety of gay, lesbian and mixed club nights every weekend and supplies infor-

mation on gay health, local support groups, special events and programmes. It's pronounced 'say-oh-say', by the way, not...

Cockring (☎ 623 96 04; www.clubcockring.com; Warmoesstraat 96) No mistaking the pronunciation, here. The 'Ring plays techno and trance downstairs, while upstairs is for cruising leather boys. Live strip shows and 'shoes only' nude parties sometimes get an airing, as does a lot of flesh.

Saarein (☎ 623 49 01; Elandsstraat 119) During the late '70s Saarein was the focal point of the Dutch feminist movement, and today it's a favoured meeting place for lesbians. There's a small menu with tapas and soups and bar staff can advise on Sapphic nightlife.

Live Music

CLASSICAL & CONTEMPORARY

Concertgebouw (Concert Bldg; ☎ for tickets 10am-5pm 671 83 45; www.concertgebouw.nl; Concertgebouwplein 2-6) Each year, this neo-Renaissance centre presents around 650 concerts attracting 840,000 visitors, making it the world's busiest concert hall (with reputedly the best acoustics). Classical musos consider the Concertgebouw a very prestigious gig indeed, as do some rock bands with classical pretensions (like King Crimson). Holds free 'lunch concerts' at 12.30pm Wednesdays, between September and June.

JAZZ

Bimhuis (☎ 788 21 50; www.bimhuis.nl; Piet Heinkade 3) The Bimhuis is Amsterdam's number-one jazz joint, attracting local and international jazz greats and holding workshops to boot. It is now in the high-profile Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ complex, and the new space has a great bar and huge windows overlooking the city.

ROCK & POP

Paradiso (☎ 626 45 21; www.paradiso.nl in Dutch; Weteringschans 6) This converted church has long been a premier rock venue since the '60s, hosting big names such as Sonic Youth, David Bowie and the Rolling Stones. Also holds dance evenings like Paradisco; there's indie and hip-hop, too.

Melkweg (Milky Way; ☎ 531 81 81; www.melkweg.nl; Lijnbaansgracht 234A) This former milk factory off Leidseplein has been a top cultural venue since the 1970s. It's an all-in-one entertainment complex with a café, a multi-

media centre and top live music almost every night (everything from Afro-Celtic to thrash), plus a nightclub, a cinema, lounges, art galleries...

Theatre

Amsterdams Marionetten Theater (☎ 620 80 27; www.marionet.demon.nl; Nieuwe Jonkerstraat 8; adult/child from €12/6) In a former blacksmith's shop, this charming, intimate theatre features marionettes performing elaborate productions such as *The Magic Flute*. The skill of the puppeteers is something to see. Call or check the website for show times.

Nachttheater Sugar Factory (☎ 626 50 06; www.sugarfactory.nl; Lijnbaansgracht 238) This 'night theatre' showcases theatre, spoken word, exhibitions, poetry readings and live music, after which the space clears and it becomes a bangin' nightclub.

Koninklijk Theater Carré (☎ 0900-252 52 55; backstage tours 524 94 52; www.theatercarre.nl in Dutch; Amstel 115-125) The largest theatre in town offers mainstream international shows, musicals, cabaret, opera, operetta, ballet and circuses. Backstage tours (adult/child €8/4, 11am Saturday) are also available by reservation.

Boom Chicago (☎ 423 01 01; www.boomchicago.nl; Leidseplein 12) Performing English-language stand-up and improvised comedy year-round. See it over dinner and a few drinks – the food here's decent.

Sport

Four-times European champion Ajax is the Netherlands' most famous football team. Ajax plays in the **Amsterdam Arena** (☎ 311 13 33; www.amsterdamarena.nl; Arena Blvd 11, Bijlmermeer), usually on Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons August to May. Stadium tours are available.

Cinemas

Find out what's on in Thursday's papers or Wednesday's *Amsterdam Weekly*.

Movies (☎ 638 60 16; www.themovies.nl; Haarlemmerdijk 161) Art-house and indie films in Art Deco surrounds.

Tuschinskithheater (☎ 623 15 00; www.pathe.nl/tuschinski; Reguliersbreestraat 26) Blockbusters in a sumptuous Art Deco interior.

Filmmuseum (☎ 589 14 00; www.filmmuseum.nl; Vondelpark 3) Priceless archive of films; summer screenings on the outdoor terrace.

SHOPPING

Department Stores

Maison de Bonneterie (☎ 531 34 00; www.maisondebbonneterie.nl in Dutch; Rokin 140) Exclusive, classic garments.

Vroom & Dreesmann (☎ 622 01 71; www.vroomendreesmann.nl in Dutch; Kalverstraat 201) Popular clothing and cosmetics.

Markets

Albert Cuypmarkt (www.decuyp.nl; Albert Cuypstraat; ☎ 10am-5pm, closed Sun) Amsterdam's largest, busiest market – it's 100 years old. Food of every description, flowers, souvenirs, clothing, hardware and household goods.

Bloemenmarkt (Singel; ☎ 9am-5pm, closed Sun Dec-Feb) 'Floating' flower market that's actually on pilings. Traders can advise on import regulations. Notorious for pickpockets.

Boerenmarkt (Farmers Market; www.boerenmarkt.amsterdam.nl in Dutch; Noordermarkt & Nieuwmarkt; ☎ 10am-3pm Sat) Home-grown produce, organic foods and picnic provisions.

De Looier Antiques Market (www.looier.nl in Dutch; Elandsgracht 109; ☎ 11am-5pm Sat-Thu) Jewellery, furniture, art and collectibles.

Waterlooplein Flea Market (Waterlooplein; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-5.30pm Sat) Amsterdam's most famous fleas market: curios, second-hand clothing, music, used footwear, ageing electronic gear, New Age gifts, cheap bicycle parts.

Smart Drugs

Remember that importing drugs is illegal.

Chills & Thrills (☎ 638 00 15; Nieuwendijk 17; ☎ noon-8pm Mon-Wed, 11am-9pm Thu, to 10pm Fri-Sun) Herbal trips, mushrooms, psychoactive cacti, novelty bonges and life-sized alien sculptures.

Speciality Shops

Condomerie Het Gulden Vlies (☎ 627 41 74; www.condomerie.nl; Warmoesstraat 141) Hundreds of novelty condoms, lubricants and saucy gifts. So, three cheers for your willy or John Thomas; hooray for your one-eyed trouser snake.

Santa Jet (☎ 427 20 70; Prinsenstraat 7) Mexican shrines, religious icons, lanterns, candles, love potions.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Most major airlines fly directly to **Schiphol** (AMS; ☎ 0900-0141; www.schiphol.nl), 18km southwest of the city centre. For more in-

formation about getting to and from the Netherlands, including Amsterdam airline offices, see p882.

Bus

For details of regional buses in the Netherlands, call the **transport information service** (☎ 0900-9292); it costs €0.50 per minute. Fares and travel durations are covered under towns in the regional sections.

Amsterdam has good long-distance bus links with the rest of Europe and North Africa.

Eurolines (☎ 560 87 87; www.eurolines.nl; Rokin 10) tickets can be bought at their office near the Dam, and at most travel agencies and NS Reisburo (Netherlands Railways Travel Bureau) in Centraal Station. Fares are consistently lower than the train, and departures are from the **bus station** (☎ 694 56 31) next to Amstelstation.

Busabout tickets can be bought through its **London office** (☎ in UK 020-7950 1661; www.busabout.com) or on the coaches themselves. Coaches stop at Hotel Hans Brinker on Kerkstraat, smack in the middle of the city.

For further details on Busabout, Euro-lines and other coach services, see p1117.

Car & Motorcycle

Motorways link Amsterdam to Den Haag and Rotterdam in the south, and to Utrecht and Amersfoort in the southeast. Amsterdam is about 480km from Paris, 840km from Munich, 680km from Berlin and 730km from Copenhagen. The Hoek van Holland ferry port is 80km away; IJmuiden is just up the road along the Noordzeekanaal.

The Dutch automobile association, **ANWB** (☎ 673 08 44; Museumplein 5), provides information and services if you prove membership of your own association.

Train

Amsterdam's main train station is Centraal Station (CS). See p882 for general information about international trains.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

A taxi into Amsterdam from Schiphol airport takes 20 to 45 minutes and costs about €40. Trains to Centraal Station leave every 15 minutes, take 15 to 20 minutes, and cost €3.60/6.20 per single/return.

Bicycle

Amsterdam is cycling nirvana: flat, beautiful, with dedicated bike paths. About 150,000 bicycles are stolen each year in Amsterdam alone, so always lock up. The Dutch automobile association, **ANWB** (☎ 673 08 44; Museumplein 5), provides cycling maps and information.

For bicycle rental, try **Bike City** (☎ 626 37 21; www.bikecity.nl; Bloemgracht 68-70; per day/week €8.50/41) where there's no advertising on the bikes – you might pass for a local – or **Mike's Bike Tours** (☎ 622 79 70; www.mikesbike.tours.com; Kerkstraat 134; per half-/full/additional day €5/7/5). Both companies require a passport/ID and a credit-card imprint or cash deposit.

Boat

CANAL BOAT, BUS & BIKE

Canal Bus (☎ 623 98 86; www.canalbus.nl; day pass per adult/under 13 €17/11) does several circuits between Centraal Station and the Rijksmuseum between 9.50am and 8pm. The day pass is valid until noon the next day. The same company rents canal bikes (pedal boats) for €9 per person per hour (€7 if there are more than two people per canal bike). Docks are by Leidseplein and near the Anne Frank Huis.

Lovers Museum Boat (☎ 622 21 81; www.lovers.nl; day pass from €8.50) leaves every 30 or 45 minutes from the Lovers terminal in front of Centraal Station. Discounts after 1pm.

If you blanch at the thought of the foggy windows and stale commentary of the big glassed-in canal boats, do yourself a favour and try the not-for-profit **St Nicolaas Boat Club** (☎ 423 01 01; www.petermoskos.com/boat; Boom Chicago, Leidseplein 12; donation €10), which takes small, old barges out onto the canals. Patrons are allowed to smoke dope and drink beer on board, while the captains amuse with stories about alternative Amsterdam. Departure times are according to numbers. They'll definitely show you a different side of the city, everything from the famous Mohawk Duck to the thinnest house in town.

FERRIES

There are free ferries from behind Centraal Station to destinations around the IJ, notably Amsterdam Noord. Ferries to the Eastern Docklands cost €1.

Car & Motorcycle

Amsterdam is horrendous for parking. Try the **Transferium parking garage** (☎ 400 17 21) at Amsterdam ArenA stadium. It's €5.50 per day including two return metro tickets to the city centre.

Public Transport

The best ticketing deal is the *Strippenkaart*, a multifare 'strip ticket' valid on all buses, trams and metros (p883). The GVB office also sells a one-week pass valid in all zones for €17. If you board without a ticket, the driver sells one-/two-/three-zone tickets. Ticketing is based on zones.

Night buses take over shortly after midnight when the trams and regular buses stop running. Drivers sell single tickets for €3.20. Day passes are valid on night buses but the surcharge still applies.

Taxi

Amsterdam taxis are expensive, even over short journeys. Try **Taxicentrale Amsterdam** (☎ 677 77 77).

AROUND AMSTERDAM

Aalsmeer

☎ 0297

Here, at the world's biggest **flower auction** (☎ 39 21 85; www.aalsmeer.com; Legmeerdijk 313; adult/child €4.50/2.50; ☎ 7-11am Mon-Fri), 21 million flowers and plants worth around €6 million change hands daily; the rose is the biggest seller, outselling the tulip three to one. At one million square metres in size, the auction arena is the world's largest commercial building. Bidding usually takes place between 7am and 9.30am.

Take Connexion bus No 172 from Amsterdam Centraal Station to the Aalsmeer VBA stop (50 minutes, five times hourly).

Alkmaar

☎ 072 / pop 94,111

This picturesque town stages its famous **cheese market** (Waagplein; ☎ 10am-noon Fri Apr-Sep) in the main square. The market dates from the 17th century. Dealers in officious white smocks insert a hollow rod to extract cheese samples, sniffing and crumbling for fat and moisture content. Then the porters, wearing colourful hats to signify their cheese guild, heft the cheeses on wooden sledges to a large scale. An average 30,000kg of cheese

is on display at the Alkmaar market at any one time.

Arrive early for more than fleeting glimpses. There are two trains per hour from Amsterdam Centraal (€6.30, 40 minutes, four hourly).

THE RANDSTAD

The Randstad (literally 'Rim City') is the Netherlands' most densely populated region (and among the world's densest), containing almost half the country's population. It stretches from Amsterdam to Rotterdam and also includes Den Haag, Utrecht, Haarlem, Leiden, Delft, Gouda and Dordrecht.

HAARLEM

☎ 023 / pop 148,000

Everybody loves Haarlem, an achingly pretty, refined city of cobblestone streets, historic buildings, grand churches and museums, cosy bars, superb restaurants and antique shops. It's only 15 minutes by train from Amsterdam, but if you tire of the capital it's well worth a stopover in its own right.

The **library** (☎ 515 76 00; Doelenplein 1; ☎ 11am-8pm Mon, Tue & Thu, 10am-4pm Sat) offers free Internet and the **tourist office** (☎ 0900-616 16 00; www.vwz.nl; Stationsplein 1; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat Apr-Oct, 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat Nov-Mar) is helpful.

Sights

Kept in an almshouse where Frans Hals spent his final, impoverished years, the superb collection at the **Frans Hals Museum** (☎ 511 57 75; www.franshalsmuseum.nl; Groot Heiligland 62; adult/child €7/free; ☎ 11am-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) features Hals' two paintings known collectively as the *Regents & the Regentesses of the Old Men's Alms House* (1664). Among other treasures are ceiling-high illustrations of the human anatomy with Biblical and mythological allusions. There's an annexe featuring modern art, including works by the CoBrA movement.

Teylers Museum (☎ 531 90 10; Spaarne 16; adult/child €4.50/1; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) is the Netherlands' oldest museum (1778) and houses an array of kooky inventions such as the 18th-century electrostatic machine that ran on batteries the size of a milk wagon.

This eclectic collection also features paintings from the Dutch and French schools and numerous temporary exhibitions, in addition to fossils, ancient relics and mineral crystals.

The **Grote Kerk van St Bavo** (☎ 553 20 40; www.grotekerk.nl; Oude Groenmarkt 23; adult/child €2/1.50; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) is a Gothic cathedral with a 50m-high steeple that can be seen from almost anywhere in Haarlem. It has a striking Müller organ, 30m high with around 5000 pipes.

Sleeping

Haarlem Stayokay Hostel (☎ 537 37 93; haarlem@stayokay.com; Jan Gijzenpad 3; dm €27; ☎) This lakeside youth hostel has a 10pm silence rule but no curfew. The superclean rooms are basic, but the bar-café is full of character. Take bus No 2 (direction Haarlem Noord) from the train station (10 minutes).

Hotel Carillon (☎ 531 05 91; www.hotelcarillon.com; Grote Markt 27; s/d from €38/63) The single beds may be the thinnest in all the Netherlands, but the atmosphere is fine, friendly and fun. There's a bar-sidewalk café downstairs in the Grote Kerk's shadow.

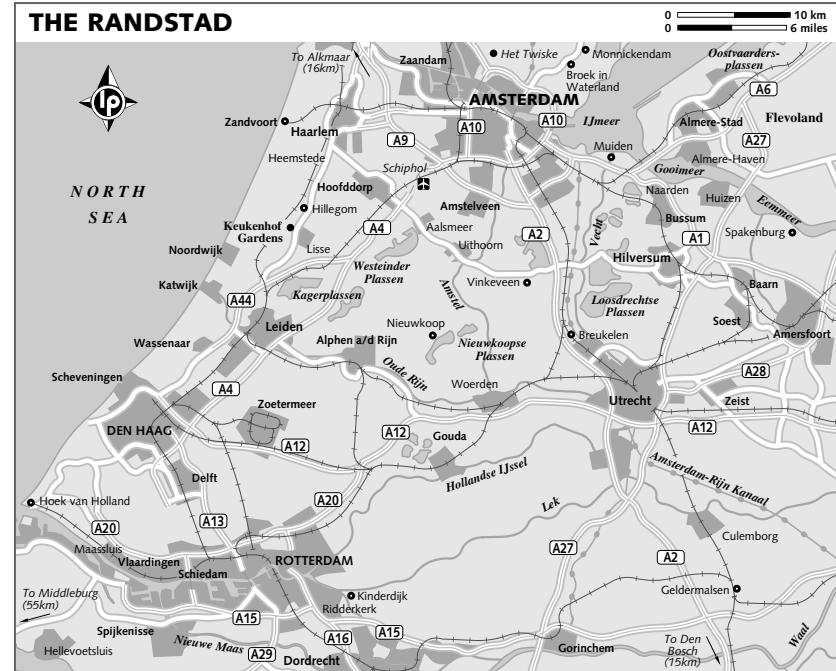
Joops Hotel (☎ 532 20 08; www.joopshotel.com; Oude Groenmarkt 20; r/studio from €85/85; ☎) More than 100 very individual rooms spread over an entire block near the Grote Kerk; studios have kitchenettes. Reception is on the ground floor of the Belly & Bolly antique shop, run by a couple of friendly chaps.

Eating & Drinking

Eko Eetkafé (☎ 532 65 68; Zijlstraat 39; mains €8-18) This organic restaurant attracts a diverse crowd: singletons, suits, grannies, groovers. The menu is also eclectic (and tasty): fish and vegetarian dishes with a clear conscience. It's a short walk from the town centre but worth it.

Spektakel (☎ 532 38 41; Spekstraat 4; mains €18; ☎ dinner) This long and thin diner is vying for UN membership, judging by its global menu that includes Australian emu fillet and Indian lamb masala. There's streetside seating for sunny days.

Try Jopen Koyt, the local beer, in one of Haarlem's many atmospheric drinking dens. First brewed in 1401, this dark, richly flavoured drop has an alcohol content of 8.5%.



Entertainment

Patronaat (☎ 517 58 58; www.patronaat.nl in Dutch; Zijlsingel 2) This cavernous music and dance club attracts bands with banging tunes. Events start around 7pm or 9pm unless it's a midnight rave.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Alkmaar (€5.70, 30 minutes, four per hour), Amsterdam (€3.60, 15 minutes, eight per hour), Den Haag (€7, 35 minutes, six per hour) and Rotterdam (€10.10, 50 minutes, four per hour).

KEUKENHOF GARDENS

Near Lisse, between Haarlem and Leiden, a beautiful enigma unfurls for just two months each year: the blooming of millions of multicoloured tulip, daffodil and hyacinth bulbs at the **Keukenhof Gardens** (www.keukenhof.nl; adult/under 11 €12.50/5.50; ☎ 8am-7.30pm late Mar-May, cashier to 6pm).

Netherlands Railways sells a ticket (adult/under 11 €17/9) that combines entrance to the gardens and travel by express bus from Leiden CS (20 minutes).

Bus No 54 travels from Leiden through Lisse to Keukenhof. Bus No 50 travels from Haarlem to Lisse, from where you can meet bus No 54.

LEIDEN

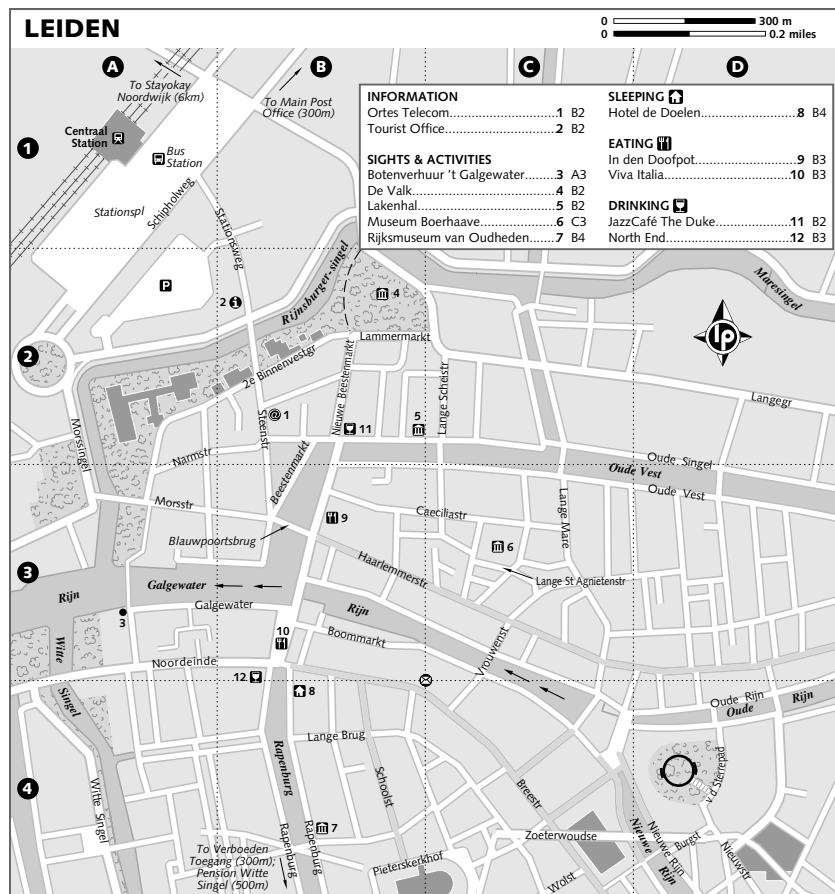
☎ 071 / pop 118,500

Lovely Leiden is a refreshing, vibrant town, patterned with canals and attractive old buildings. It also has a few claims to fame: it's Rembrandt's birthplace, and it's home to the Netherlands' oldest university (and 20,000 students), the alma mater of Rene Descartes.

Get online at **Ortes Telecom** (Internet per hr €3). The **tourist office** (☎ 0900-222 23 33; www.leidenpromotie.nl; Stationsweg 2D; ☎ 11am-5.30pm Mon, 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4.30pm Sat) will help you.

Sights & Activities

The 17th-century **Lakenhal** (Cloth Hall; ☎ 516 53 60; www.lakenhal.nl; Oude Singel 28-32; adult/under 18 €4/free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) houses the Municipal Museum, with an assortment of works by old masters (including a smattering of



Rembrandts) as well as period rooms and temporary exhibits.

The **Rijksmuseum van Oudheden** (National Museum of Antiquities; ☎ 516 31 63; www.rmo.nl; Rapenburg 28; adult/under 18 €7.50/5.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, noon-5pm Sat & Sun) has a classy collection of hieroglyphs – and 94 human and animal mummies. The entrance hall contains the actual Temple of Taffeh, a gift from Egypt for Dutch help in saving ancient monuments when the Aswan High Dam was built.

Leiden's carefully restored windmill, **De Valk** (Falcon; ☎ 516 53 53; http://home.wanadoo.nl/molennuseum; 2e Binnenvestgracht 1; adult/under 15 €3/2; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1-5pm Sun), features many presentations, including one that laments

the fact that local boy Rembrandt, as a miller's son, didn't paint many windmills. The upper levels afford an inspired view of the old town.

Leiden University was an early centre for Dutch medical research, and the **Museum Boerhaave** (National Museum of the History of Science & Medicine; ☎ 521 42 24; www.museumboerhaave.nl; Lange St Agnietenstraat 10; adult/under 19 €6/3; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) gathers together five centuries of pickled organs, surgical tools and skeletons in its Anatomy Theatre (it's morbid, but just try to look away).

Rent a canoe or kayak from **Botenverhuur 't Galgewater** (☎ 514 97 90; www.galgewater.nl; per hr €5; ☎ 11am-6pm Oct-May, to 10pm Jun-Sep) and explore the canals.

Sleeping

Stayokay Noordwijk (☎ 0252-37 29 20; www.stayokay.com/noordwijk; Langeveldeerlaan 45; dm from €20) The hostel is 45 minutes away, next to a popular beach. Take bus No 57 or 90 (last bus at 11pm) to Sancta Maria hospital and walk for 10 minutes.

Pension Witte Singel (☎ 512 45 92; www.pension-ws.demon.nl; Witte Singel 80; d €76, s/d with shared bathroom €41/62) Fresh, spacious rooms with large windows overlooking most agreeable scenery: the perfectly peaceful Singel canal in front and a typically Dutch garden out back.

Hotel de Doelen (☎ 512 05 27; www.dedoelen.com; Rapenburg 2; s/d from €75/95) Some of the Doelen's canal-side rooms border on palatial opulence with all the trimmings, and even the more basic options have bath, phone and TV. Rooms come in three flavours: basic, standard and suite.

Eating & Drinking

In Den Doofpot (☎ 512 24 34; www.indendoofpot.nl in Dutch; Turfmarkt 9; mains €12-45; ☎ dinner) The interior is regal and airy, a sensuous setting for the menu's filling, French-tinged twists on Dutch cooking.

Verboden Toegang (☎ 514 33 88; www.verbodentoeegang.nl in Dutch; Kaiserstraat 7; mains €13-20; ☎ dinner) This casual, elegant, wood-panelled restaurant doesn't take itself too seriously (the name means 'access forbidden'). The grub's top-notch with an emphasis on seafood, as the butterfish in white wine attests.

Viva Italia (☎ 514 88 18; Kort Rapenburg 17; mains €16-20) This classy and fine Italian joint, with its luxurious décor (including white-leather couches, no less) and fine service, dishes up upmarket victuals such as veal with rolled-in Parma ham and basil pesto.

Jazzcafé the Duke (☎ 566 15 85; www.jazzcafeduke.nl in Dutch; Oude Singel 2) No windows, but loads of yellowing, vintage jazz posters on the walls. The motto is, 'If we don't have it, you don't need it'. It's true: you don't need windows to enjoy this atmospheric den, with its fine live jazz every night and suitably appreciative crowds.

North End (☎ 512 1541; www.north-end.nl; 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, but a wel-

come selection of booze all the same) and patented 'beer strippenkaart'.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€7.50, 34 minutes, six per hour) and Den Haag (€2.80, 10 minutes, six per hour). Regional and local buses leave from the bus station directly in front of Centraal Station.

DEN HAAG

☎ 070 / pop 472,100

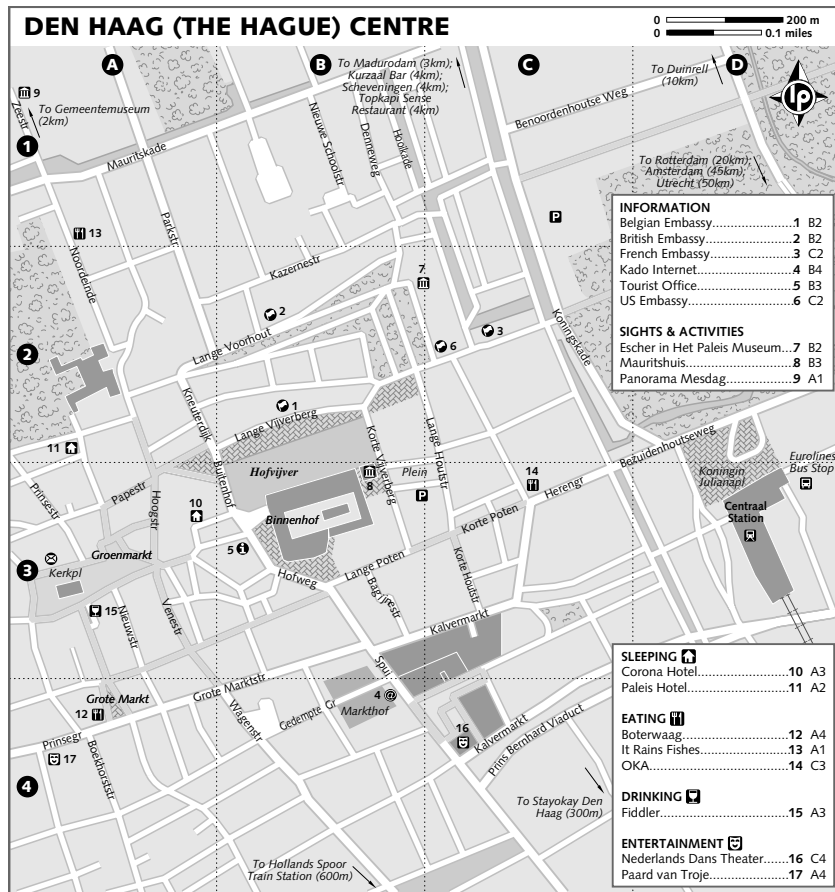
Den Haag (The Hague), officially known as 's-Gravenhage (Count's Hedge), is the Dutch seat of government (although Amsterdam's the capital). Also home to the royal family, it's a stately, regal place that's filled with palatial embassies and mansions, green boulevards and parks, prestigious art galleries, a mouth-watering culinary scene, a clutch of tasty museums, and some throbbing nightlife. Plus it's attached to the seaside suburb of Scheveningen, worth a visit for its lively kitsch and long stretch of beach.

Surf the Web at **Kado Internet** (Spui 165; per hr €2.75). Ask the **tourist office** (☎ 0900-340 35 05; www.denhaag.com; Hofweg 1; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat, noon-5pm Sun) for advice.

Sights & Activities

The **Mauritshuis** (☎ 302 34 56; www.mauritshuis.nl; Korte Vijverberg 8; adult/under 18 incl audio tour €11.50/free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) is a small but grand museum, housing Dutch and Flemish works (and Andy Warhol's *Queen Beatrix*). Highlights include Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and Rembrandt self-portraits at ages 20 and 63. Even if you're just passing Den Haag on the train, it's well worth hopping off to visit.

The Lange Voorhout Palace was once Queen Emma's residence. Now it's home to the work of Dutch graphic artist MC Escher. **Escher in Het Paleis Museum** (☎ 338 11 20; www.escherinhetpaleis.nl; Lange Voorhout; adult/under 15 €7.50/5; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) features notes, letters, drafts, photos and fully mature works covering Escher's entire career, from early realism to later phantasmagoria. There are some imaginative displays, including a virtual reconstruction of Escher's impossible buildings and 4D spatial dynamics, and an optical illusion photo booth, where you can take a picture of yourself that will look as if you're inside an Escher drawing.



Admirers of De Stijl and Piet Mondrian mustn't miss the Berlage-designed **Gemeentemuseum** (Municipal Museum; ☎ 338 11 20; Stadhouderslaan 41; www.gemeentemuseum.nl; adult/under 18 €8/free; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sat). It also houses extensive exhibits of applied arts, costumes and musical instruments. Mondrian's unfinished *Victory Boogie Woogie* takes pride of place (so it should; the museum paid €30 million for it). There are also a few Picassos and some Eschers.

The **Panorama Mesdag** (☎ 364 45 44; www.panorama-mesdag.nl; Zeestraat 65; adult/under 13 €5/2.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun & holidays) contains the *Panorama* (1881), a gigantic 360-degree painting of Scheveningen, painted by Hendrik Willem Mesdag. The panorama is

viewed from a constructed dune, with real sand and beach chairs; birdsong and wave sounds are piped through. Mesdag's command of perspective and minute detail was masterly: it's a fully immersive experience.

Madurodam (☎ 355 39 00; www.madurodam.nl; George Maduroplein 1; adult/under 11 €12.50/9; ☎ 9am-8pm) is a miniaturised Netherlands, complete with 1:25 scale versions of Schiphol, Amsterdam, windmills and tulips, Rotterdam harbour, the Delta dikes, and so on. It's an enlightening example of the Dutch tendency to put their world under a microscope (see the boxed text, p847).

The long beach at **Scheveningen** (www.scheveningen.nl) attracts nine million visitors per year. Crowds can get up close and per-

sonal when the weather gets warm and the shopping strip gets crassly commercial, but the attraction of sea and sand keeps the peace. A palpable frisson of frivolity sweetens the air.

Walk northwest along the beach and you'll come across a series of WWII bunkers, part of the Nazi Atlantic Wall defence system and an eerie reminder of the Netherlands' place in European history.

Sleeping

Stayokay Den Haag (☎ 315 78 88; www.stayokay.com/den Haag; Scheepmakerstraat 27; dm from €21) This branch of the Stayokay hostel chain has all the usual facilities including a bar, a restaurant, Internet and games. It's around 15 minutes' walk from Hollands Spoor station.

Corona Hotel (☎ 363 79 30; www.corona.nl; Buitenhof 39-42; r from €74) This pleasant hotel is across the way from the Binnenhof and has all the usual facilities and amenities, plus super comfy rooms that come in a range of un-Dutchlike styles including 'Colonial English'.

Paleis Hotel (☎ 362 46 21; www.paleishotel.nl; Molenaarstraat 26; s/d €135/175; ☎) The Paleis has an austere style, a fine, central location near Noordeinde, and a solarium. The rooms are well equipped and very comfortable.

Eating & Drinking

Topkapi Sense Restaurant (☎ 358 53 50; www.topkapi-scheveningen.nl; Gevers Deynootplein 36, Scheveningen; mains €11-22) An 'Ottoman' restaurant with cuisine from Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Morocco... The couscous with sea bass is a winner, as is the baked, stuffed zucchini. Ruby red drapes and beads combine with low lighting to create a suitable atmosphere, although the guy in the corner playing cheery tunes on his synthetic organ tempts it.

It Rains Fishes (☎ 365 25 98; www.itrainfishes.nl in Dutch; Noordeinde 123; mains €13-24) It's the 'restaurant on the sunny side of the street', a multiaward-winning seafood concern serving grilled, fried and poached fish, mussels and scallops.

OKA (☎ 392 01 33; Herengracht 2-6; mains €15-30; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This swish, authentic Japanese restaurant serves up delectable sushi and *teppanyaki* (Japanese meat and vegetable dish cooked in an iron griddle). The hostess, Ms JoJo Phang, is a bit of a per-

sonality – she says she can arrange on-site bachelor parties, ironing out all the details in a 'private talk tailored to that evening's party boy'.

Boterwaag (☎ 365 96 86; www.september.nl in Dutch; Grote Markt 8a) This old weighhouse serves as a café-restaurant and provides a distinctive drinking and eating experience with its high ceilings, large windows, candle fetish, nooks and crannies to hide out in, and great beer list. When we were here, a kooky Dutch kid was riding around inside on a unicycle and no-one batted an eyelid.

Kurzaal Bar (☎ 416 26 36; Kurhaus Hotel, Gevers Deynootplein 30) Even if you're not staying at the plush, 19th-century Kurhaus Hotel, it's worth popping in for a drink at its bar (but wear your best shoes). The Kurzaal's on the edge of a stunning dancehall-restaurant with period trimmings, painted ceiling, frescoes, chandeliers, huge potted plants, port-holes, artworks, photos of Jacques Brel, Bing Crosby, etc. The Rolling Stones played their shortest ever concert here (just three minutes) before rioting teenage girls ended it.

Fiddler (☎ 365 19 55; Riviervismarkt 1; www.fiddler.nl) This large, split-level, wood-panelled English microbrewery always has a decent crowd snacking on the OK pub food and the Fiddler's own beers: an ale, a pale ale and a stout. In the end, it's probably a bit too cavernous – intimacy's hard to come by. Good location: in the eye of the Grote Kerck.

Entertainment

Nederlands Dans Theater (☎ 880 01 00; www.ndt.nl; Schedeldoekshaven 60) This world-famous dance company has three components: NDT1, the main troupe of 32 dancers; NDT2, a small group of 12 dancers under 21; and NDT3, a group of dancers over 40 who perform more dramatic works.

Paard van Troje (☎ 750 34 34; www.paard.nl; Prinsegracht 12) This emporium has club nights and live music, as well as a café. The programming's eclectic: everything from booty-shaking drum'n'bass DJs to bowel-destroying sonic terrorists the Hafler Trio.

Getting There & Around

Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€9.50, 50 minutes, four per hour), Leiden (€2.80, 13 minutes, four per hour), Rotterdam (€4.10, 22 minutes, four per hour) and Utrecht

(€9.10, 40 minutes). Tram Nos 1, 8 and 9 link Scheveningen with Den Haag; the fare is three strips. The last tram at night runs in either direction at about 1.30am. There's a tram to Delft.

DELFT

☎ 015 / pop 96,100

Ah, lovely Delft: compact, charming, relaxed. Founded around 1100, it's a very popular tourist destination. Day-trippers – and lovers of beauty and refinement – clamour to stroll Delft's narrow, canal-lined streets, gazing at the remarkable old buildings and meditating on the life and career of Golden Age painter Jan Vermeer, who was born and lived here. (*View of Delft*, one of Vermeer's best-loved works, is an enigmatic, nonrealist vision of the town.) Delft is also famous for its 'delftware', the distinctive blue-and-white pottery originally duplicated from Chinese porcelain by 17th-century artisans.

The **tourist office** (☎ 0900-515 15 55; www.delft.nl; Hippolytusbuurt 4; ☎ 11am-4pm Mon, 10am-4pm Tue-Fri, to 5pm Sat, to 4pm Sun) has free Internet.

Sights & Activities

The 14th-century **Nieuwe Kerk** (☎ 212 30 25; www.nieuwekerk-delft.nl; Markt; adult/child €3/1.50; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, 11am-4pm Nov-Apr, closed Sun) houses the crypt of the Dutch royal family and the mausoleum of Willem the Silent. The fee includes entrance to the **Oude Kerk** (☎ 212 30 15; www.oudekerk-delft.nl; Heilige Geestkerkhof; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, 11am-4pm Nov-Mar, closed Sun) – and vice versa. The latter, 800 years old, is a surreal sight: its tower leans 2m from the vertical. Among the tombs inside is Vermeer's.

Municipal Museum Het Prinsenhof (☎ 260 23 58; www.prinsenhof-delft.nl in Dutch; St Agathaplein 1; adult/under 16 €5/4; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1-5pm Sun), a former convent, is where Willem the Silent was assassinated in 1584 (the bullet hole in the wall is covered in Perspex to protect it against inquisitive visitors). The museum displays various objects telling the story of the 80-year war with Spain, as well as 17th-century paintings.

The **Museum Nusantara** (☎ 260 23 58; www.nusantara-delft.nl in Dutch; St Agathaplein 4; adult/under 16 €3.50/3; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1-5pm Sun) shines a light on the Netherlands' colonial past. There's a collection of furniture and other

lifestyle artefacts from 17th-century Batavia (now Jakarta), as well as a 'colonial department' detailing the beginnings of Dutch rule in the region.

The **Vermeercentrum** (☎ 213 85 88; www.vermeer-delft.nl; Voldersgracht 21; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun), set to open in September 2006, promises to offer 'a fascinating voyage of discovery through the life and work of Johannes Vermeer.' The museum says it will enable visitors to 'Experience life in 17th-century Delft, experience his studio, and get to know his work'.

See Delft on a **canal boat tour** (☎ 212 63 85; adult/under 12 €5.50/3; ☎ 9.30am-6pm mid-Mar-Oct) departing from Koornmarkt 113.

Sleeping & Eating

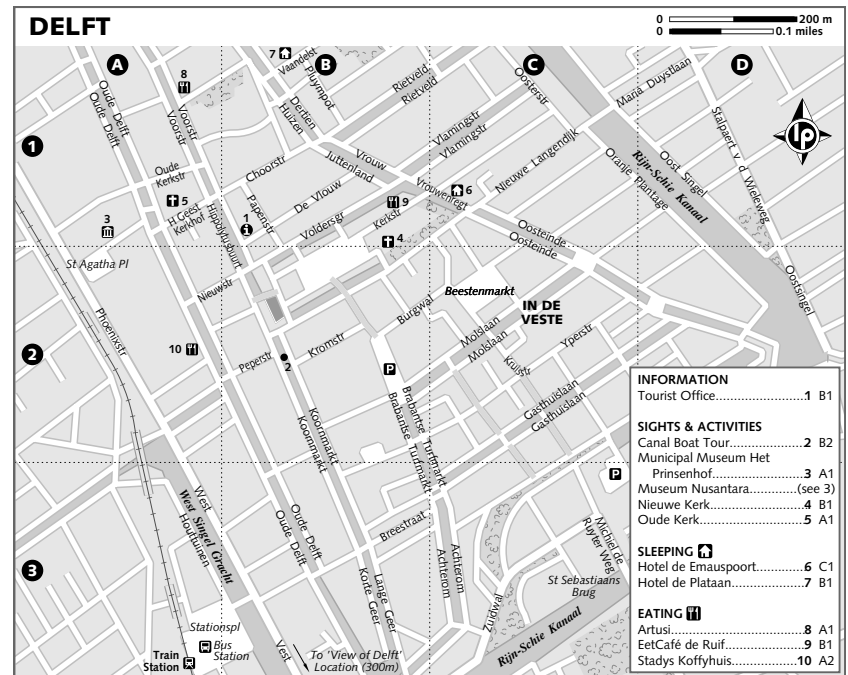
Hotel De Emauspoort (☎ 219 02 19; www.emauspoort.nl; Vrouwenregt 9-11; s/d €80/90, caravan s/d €75/85) Comfy, old-style rooms, plus two attentively restored gypsy caravans out back. Delightful. Big fat bonus: the bakery-confectionery store right next door provides the big fat breakfast.

Hotel de Plataan (☎ 212 60 46; www.hoteldeplataan.nl; Doelenplein 10; s/d €88/99) Delft's finest accommodation is on a delightful square, and features an ace café and a downright dignified breakfast room. Standard rooms are small but elegant. Then there are the wonderfully opulent theme rooms, which come on like a Japanese love hotel: there's the Garden of Eden; the Amber, based on Eastern stylings; or the jaw-dropping Tamarinde, themed after a desert island.

Stadys Koffyhuis (☎ 212 46 25; Oude Delft 133; www.stadys-koffyhuis.nl; pancakes €7-10) This warm and friendly café has a real ace in the hole: a terrace barge moored out front, where you can take your coffee and eat your delicious sandwiches and pancakes while admiring possibly the best view in Delft – the Oude Kerk, just ahead at the end of the canal.

Eetcafé De Ruif (☎ 214 22 06; www.ruif.nl in Dutch; Kerkstraat 22; mains €12-16) Wonderfully rustic, with a low ceiling, canal views and yummo lunches such as goat-cheese salads and Stelendam shrimps (seafood that's apparently very highly prized round these here parts). At night it's busier, morphing into an exceedingly popular carousing option.

Artusi (☎ 212 03 54; www.restaurant-artusi.nl; Voorstraat 20A; mains €18-22; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) This place is a bar as well as a restaurant, and



Italian dishes are the name of the game. It's stylish, but not too snobby. All the usual Italian faves are here, plus ramped up, out-of-left-field goodies such as tame duck udder with olives and balsamic sauce.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Den Haag (€2.20, eight minutes), Rotterdam (€2.90, 13 minutes) and Amsterdam (€10.80, 50 minutes). Tram No 1 makes the run to Den Haag.

ROTTERDAM

☎ 010 / pop 605,000

Rotterdam, Europe's largest port and the second-largest Dutch city, was bombed flat during WWII and spent the following decades rebuilding the harbour and the centre. The result is an architectural aesthetic that's unique in Europe. Today, Rotterdam has a crackling energy, with superb nightlife, a diverse, multiethnic community, an intensely interesting maritime tradition and a wealth of top-class museums. It also has a long-standing rivalry with Amsterdam, reflected in most aspects of culture. When local football

team Feyenoord meets Ajax of Amsterdam, the fur *always* flies. And when Rotterdam unleashed its extreme form of techno, gabber, on the world in the early '90s, one of its most enduring targets was Amsterdam: an early gabber single was memorably titled 'Amsterdam, Waar Lech Dat Dan?' ('Amsterdam, Where the F*** is That?').

Orientation

Rotterdam, split by the vast Nieuwe Maas shipping channel, is crossed by a series of tunnels and bridges, notably the fabulously postmodern Erasmusbrug. The centre is on the north side of the water. Huge new neighbourhoods are rising to the south. From Centraal Station (CS), a 15-minute walk along the canal-like ponds leads to the waterfront. The commercial centre is to the east and most of the museums are to the west. The historic neighbourhood of Delfshaven is a further 3km west.

Information

The Rotterdam Card offers discounts in hotels and restaurants; it's €22.50/43.50 for

24/72 hours. The card is even available as a watch. Buy it from the tourist office.

EasyInternetCafé (www.easyeverything.com/map/rot; Stadhuisplein 16-18; per hr €3; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm Sun)

Post office ☎ 233 02 55; Coolsingel 42; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Wed & Fri, to 8.30pm Thu, 9.30am-3pm Sat

Tourist office ☎ 271 01 28; www.rotterdam.info; Coolsingel 5; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun) Free Internet.

Use-It ☎ 240 91 58; www.use-it.nl; Schaatsbaan 41-45; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun mid-May-mid-Sep, to 5pm Tue-Sat mid-Sep-mid-May) Ostensibly aimed at young travellers, but suitable for anyone who wants information that's more engaging and irreverent than the po-faced official tourist body. Also books accommodation with substantial discounts.

Sights & Activities

Museum Boijmans van Beuningen ☎ 441 94 00; www.boijmans.nl; Museumpark 18-20; adult/under 18 €8/free, free Wed; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) is among Europe's very finest museums and has a permanent collection taking in Dutch and European art (Bosch, Van Eyck, Rembrandt, Tintoretto, Titian). There's an absorbing surrealist wing featuring ephemera, paraphernalia and famous works from Dalí, Duchamp, Magritte, Man Ray and more.

The **Nederlands Architectuur Instituut** (NAI; ☎ 440 12 00; www.nai.nl); Museumpark 25; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun & holidays) offers an amazingly thorough overview of Dutch architecture. Exhibitions are revelatory, and a recent multimedia presentation devoted to the utopian genius Hendrik Wijdeveld was quite honestly mind-expanding. The NAI is a worthy monument in a city that celebrates built space like no other.

The **Historisch Museum Het Schielandhuis** ☎ 217 67 67; www.hmr.rotterdam.nl; Korte Hoogstraat 31; adult/child €3/1.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun) is in one of the city's few surviving 17th-century buildings. Exhibits focus on everyday life through the ages, such as the (purportedly) oldest surviving wooden shoe. Clogs ahoy!

The **Kunsthal** ☎ 440 03 00; www.kunsthal.nl; Westzeedijk 341; adult/under 18 €8.50/3; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun & holidays) hosts around 20 temporary exhibitions (including art and design) each year. As the publicity says, everything from 'elitist to popular' gets an airing.

At 185m, a shimmy up the **Euromast** ☎ 436 48 11; www.euromast.com; Parkhaven 20; adult/under 11

€8/5.50; ☎ 9.30am-11pm Apr-Sep, 10am-11pm Oct-Mar) is a must. It offers unparalleled 360-degree views of Rotterdam, with its rotating, glass-walled 'Euroscope' contraption ascending to near the summit, from where you'll fully appreciate just how mighty the harbour is. There's a luxury accommodation suite and the Panorama restaurant near the top. Book an abseiling session (€39.50).

The **Overblaak development** (1978-84), designed by Piet Blom, is near Blaak metro station. Marked by its pencil-shaped tower and upended, cube-shaped apartments, it seems plucked straight from the novels of JG Ballard. One apartment, the **Show Cube** ☎ 414 22 85; www.cubehouse.nl; adult/under 12 €2/1.50; ☎ 11am-5pm, closed Mon-Thu Jan & Feb), is open to the public.

Delfshaven was once the official seaport for the city of Delft. A reconstructed 18th-century windmill overlooks the water at Voorhaven 210, while the **Oude Kerk** on Voorhaven is where the Pilgrim Fathers prayed for the last time before leaving the city on 22 July 1620.

Spido ☎ 275 99 88; www.spido.nl; Willemsplein 85; adult/child €8.50/5.50; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Jun-Sep, 11am-3.30pm Oct, to 2pm Thu-Sun Nov-Mar) offers daily harbour tours.

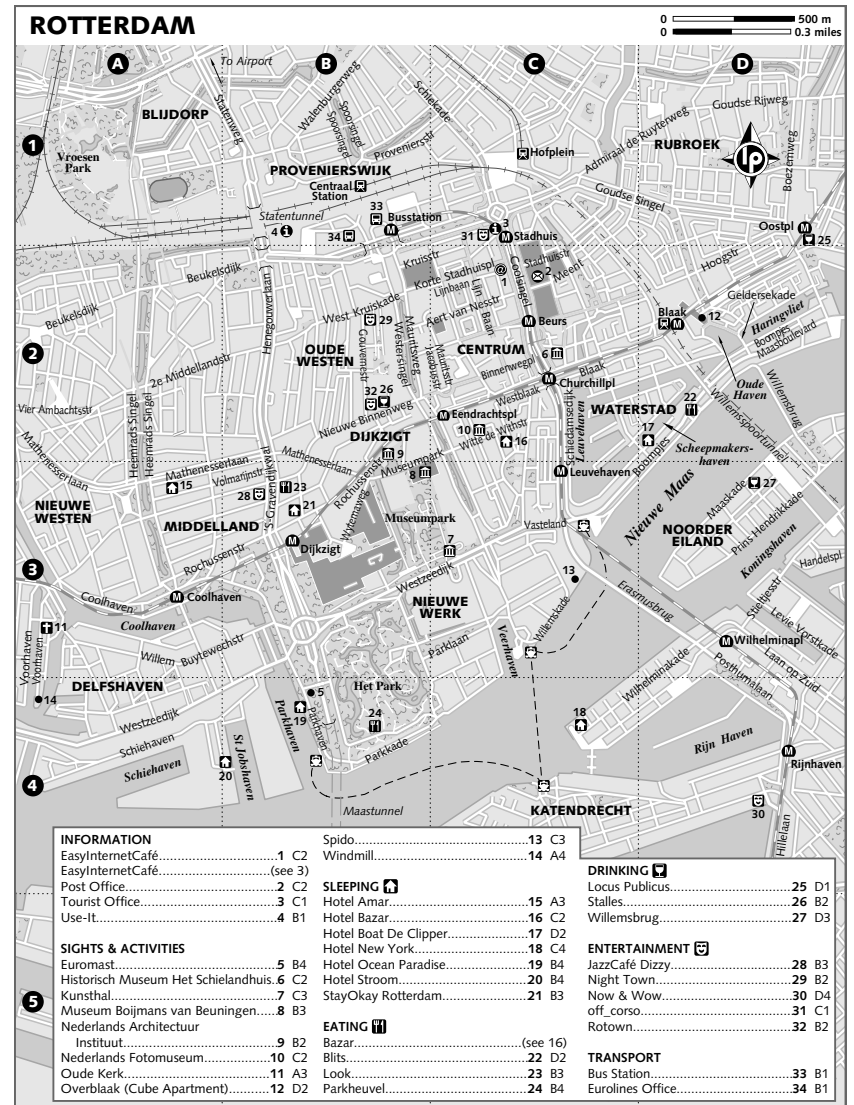
Sleeping

Stayokay Rotterdam ☎ 436 57 63; www.stayokay.com/rotterdam; Rochussenstraat 107-109; dm from €20.50; ☎) A typically well-run link in the Stayokay chain, the Rotterdam version is well placed for the museums and has a low-key bar. Reception is open until 1am.

Hotel Boat de Clipper ☎ 331 42 44; Scheepmakershaven; B&B from €30; ☎) This 'botel', docked in Rotterdam's old harbour, is perfect for soaking up the city's maritime atmosphere, even if the quarters are, inevitably, a little cramped.

Hotel Amar ☎ 425 57 95; www.amarhotel.nl; Mathenesserlaan 316; s/d from €60/75) This friendly, small place is in a leafy neighbourhood close to the Museumplein and good shopping and nightlife. Rooms are simple but comfy, and the ones at the back overlook a large and peaceful garden.

Hotel Bazar ☎ 206 51 51; www.hotelbazar.nl; Witte de Withstraat 16; s/d from €60/75) Bazar is deservedly popular for its Middle Eastern-, African- and South American-themed rooms: lush, brocaded curtains, exotically



tiled bathrooms, comfy beds, and copies of *Tales from the Arabian Nights* scattered about. Breakfast is spectacular: Turkish breads, international cheeses, yogurt, fruit, cold cuts and coffee. An exceptional place to wind down, particularly as its ground-floor bar and restaurant (p855) is among the city's best.

Hotel Ocean Paradise ☎ 436 17 02; www.oceanparadise.nl; Parkhaven 21; s/d €68/88, with shared bathroom €58/68) Ocean Paradise is actually a floating hotel-Chinese restaurant-Asian supermarket pavilion; it looks like an aquatic temple. The rooms are naturally Eastern-themed and not too bad, although they get a little hot in summer. It's a nice part of town, next

THE NETHERLANDS

THE NETHERLANDS

WORTH A TRIP

The **Kinderdijk** (Child's Dike; www.kinderdijk.nl) features 19 working, 18th-century windmills stretching for 3km, rising above the empty marshes and waterways. On Saturdays in July and August from 2pm to 5pm, all 19 are in operation. One mill is a **visitors centre** (☎ 078-613 28 00; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep).

Take a local train from Rotterdam CS to Rotterdam Lombardijen station, then catch the hourly bus No 154. By car, take the N210 12km east from Rotterdam.

to the Euromast and surrounding parks and greenery.

Hotel New York (☎ 439 05 00; www.hotelnewyork.nl; Koninginnenhoofd 1; r €98-220) The city's favourite hotel is housed in the former headquarters of the Holland-America passenger ship line, and has excellent service and facilities. Often booked far in advance, it's noted for its views, café and boat shuttle taking guests across the Nieuwe Maas to the centre. The Art Nouveau rooms – with many original and painstakingly restored décor items and fittings – are divine.

Hotel Stroom (www.stroomrotterdam.nl; Lloydstraat 1; d from €135) Stroom, a designer hotel that's actually a converted power station, is the rising star of the Rotto accommodation scene. Spiffy designer studios come in a range of configurations, such as the 'video-studio' option, a jaw-dropping split-level fancy under a glass roof with an open bathroom downstairs.

Eating

Bazar (☎ 206 51 51; www.hotelbazar.nl; Witte de Withstraat 16; mains €8-14) On the ground floor of the inventive Hotel Bazar, this eatery comes up trumps, with similarly stylised Middle Eastern décor and matching menu: dolmades, falafel, mussels, sardines, couscous and kebabs served up in tangy, attention-grabbing combinations.

Look (☎ 436 70 00; www.restaurantlook.nl; 's Graven-dijkwal; mains €13-20; ☎ dinner Wed-Sun) This one's especially recommended for single people, Buffy and Francophiles. Look is a cosy little restaurant that specialises in garlic-based dishes: steamed garlic, fried garlic, garlic soup, garlic vegetables...even garlic dessert

on occasion. It's delicious and you can even be a spoilsport and plump for nongarlic dishes.

Blits (☎ 282 90 51; www.blits-rotterdam.nl; Boompjes 701; €18-30; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) It was only a matter of time. In a city that loves diverse food and cutting-edge architecture, here's a restaurant that combines both: wall-length windows looking out over the Maas and a classy international menu. Seating arrangements are 'out there': try the bench with pillows or the Love Suite, a heart-shaped, rich red enclosure.

Parkheuvel (☎ 436 05 30; Heuvelaan 21; 3-course menu from €50; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, dinner Sat) Some say it's the Netherlands' best restaurant; as one of only two Dutch fancies with three Michelin stars, it's got a strong claim. The French/International menu features especially fab seafood – red mullet with balsamic dressing, anyone?

Drinking

Stalles (☎ 436 16 55; Nieuwe Binnenweg 11a) This classic *bruin café* is on a great stretch of road near plenty of good shops, cafés and bars. It has an extensive range of single-malt whiskies and some reasonable food, including pizza and lasagne.

Locus Publicus (☎ 433 17 61; www.locus-publicus.com in Dutch; Oostzeedijk 364) With more than 200 beers on its menu, it's an outstanding specialist beer café.

Willemsbrug (☎ 413 58 68; Maaskade 95) This old-time, maritime-themed pub attracts salty sea-dog types. It's not for those with weak lungs – the air's blue with cigarette, cigar and pipe smoke (and probably blue with salty language if you understand Dutch well enough). But the staff and clientele are very friendly, and a bit of a laugh – they're liable to turn the cheesy music up full bore and indulge in a woefully off-key sing-along at any given moment.

Entertainment

Jazzcafé Dizzy (☎ 477 30 14; www.dizzy.nl in Dutch; 's-Graven-dijkwal 129) Live music Tuesday nights and Sunday afternoons. The evening performances are scorching: everything from hot jazz to fast and funky Brazilian and salsa, with a very lively, sweaty crowd jumping out of their skins.

Now & Wow (☎ 477 10 74; www.now-wow.com; Maashaven 1) Many believe this to be Rotto's

best club. It's a relaxed place, divided into two: Now for mainstream house, and Wow for funky beats. Theme nights with titles like Superbimbo say it all.

Rotown (☎ 436 26 69; www.rotown.nl in Dutch; Nieuwe Binnenweg 19) A smooth bar, a dependable live rock venue, an agreeable restaurant, a popular meeting place. The musical programme features new local talent, established international acts and crossover experiments.

off_corso (☎ 411 38 97; www.off-corso.nl in Dutch; Kruiskade 22) This is where it's at: bleeding-edge local and international DJs mashing up a high-fibre electronic diet of bleeps 'n' beats.

Night Town (☎ 436 12 10; www.nighttown.nl; West Kruiskade 26-28) This place is recommended for its fun kung-fu-sion mash-up: jazz, Latin, funk, and house.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€12.60, 62 minutes, four every hour), Den Haag (€4.10, 15 minutes, four every hour), and Utrecht (€8.60, 40 minutes, two every hour).

UTRECHT CITY

☎ 030 / pop 282,000

Utrecht is one of the Netherlands' oldest cities – not that you'd know it when you step off the train and find yourself lost in the maze that is the Hoog Catharijne shopping centre. The Hoog is huge...and it's attached to the station...and it seemingly goes on forever...and ever. But fight your way through and you'll emerge starry-eyed into a beautiful, vibrant, old-world city centre, ringed by striking 13th-century canal wharves. The wharves, well below street level, are unique to Utrecht and the streets alongside brim with chic shops, restaurants and cafés. The city's student community of 40,000 is the largest in the country – this is one very infectious place (in all senses of the term).

Information

Municipal library (☎ 286 18 00; Oudegracht 167; per hr €3; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon, 11am-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat) Internet access.

Post office (Neude 11)

Tourist office (☎ 0900-128 87 32; www.utrecht-city.com; Vinkenburgstraat 19; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Wed & Fri, to 9pm Thu, to 5pm Sat) Get the free map with street index.

Sights

One of Utrecht's favourite sons, Dick Bruna, is honoured at the **Dick Bruna Huis** (☎ 236 23 61; www.dickbrunahuis.nl; Agnietenstraat 2; adult/under 17 €8/5; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun). Bruna is the creator of beloved cartoon rabbit Miffy and she naturally takes pride of place, along with an extensive overview of Bruna's career: the museum has everything from the book covers he designed for the family publishing company to a multimedia demonstration of his technique and philosophy. Obviously children will get a huge kick out of it all, but so will adults who simply appreciate superlative graphic design.

The **Museum Catharijneconvent** (☎ 231 72 96; www.catharijneconvent.nl; Nieuwegracht 63; adult/under 17 €7/5; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun) has the finest collection of medieval religious art in the Netherlands, housed in a Gothic former convent and an 18th-century canal-side house.

The **Centraal Museum** (☎ 236 23 62; www.centraalmuseum.nl; Nicolaaskerkhof 10; adult/under 17 €8/5; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has a wide-ranging collection: applied arts dating back to the 17th century as well as paintings by some of the Utrecht School artists. There's even a 12th-century boat that was dug out of the local mud.

The **Domtoren** (Cathedral Tower; ☎ 233 30 36; www.domtoren.nl in Dutch; Domplein; adult/child €7.50/4; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) is 112m high, with 465 steps. It's a tough haul to the top but well worth the exertion: the tower gives unbeatable city views. The guided tour in Dutch and English is detailed and gives privileged insight into this beautiful structure.

The tourist office can help with canal boat hire and tours.

Sleeping

Strowis Budget Hostel (☎ 238 02 80; Boothstraat 8; www.strowis.nl; dm from €14, r €55; ☎) This 17th-century building, run by a cluey group of ex-squatters, is near the town centre and has been lovingly restored and converted into a hostel. It's open 24 hours a day and has a cosy bar.

Park Hotel (☎ 251 67 12; Tolsteesingel 34; s/d €52/65; ☎) You'll sleep well in this comfy eight-room guesthouse occupying a canal house. It's not far from Utrecht's buzzing nightlife, and breakfast can be taken in the pretty garden out back.

NH Centre Utrecht Hotel (☎ 231 31 69; www.nh-hotels.com; Janskerkhof 10; r €120; P) This gorgeous hotel is housed in an atmospheric old building (1870). The rooms are very comfortable, with all the conveniences a business traveller would expect, and the views of the old church square are delectable. The suitably elegant Broers restaurant downstairs is an added bonus.

Eating & Drinking

Opium (☎ 231 55 15; www.restaurant-opium.nl; Voorstraat 80; mains €15-30; ☎ dinner) This place will rock your socks off with Asian-fusion cooking that matches the gorgeous, Asian-fusion-minimalist interior – all fans, clean angles and plays of light. Softshell-crab tempura in sweet chilli sauce with spring onion and paprika gives you an idea of what's on offer.

Blauw (☎ 234 24 63; Springweg 64; set menu from €19; ☎ dinner) Blauw has worked hard to make Indonesian food trendy in Utrecht – or at least popular. Quality's the key and the rice table, comprising 14 dishes, is a winner: young and old alike flock to scarf it down. The décor, a mix of nostalgia and uberhip minimalism, packs 'em in, too.

Goesting (☎ 273 33 46; www.restaurantgoesting.nl; Veeartsenijpad 150; mains €22-35; ☎ dinner) Celebrities and wannabes flock to Goesting for fancies such as spit roast, Dutch asparagus, poached tournedos and 'tame duck' in a minimalist, high-society atmosphere.

Café Ledig Erf (☎ 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 chessboards on the terrace, and it's always packed in warm weather.

Café Springhaver (☎ 231 37 89; www.springhaver.nl in Dutch; Springweg 50-52) This incredibly cosy bar next to the Springhaver Theater is a perfect spot to order a drink before the main feature, or just to pore over the daily news.

't Oude Pothuys (☎ 231 89 70; Oudegracht 279) Small and dark, this basement pub has nightly music – jam sessions with locals trying their hand at rock and jazz, but also touring pro bands.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€6.30, 35 minutes), Maastricht (€26, two hours) and Rotterdam (€8.60, 40 minutes).

THE DELTA REGION

The province of Zeeland (Sea Land) is three slivers of land nestling in the middle of a vast delta through which many of Europe's rivers drain; it dominates this peaceful corner of the Netherlands. As you survey the calm, flat landscape, consider that the region was home to two massive waterborne tragedies. In 1421 the St Elizabeth's Day flood killed more than 100,000 people; and in 1953, yet another flood laid waste to 2000 lives and 800km of dikes, leaving 500,000 homeless and leading to the Delta Project, among the world's greatest engineering feats (see the boxed text, opposite).

MIDDELBURG

☎ 0118 / pop 47,000

Middelburg, Zeeland's sleepy capital, is a friendly, low-key settlement: not exactly flush with nightlife, but perfect for exploring the region. There's no VVV but there is a **tourist shop** (☎ 67 43 00; www.touristshop.nl in Dutch; Markt 65c; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat), and the **Zeeland Regional Library** (☎ 65 40 00; Kousteensdijk 7; Internet per hr €3; ☎ 5.30-9pm Mon, 10am-9pm Tue-Fri, to 1pm Sat) has Internet access.

Sights

This pretty, airy little town is eminently suitable for walking, with cobblestones and snaking alleyways leading in and away from the town square, which hosts a famous market on Thursdays.

The sizable **Abdij** (☎ 61 35 96) complex dates from the 12th century and houses the regional government as well as three churches and two museums. Climb **Lange Jan** (€2.50), a 91m-high tower dating from the 14th century; the **Zeeuws Museum**, in the former monks dormitories, is closed until 2007 for refurbishment.

The **Stadhuis** (☎ 67 54 52; admission €2.50; ☎ 11am-5pm Mon-Sat year-round, noon-5pm Sun Apr-Oct) grabs the eye: it's staggeringly beautiful. The Gothic side facing the Markt is from the 1400s, while the classical Noordstraat segment dates from the 1600s.

Sleeping & Eating

De Kaepstander (☎ 64 28 48; www.kaepstander.nl; Koorkerkhof 10; s/d with shared bathroom €38.50/65) It's got four rooms featuring B&B-style accom-

WORTH A TRIP

The disastrous 1953 flood was the impetus for the stupendous Delta Project, which began shortly after and was finished decades later – in 1986. The southwest river deltas were blocked using a network of dams, dikes and a remarkable 3.2km storm-surge barrier, which is lowered in rough conditions.

The **Waterland Neeltje Jans** (☎ 111 655 655; www.neeltjens.nl; admission Nov-Mar €11, April-Oct €16; ☎ 10am-5pm), located by the main surge barrier, is a terrific complex that explains the project in minute detail, with working models, hilarious public-service films from the '70s (complete with bad hair and funky soundtracks), and an exhilarating boat trip that takes you out onto the Oosterschelde for a panoramic view of the barriers and beyond. It's also possible to walk inside and around the barrier's pylons and see how the whole shebang works.

Bus No 104 stops at the Expo on its run between Rotterdam's Spijkenisse metro station (25 minutes from Rotterdam CS) and Vlissingen. The buses take about an hour from Rotterdam and 30 minutes from Middelburg and run every 30 minutes.

modation and a downstairs lounge and TV room for all guests. It's cosy and peaceful but best of all, it's next door to Jazz Eetcafé Desafinado.

Nieuwe Doelen (☎ 61 21 21; Loskade 3-7; r from €75) Simple rooms, pleasingly decorated. There's an enclosed garden, perfect for breakfast in fine weather.

Peper & Zout (Pepper & Salt; ☎ 62 70 58; www.peperenzout.com; Lange Noordstaat 8; mains €12-19) Peper & Zout has a casual yet elegant interior. The menu concentrates on fresh seafood, mainly various kinds of local fish. It's a popular place with a great wine list.

Jazz Eetcafé Desafinado (☎ 64 07 67; www.desafinado.nl; Koorkerkstraat 1; mains €13-20) It does exactly what it says on the tin: serves up hot jazz in steaming portions in wood-bound surroundings, with authentic jazz and blues on the stereo, old-time vinyl adorning the walls, and live jazz on Wednesday nights. The food's not too bad, although watch out for those little snail things they serve up as nibbles.

De Mug (Mosquito; ☎ 61 48 51; www.demug.nl in Dutch; Vlasmarkt 54-56; mains €16-21; ☎ dinner Tue-Sat) Don't be fooled by the Heineken signs; the beer list is long and boasts many rare Trappist varieties. Also try the Mug Bitter, heavy on the hops. In the kitchen, De Mug has got quite the reputation for its trademark dishes prepared with unusual beers. The accommodation is clean and comforting.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€26.30, 2½ hours), Roosendaal (€10.40, 45 minutes) and Rotterdam (€17.50, 1½ hours).

THE NORTH & EAST

This region includes Friesland, which, once upon a time, incorporated regions of the Netherlands, northern Germany and Denmark until it became part of the united Netherlands. Frisians are determined to preserve their fiercely independent heritage – their anthem cheekily proclaims Friesland to be 'the best land on earth'. And though the Frisian language is similar to Dutch, pronunciation is entirely different. Apparently Frisian is the closest language to English, although English speakers will not understand it. As the Frisians themselves say: 'As milk is to cheese, are English and Frise.'

GRONINGEN CITY

☎ 050 / pop 177,300

It may be a long way from Amsterdam, but Groningen's a vibrant, youthful city, boasting all you'd expect of a progressive Dutch metropolis – it's 20,000-strong student population (which has been around since 1614 when the university opened) sees to that. There's also the requisite art museums, theatre and classical concerts, as well as gabled houses reflected in silent canals.

See the **tourist office** (☎ 0900-202 30 50; www.vvgroningen.nl; Grote Markt 25; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat year-round, 11am-3pm Sun Jul & Aug) for more information. The **library** (☎ 368 36 83; Oude Boteringestraat 18; Internet per hr €2; ☎ 1-8pm Mon, 10am-6pm Wed & Fri, to 8pm Thu, 11am-4pm Sat, 1-4pm Sun) has Net access.

Sights & Activities

The colourful, oddly shaped **Groninger Museum** (☎ 366 65 55; www.groninger-museum.nl; Museumland 1; adult/child €8/4; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun year-round, noon-5pm Mon Jul-Aug), occupying three islands in the middle of the canal in front of the station, hosts contemporary design and photography exhibitions alongside classic Golden Age Dutch paintings.

The **Noordelijk Scheepvaartmuseum** (Northern Shipping Museum; ☎ 312 22 02; www.noordelijk-scheepvaartmuseum.nl; Brugstraat 24-26; adult/child €3/2; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1-5pm Sun) is laid out over several floors of buildings that once comprised a 16th-century distillery. Highlights include an intricately carved replica of the church at Paramaribo – the capital of former Dutch colony Surinam – in a bottle (room three).

The 16th-century **Martinikerk** (☎ 311 12 77; Grote Markt; ☹ 11am-5pm Apr-Nov, noon-4pm Dec-Mar), at the northern corner of the Grote Markt, is eye catching. Its tower, the Martinatoren, is 96m tall and is considered to have one of the most finely balanced profiles in the country. A climb (€3; purchase ticket at tourist office) to the top yields awesome views.

When the tide retreats across the mudflats off the north coast of Groningen, locals and visitors alike attack it with abandon, marching, and inevitably sinking, into the sloppy mess, a pastime known as *wadlopen* (mud-walking).

The centre for *wadlopen* is the tiny village of **Pieterburen**, 22km north of Groningen, where several groups of trained guides are based. In Groningen, the following organisations can help: **Wadlooppcentrum** (☎ 0595-52 83 00; www.wadloopen.org in Dutch; Hoofdstraat 105) and **Dijkstra's Wadlooptochten** (☎ 0595-52 83 45; www.wadloop-dijkstra.nl in Dutch; Hoofdstraat 118).

Sleeping

Hotel Gari Friesland (☎ 312 13 07; www.hotelfriesland.nl in Dutch; Kleine Pelsterstraat; s/d €35/50) The rooms here are just about as sparse as they come, but the price can't be beat and the location is central.

City Hotel (☎ 588 65 65; www.edenhotelgroup.com; Gedempte Kattendiep 25; r from €75; ☹ ☑) These standard business rooms are a good bet for those requiring a few more creature comforts. There's a rooftop deck, free coffee and tea on every floor, free Internet, and a fine location.

Schimmelpenninck Huys (☎ 318 95 02; www.schimmelpenninckhuys.nl; Oosterstraat 53; d from €130; ☹) The ground floor is occupied by a silver-service restaurant, pristine café and beautician. The rest of the building is filled with rooms ranging from simple, stylish standard doubles to suites with antique pieces and chandeliers.

Eating & Drinking

Goudkantoor (Gold Office; ☎ 589 18 88; Waagplein 1; mains €12-20) The architecture of this recently restored historical haunt is amazing. Dating from 1635, the 'Gold Office' features a gold-tinted exterior and graceful interior, complete with striking paintings. Oh, by the way, the food is quite good, too.

De 7e Hemel (Seventh Heaven; ☎ 314 51 41; Zuiderkerkstraat 7; mains €15-18; ☹ dinner Tue-Sat) This is quality: De 7e Hemel even imports Scottish mineral water direct from the Glens because of its purity. The ever-changing menu, a medley of vegan, vegetarian, fish and meat dishes, is a delight, and the cherubs, chandeliers and calming yellow shades all help to create a cosy, romantic air.

Brussels Lof (☎ 312 76 03; A-Kerkstraat 24; mains €17-22; ☹ dinner Thu-Mon) This upmarket joint concentrates on seafood and vegetarian options, and leaves the fancy décor to the Gold Office. Mussels are a speciality and the service is top-notch.

Roezemoes (☎ 314 03 82; Gedempte Zuiderdiep 15) You can tell this gem of a *bruin café* has been around: the bullet holes from the 1672 invasion attempt are a dead giveaway. There's the occasional blues band.

Entertainment

Vera (☎ 313 46 81; www.vera-groningen.nl; Oosterstraat 44; ☹ concerts Thu-Sat) Witness the future at this rock venue: Vera hosted a precorporate U2 before a crowd of 30-odd people in the early 1980s, while Nirvana played to a Vera audience of around 60 in the days before heroin chic.

Jazz Café de Spieghele (☎ 312 63 00; Peperstraat 11) This one's a perennial favourite, with regular live jazz music, a smooth, sultry atmosphere, and a great bar.

Getting There & Away

Sample train schedules: Amsterdam (€26.70, 140 minutes, two per hour), Leeuwarden (€8.30, 50 minutes, two per hour),

Rotterdam (€29.60, 160 minutes, two per hour) and Utrecht (€24.50, two hours, two per hour).

TEXEL

☎ 0222 / pop 13,500

Texel (*tes-sel*) is about 3km north off the coast of Noord Holland. It's remarkably diverse, with broad white beaches, lush nature reserves, forests and picture-book villages. Now 25km long and 9km wide, it consisted of two islands until 1835, when a spit of land to Eyerland Island was pumped dry. The island makes a superb getaway from the mainland rush, with beauty and isolation in abundance – except in mid-June, when spectators line the beaches for the largest catamaran race in the world, the Zwitserleven Round Texel Race (www.roundtexel.com).

Information

Get online at the **library** (Drijverstraat 7, Den Burg; per hr €3; ☹ 2-5pm Tue-Fri, 10.30am-12.30pm Sat & Mon) and for free at the **tourist office** (☎ 31 47 41; www.texel.net; Emmalaan 66, Den Burg; ☹ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat).

Sights & Activities

Ecomare (☎ 31 77 41; www.ecomare.nl; Ruyslaan 92, De Koog; adult/child €8/5; ☹ 9am-5pm) is chiefly a refuge for sick seals retrieved from the Waddenzee; rescued birds are the other main tenants. At the aquariums you can sidle up to sharks and even pat a sea skate, and there are seal feedings at 11am and 3pm.

Duinen van Texel National Park is a patchwork of varied dunescape running along the entire western coast of the island. Salt fens and heath alternate with velvety, grass-covered dunes. Much of the area is bird sanctuary and accessible only on foot.

Just near the windswept beach is **De Dennen**, a dark and leafy forest. Originally planted as a source of lumber, today it has an enchanting network of walking and cycling paths. In springtime the forest floor is carpeted with snowdrops first planted in the 1930s.

There are six museums on the island, covered by the **Texel Museum Combination Card** (adult/child €15/8.50) available from the tourist office.

The **Maritime & Beachcombers Museum** (☎ 31 49 56; Barentszstraat 21, Oudeschild; adult/child €4.50/3.50;

☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) has an extraordinary variety of junk recovered from sunken ships.

Texel's wonderful **beaches** are pristinely white and clean and include two nudist areas.

Contact the tourist office for information on cycling routes, hiking trails, boat trips, catamaran hire, pleasure flights and more.

Sleeping & Eating

Although Texel has an astounding 46,000 beds, book ahead, especially in July and August.

Hotel De 14 Sterren (☎ 32 26 81; www.14sterren.nl; Smitsweg 4, Den Burg; s/d €55/110; ☹) On the edge of De Dennen forest, it has 14 rooms decorated in warm Mediterranean hues, most with a terrace or balcony with garden views. Its barn-house restaurant De Worstelent is a great choice for lunch and/or dinner, with an extensive wine list alongside steak, fish and vegetarian dishes (mains €15 to €20).

Bij Jef (☎ 31 96 23; www.bijjef.nl; Herenstraat 34, Den Hoorn; s/d €72.50/90) Bij Jef is mainly known for sumptuous French-influenced cuisine (mains around €20), but also offers simple yet stylish rooms with bath, well-stocked minibar, countryside views and balconies.

Freya (☎ 32 16 86; Gravenstraat 4, Den Burg; set menu €23.50; ☹ dinner Tue-Sat) This petite restaurant has a reputation for outstanding French and Dutch cuisine, so it's no surprise that reservations are highly recommended. The hosts are warm and welcoming, and while the place bubbles with energy, it has a decidedly romantic feel.

Getting There & Away

Trains from Amsterdam to Den Helder (€10.90, one hour) are met by a bus that connects with the **car ferry** (☎ 36 96 00; adult/child/car return €4/2/38; ☹ 6.35am-9.35pm), which then makes the crossing in 20 minutes.

The ferry **De Vriendschap** (☎ 31 64 51; www.waddenveer.nl in Dutch; De Cocksdoorp; adult/child return €20/13.50) makes the half-hour crossing from De Cocksdoorp to car-free Vlieland, the nearest of the Wadden Islands.

AMELAND

☎ 0519 / pop 3600

Ameland, just 85 sq km, has four peaceful villages that are less developed than Texel's, but still provide enough social structure for

travellers' needs. Large swaths of untouched natural splendour offer serenity and great cycling, but Mother Nature doesn't rule as she does on other Frisian islands.

Nes hosts Ameland's **tourist office** (☎ 54 65 46; www.ameland.nl in Dutch; Rixt van Doniastraat, Nes; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat), which has Internet access.

Sleeping

Stayokay Waddencentrum Ameland (☎ 55 53 53; ameland@stayokay.com; Oranjeweg 59; dm/s/d €25/45/66) Two hundred metres west of the lighthouse, with sand dunes on your doorstep. Meals, pack lunches and bicycles can be ordered.

Zeewinde (☎ 54 65 00; www.zeewinde.nl; Torenstraat 22, Nes; r from €75) Its rooms are neither large nor small, but do include a kitchenette and bathtub, a welcome relief after a day on a bike (which can be rented from reception).

Getting There & Around

Wagenborg (☎ 54 61 11; www.wpd.nl; adult/child return €11.50/6, bicycle/car €7.45/75.85) operates ferries between Nes and the port at Holwerd. Ferries (45 minutes) run almost every two hours year-round from 7.30am to 7.30pm.

From Leeuwarden, take bus No 66 (40 minutes, hourly) to Holwerd; a ticket covering this bus, the ferry and a bus ride on the island can be purchased at the Leeuwarden train station for €23.10.

HOGVE VELUWE NATIONAL PARK

The **Hoge Veluwe** (☎ 0318-59 16 27; www.hogeweluwe.nl; adult/child €6/3, park & museum €12/6, car €6; ☎ 8am-8pm Apr, to 9pm May & Aug, to 10pm Jun & Jul, 9am-8pm Sep, to 7pm Oct, to 5.30pm Nov-Mar) is the Netherlands' largest national park, a mix of forests and woods, shifting sands and heathery moors, along with red deer, wild boar and mouflon (wild sheep). It also features the world-class **Kröller-Müller Museum** (☎ 0318-59 12 41; www.kmm.nl; Houtkampweg 6; adult/under 12 €5/2.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun & public holidays), with a Van Gogh collection and works by Picasso, Renoir and Manet.

From Arnhem, take bus No 2 (direction: Deelevy OC) to the Schaarsbergen entrance and on to the Kröller-Müller Museum. The first bus leaves at 10.10am (April to October) and there are three more through the day (one per hour in July and August). From Apeldoorn, bus No 110 leaves the station every hour from 8.42am to 4.42pm.

THE SOUTHEAST

The Dutch Southeast includes Noord Brabant, the country's largest province, primarily a land of agriculture and industry peppered with a few pleasant towns including Den Bosch. The long and narrow Limburg province is home to Maastricht, contender for the title of Finest Dutch City, as well as – wait for it – hills.

DEN BOSCH

☎ 073 / pop 134,000

This sweet old town has a top-notch church, a good museum, outstanding cafés and restaurants, and atmospheric streets. The official name is 's-Hertogenbosch (Duke's Forest), but everyone calls it Den Bosch (den boss). It's also the birthplace of 15th-century painter Hieronymus Bosch, and the protosurrealist is honoured with a statue in front of the town hall. The **tourist office** (☎ 0900-112 23 34; www.regio-vvv.nl; Markt 77; ☎ 1-6pm Mon, 9.30am-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat) can tell you all this and more.

Sights

St Janskathedraal (☎ 613 03 14; www.sint-jan.nl in Dutch; Choorstraat 1; admission €3.50; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 1-4.30pm Sun), one of the finest Gothic churches in the Netherlands, took from 1336 to 1550 to complete.

The **Noordbrabants Museum** (☎ 687 78 77; www.noordbrabantsmuseum.nl in Dutch; Verwersstraat 41; adult/child €6.50/3.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, noon-5pm Sat), in the former governor's residence, features exhibits about Brabant life and art, as well as some works by Bosch.

The tourist office can arrange boat trips around Den Bosch's canals.

Sleeping

Hotel Terminus (☎ 613 06 66; fax 613 07 26; Boschveldweg 15; s/d €31/60) These simple, brightly coloured rooms are decent enough, plus there's an appealing bar (well, they call it a 'folk pub') and regular live folk music.

Hotel Euro (☎ 613 77 77; www.eurohotel-denbosch.com; Hinthamerstraat 63; s/d from €65/85) This business hotel is part of a chain but it's still got a certain degree of warmth, even if the rooms are draped in chintzy corporate pastels. The location is central and next to a warren of great cafés and eating houses.

Eating & Drinking

Restaurant Nescio (☎ 610 09 00; www.nescio-restaurant.nl; Hinthamerstraat 80; dishes from €4; ☎ dinner) Nescio only serves appetisers, the idea being that taste is emphasised via concentrated, small portions, and to sample several experiences is preferable to having just one main one. Try fancies such as 'preserved Oriental duck bolts' or ask the chef for a 'wild card': tell him your boundaries (no bull's penises, for example) and let him surprise you.

De Truffel (☎ 614 27 42; www.detruffel.com; Kruisstraat 37; mains €10-25; ☎ dinner) In a restored warehouse, De Truffel serves top-notch Mediterranean food in a relaxed atmosphere. Get a load of this: roasted complete trout with browned almonds and a stuffed potato. Now that's attention to detail you just don't see everywhere.

Café 't Bonte Palet (☎ 613 25 32; Hinthamerstraat 97) Talk about quirky: the front window of this little hole-in-the-wall bar is stuffed with all kinds of trinkets including miniature carillons, toy cars, tiny theatrical sets, and, the crowning glory, an Asterix triptych. There's sometimes live music.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€12.70, one hour), Maastricht (€18, 1½ hours) and Utrecht (€7.50, 30 minutes).

MAASTRICHT

☎ 043 / pop 122,000

Make no bones about it: Maastricht is utterly beautiful. A stunner. The crown jewel of the south – of maybe the entire country. About as far from windmills, clogs and tulips as you'd want. Much of the Netherlands has a 'samey' feel to it, but here there are Spanish and Roman ruins, cosmopolitan food, French and Belgian twists in the architecture and a shrugging off of the shackles of Dutch restraint. Even the landscape's different: there are actually hilly streets and what passes for mountains ringing the centre.

Information

Centre Ceramique Library (☎ 350 56 00; Ave Céramique 50; Internet access free; ☎ 10.30am-8.30pm Tue & Thu, 10.30am-5pm Wed & Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 1-5pm Sun)

Grand Net Internet Café (81 Boschstraat; per hr €3)

Tourist office (☎ 325 21 21; www.vvmmaastricht.nl;

Kleine Straat 1; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat, 11am-3pm Sun)

Sights & Activities

The **Bonnefantenmuseum** (☎ 329 01 90; www.bonnefantenmuseum.nl; Ave Céramique 250; adult/under 12 €7/3.50; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) features a 28m tower that houses various exhibits, always fun and provocative. Old masters and medieval sculpture are on one floor, contemporary art by Limburg artists are on the next, and temporary exhibitions are revelatory, such as the recent 'Travellin' Light' focus on Dada lineages. From 2006 until 2008, while Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum is undergoing renovation, the Bonnefantenmuseum will display Rijksmuseum classics from the southern Netherlands, Antwerp and Bruges.

The 16th-century **Spanish Government Museum** (☎ 321 13 27; www.museumspaansgouvernement.nl in Dutch; Vrijthof 18; admission €2.50; ☎ 1-5pm Wed-Sun) is where Philip II outlawed his former lieutenant Willem the Silent at the start of the Eighty Years' War. The exhibits feature statues and 17th-century paintings.

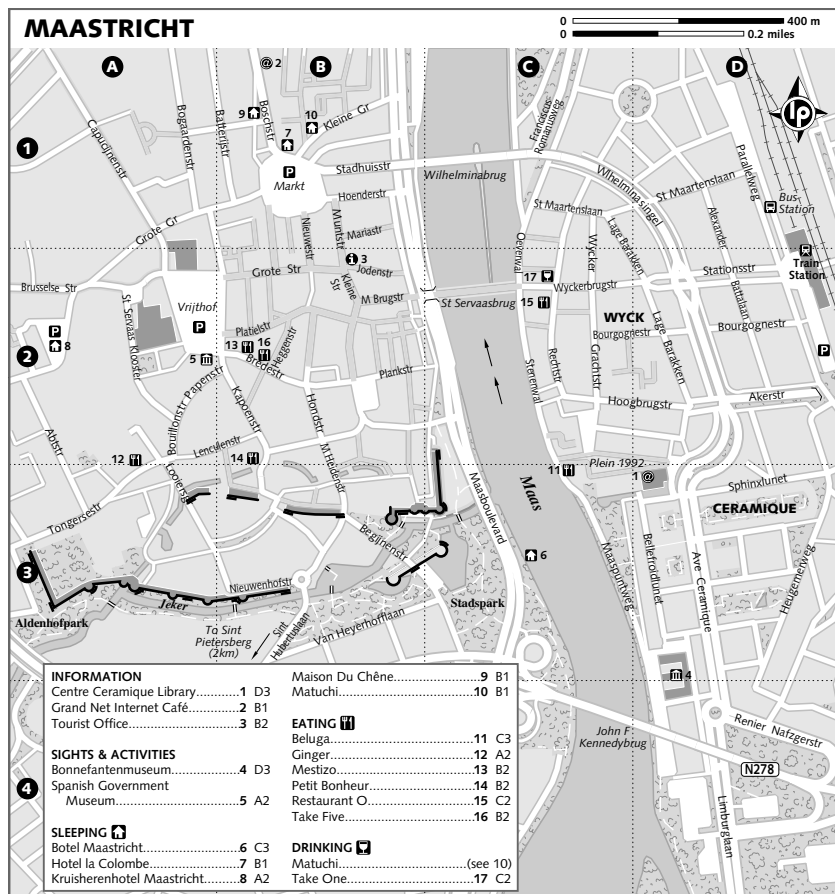
Much of Maastricht is riddled with defensive tunnels dug into the soft sandstone over the centuries. The best place to see the tunnels is **Sint Pietersberg**, a Roman fort 2km south of Helpoort. This is a beautiful area, pastoral and peaceful; the fort is an arresting sight peeking over the hillside.

The Romans built tunnels throughout the hills over a period of 2000 years; at one stage, they even extended under the Netherlands-Belgium border. The tourist office leads spooky, thrilling and highly educational **cave tours** (☎ 321 78 78; per person €3; ☎ tours 3.30pm Jul, Aug & school holidays) – this experience is highly recommended. Although tours are supposed to be in Dutch, ask for Kitty, an extremely knowledgeable, English-speaking guide.

The tourist office can arrange all manner of walking tours, cycling expeditions, and boat cruises on the Maas.

Sleeping

Botel Maastricht (☎ 321 90 23; Maasboulevard 95; s/d €37/58; ☎) Two barges lashed together make up the Botel; the smaller vessel acts as an exemplary deck for beer drinking when the sun's out. Inside, rooms are narrow and portholed for that sea-dog feel, but comfy



enough (assuming you like to suck on your knees at night). There's a beautiful little ship-shape bar inside.

Maison Du Chêne (☎ 321 35 23; www.maastricht-hotel.com; Boschstraat 104; s/d from €40/58) In an elegant 1855 building, the rooms here are very clean and the brasserie on the ground floor is classy. Beware: it's right on the Markt, which can make for a noisy Friday or Saturday night. Ask for rooms at the back.

Matuchi (☎ 354 06 92; Kleine Gracht 34; s/d €50/65) These rooms, above the hip bar of the same name (opposite), are elegant, minimalist and stylish, and surprisingly large for the price. All include flat-screen TVs.

Hotel la Colombe (☎ 321 57 74; www.hotellacolombe.nl; Markt 30; s/d €61/80) Also on the Markt,

Hotel la Colombe is housed in a simple, white building.

Kruissherenhotel Maastricht (☎ 329 20 20, www.chateauhotels.nl; Kruissherenstraat 19-23; s/d from €85/145; 🏠) This stunning option is housed inside the former Crutched Friar monastery complex dating from 1483. They call it a 'designer hotel', but the past hasn't been overwhelmed. Where there are modern touches like moulded furniture and padded walls, they accent the historical surroundings. The rooms feature flat-screen TVs and wall-length paintings. Sumptuous.

Eating

Take Five (☎ 321 09 71; Bredestraat 14; lunch €6, dinner from €12) Situated on a quiet street parallel

to the cramped terraces of heaving Platielstraat, Take Five combines fusion cooking with a stark interior, chill-out music and engaging staff. On many nights there's live jazz.

Ginger (☎ 326 00 22; Tongersestraat 7; mains €10-20) Supersmooth and healthy Asian noodle soups come to Maastricht. And Ginger's the place to get them. Fabulous fresh ingredients in a serene and wonderful contemporary setting.

Mestizo (☎ 327 08 74; www.mestizo.nl; Bredestraat 18; mains €12-19) Need a break from French and Dutch cuisine? Try Mestizo, a very inspired Latin restaurant serving up terrific Spanish and Mexican food. Now, exactly who among us can resist marinated lamb steaks roasted with garlic and chilli? Well, vegetarians, obviously – but there's a reasonable selection for them, too.

Restaurant O (☎ 325 97 47; www.restaurant-o.nl; Rechtstraat 76; mains €18-21) Mmmm...this (mainly) seafood restaurant wins us over with striking, stylish décor, and ever-present, ever-tasty aquatic meals. Lobster soup with mussels and shrimps, anyone? Pan-roasted moonfish? There's even a separate *fruits de mer* (seafood) menu – grand! Fresh and delightful.

Beluga (☎ 321 33 64; www.rest-beluga.com; Plein 1992; 3-course meals from €45; 🍷 lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Tue-Sat) With two Michelin stars, Beluga leads the pack. This sleek, angular, elegant designer restaurant on the Maas features excellent service and Frenchified cuisine that never fails to impress with its attention to detail. Picture lightly steamed sole with pan-fried langoustines and pommes à la tsarine filled with caviar, butter asparagus and a sour cream and black pepper sauce.

Drinking

Take One (☎ 321 64 23; www.takeonebiercafe.nl in Dutch; Rechtsstraat 28) Cramped and narrow from the outside, this 1930s tavern is like Dr Who's Tardis: inside there's well over 100 beers from the most obscure parts of the Benelux. It's run by a husband-and-wife team who organise beer tastings and refer to their customers as 'victims'. Relax: they'll willingly help you select the beer most appropriate to your tastes.

Matuchi (☎ 354 06 92; Kleine Gracht 34) It bills itself as an 'Orient Style Lab', but it's a bit more than that: there's a dash of *A Clock-*

work Orange in the interior design, mixed with *de rigueur* Arabian themes. All in all, a hot joint in which to have a cool drink.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€26.70, 155 minutes, hourly), Rotterdam (€25.70, 140 minutes, two per hour) and Utrecht (€23.10, two hours, hourly).

THE NETHERLANDS DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Always book accommodation ahead, especially during high season; note that many visitors choose to stay in Amsterdam even if travelling elsewhere. The tourist offices operate booking services; when booking for two, make it clear whether you want two single (twin) beds or a double bed.

In cities you should expect to pay under €50 for a double room in a budget hotel, up to €125 in a midrange hotel and from €125 for the top end. Prices are higher in Amsterdam.

Many Dutch hotels have steep stairs but no lifts, although most top-end and some midrange hotels are exceptions.

Accommodation in B&Bs is mostly found in the country – local tourist offices keep a list of B&Bs on file.

In this chapter, breakfast is included in rates unless otherwise specified, as are private bathrooms.

Lists of camping grounds are available from the tourist offices. Expect to pay roughly €8 to €20 for two people and a tent overnight, plus €3 to €6 for a car. The camping grounds have plenty of caravan hook-ups.

Stayokay (☎ 020-501 31 33; www.stayokay.com) is the Dutch hostelling association. A youth hostel card costs €15 at the hostels; non-members pay an extra €2.50 per night and after six nights you're a member. The usual HI discounts apply.

ACTIVITIES

Cycling, skating, windsurfing, sailing, boating and hanging out at the beach are popular Dutch pastimes. Check the tourist offices for further information.

BUSINESS HOURS

The working week starts around lunch time on Monday. For the rest of the week most shops open at 8.30am or 9am and close at 5.30pm or 6pm, except Thursday when many close at 9pm, and on Saturday when they close at 5pm. In Amsterdam and tourist centres you will find many shops open on Sunday. In major centres, supermarkets often have extended trading hours.

Banks are generally open 9am to 4pm or 5pm weekdays. Many museums close on Monday. Post offices open 9am to 5pm weekdays and 10am to 1pm Saturday.

Restaurants are usually open from 11am to 2.30pm or 3pm for lunch, and 5.30pm to 10pm or 11pm for dinner. Most bars open by 11am and close between midnight and 2am. Nightclubs tend to open at 9pm or 10pm and close at 3am or 4am.

In this chapter we have listed opening hours only when they deviate from these standard opening times.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The Netherlands is a safe country, but be sensible all the same: watch for pickpockets in crowded areas, don't leave valuables in cars and *always* lock your bike. Never buy drugs on the street: you'll get ripped off or mugged. And don't light up joints just anywhere – stick to coffee shops.

DISCOUNT CARDS

Available from the museums themselves, a *Museumkaart* gives access to 400 museums across the country for €30 (€17 for under twenty-fives).

The *Cultureel Jongeren Paspoort* (Cultural Youth Passport, CJP; www.cjp.nl; €12.50), available from tourist offices, gives people aged under 27 discounts to museums and cultural events around the country.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Dutch Embassies & Consulates

Australia (☎ 02-6220 9400; www.netherlands.org.au/index.html; 120 Empire Circuit, Canberra, ACT 2600)

Belgium (☎ 02-679 17 11; www.nederlandseambassade.be in Dutch & French; ave Herrmann-Debroux 48, Brussels 1160)

Canada (☎ 613-237 50 30; www.netherlandsembassy.ca; Suite 2020, 350 Albert St, Ottawa, Ont K1R 1A4)

Germany (☎ 030-20 95 60; www.dutchembassy.de in Dutch & German; Friedrichstrasse 95, Berlin, 10117)

New Zealand (☎ 04-471 6390; www.netherlandsembassy.co.nz; Investment House, cnr Ballance & Featherston Sts, Wellington)

UK (☎ 020-7590 3200; www.netherlands-embassy.org.uk; 38 Hyde Park Gate, London SW7 5DP)

USA (☎ 202-244 5300; www.netherlands-embassy.org; 4200 Linnean Ave NW, Washington, DC 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in the Netherlands

In Amsterdam:

France (☎ 530 69 69; www.ambafraance.nl; Vijzelgracht 2)

Germany (☎ 574 77 00; Honthorststraat 36-8)

Italy (☎ 550 20 50; www.italy.nl; Vijzelstraat 79)

Spain (☎ 620 38 11; Frederiksplein 34)

UK (☎ 676 43 43; www.britain.nl; Koningslaan 44)

USA (☎ 575 53 09; http://netherlands.usembassy.gov; Museumplein 19)

In Den Haag:

Australia (☎ 070-310 82 00; Carnegieplein 4)

Belgium (Map p864; ☎ 312 34 56; www.diplomatie.be/thehague; Alexanderveld 97)

Canada (☎ 070-311 16 00; Sophialaan 7)

Denmark (☎ 070-302 59 59; Koninginnegracht 30)

France (Map p864; ☎ 312 58 00; www.ambafraance.nl; Smidsplein 1)

India (☎ 070-346 97 71; Buitenrustweg 2)

Ireland (☎ 070-363 09 93; Dr Kuyperstraat 9)

Israel (☎ 070-376 05 00; Buienhof 47)

Japan (☎ 070-346 95 44; Tobias Asserlaan 2)

New Zealand (☎ 070-346 93 24; Carnegieplein 10-1V)

Norway (☎ 070-311 76 11; Lange Vijverberg 11)

UK (Map p864; ☎ 070-427 04 27; www.britain.nl; Lange Voorhout 10)

USA (Map p864; ☎ 070-310 22 09; http://thehague.usembassy.gov; Lange Voorhout 102)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

February/March

Carnaval Celebrated with greater vigour in Maastricht than anywhere else in Europe, save Venice (Italy) and Sitges (Spain). The orgy of partying and carousing begins the Friday before Shrove Tuesday and lasts until the last person collapses some time on the following Wednesday.

TEFAF Maastricht Art & Antiques Show (www.tefaf.com) Held annually in mid-March.

April

Amsterdam Fantastic Film Festival (www.afff.nl) European and international fantasy, horror and science fiction movies held in late April.

Koninginnedag (Queen's Day) On 30 April it's celebrated countrywide, but especially so in Amsterdam, which becomes awash in orange costumes and fake afros, beer,

balloon animals, beer, dope, Red Bull, beer, leather boys, skater dikes, temporary roller coasters, clogs, clothes horses, fashion victims, grannies and grandpas...

May

Herdenkingsdag & Bevrijdingsdag (Remembrance Day and Liberation Day) Held 4–5 May.

Nationale Molendag (National Windmill Day) On the second Saturday in May, nearly every working windmill in the country opens its doors to visitors.

June

Holland Festival (www.hollandfestival.nl) For all of June the country's biggest music, drama and dance extravaganza centres on Amsterdam. Highbrow and pretentious meet lowbrow and silly.

July

North Sea Jazz Festival (www.northseajazz.nl) The world's largest jazz festival, now held in Rotterdam in mid-July.

August

Gay Pride Canal Parade First Saturday.

FFWD Heineken Dance Parade (www.ffwdheineken.danceparade.nl in Dutch) Rotterdam goes sick, mate, inna urban funky techno stylee in mid-August.

Uitmarkt (www.uitmarkt.nl in Dutch) The reopening of Amsterdam's cultural season for three days in late August.

September

Robodock (www.robodock.org) A full-on, extraordinary festival held in late September that blends technology and art. Humans and robots enact mixed-media performance art and theatre events with pyrotechnics, explosions, live music and projections.

November

Sinterklaas Intocht The Dutch Santa Claus arrives 'from Spain' with his staff in mid-November.

December

Sinterklaas On 5 December, families exchange small gifts ahead of Christmas religious celebrations.

HOLIDAYS

Public Holidays

Nieuwjaarsdag New Year's Day.

Goede Vrijdag Good Friday.

Eerste Paasdag Easter Sunday.

Tweede Paasdag Easter Monday.

Koninginnedag (Queen's Day) 30 April.

Bevrijdingsdag (Liberation Day) 5 May.

Hemelvaartsdag Ascension Day.

Eerste Pinksterdag Whit Sunday (Pentecost).

Tweede Pinksterdag Whit Monday.

Eerste Kerstdag (Christmas Day) 25 December.

Tweede Kerstdag (Boxing Day) 26 December.

School Holidays

Spring Holiday Two weeks in mid-February.

May Holiday First week of the month.

Summer Holiday July, August and sometimes the first few days of September.

Autumn Holiday Second half of October.

Christmas Holiday Two weeks through the first full week of January.

LEGAL MATTERS

The Dutch fuzz are helpful, with a sense of humour. One of their leaflets urges foreigners to seek help if they find themselves in trouble, like falling into a canal stoned: 'Don't be embarrassed,' they say, 'we've seen it all before.' They can hold you for six hours for questioning if you break the law.

Drugs are actually illegal in the Netherlands. Possession of soft drugs up to 5g is tolerated but larger amounts can get you jailed. Hard drugs are treated as a serious crime.

MONEY ATMS

Automatic teller machines can be found outside most banks, at airports and at most train stations. Credit cards such as Visa and MasterCard/Eurocard are widely accepted, as are cash cards that access the Cirrus network.

Credit Cards

Report lost or stolen cards to the following 24-hour numbers:

Amex (☎ 020-504 80 00, 020-504 86 66)

Diners Club (☎ 020-654 55 11)

Eurocard & MasterCard (☎ 030-283 55 55)

Visa (☎ 020-660 06 11)

Moneychangers

Avoid the private exchange booths dotted around tourist areas. Banks and the Postbank (at post offices) stick to official exchange rates and charge a sensible commission, as does the **GWK** (☎ 0900-05 66; www.gwk.nl).

Travellers Cheques

Banks charge a commission to cash travellers cheques (with ID such as a passport).

Thomas Cook and Amex don't charge commission on their own cheques but their rates might be less favourable. Shops, restaurants and hotels always prefer cash; a few might accept travellers cheques but their rates will be anybody's guess.

POST

Post offices are generally open 9am to 5pm weekdays and 10am to 1pm Saturday. Post restante is best handled in Amsterdam.

TELEPHONE

Most public phones will accept credit cards as well as various phonecards. The official KPN-Telecom public phone boxes charge €0.10 per 20 seconds for national calls. The cost of international calls varies depending on the destination, and will change frequently as a result of competition. Ringing a mobile number costs about €0.55 per minute from a public phone. Many public phones accept credit cards, although cards issued outside of the Netherlands or Europe may require extra steps during dialling or may not work at all.

Mobile Phones

The Netherlands uses GSM 900/1800, compatible with the rest of Europe and Australia but not with the North American GSM 1900 (some convertible phones work in both places). Prepaid mobile phones are available at mobile-phone shops starting from around €40 on special.

Phone Codes

To ring abroad, dial ☎ 00 followed by the country code for your target country, the area code (you usually drop the leading 0 if there is one) and the subscriber number. The country code for calling the Netherlands is ☎ 31 and the area code for Amsterdam is ☎ 020; again, drop the leading 0 if you're calling from outside the Netherlands. Do not dial the city code if you are in the area covered by it.

Phonecards

For public telephones, cards are available at post offices, train station counters, VVV and GWK offices and tobacco shops for €5, €10 and €20. The KPN Hi card is the most common but other brands are muscling in – T-Mobile, Orange, Vodafone, Belnet etc –

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Ambulance ☎ 112
- Fire ☎ 112
- Police ☎ 112

with superior rates. Train stations have Telfort phone booths that require a Telfort card (available at GWK offices or ticket counters), although there should be KPN booths nearby.

VISAS

Travellers from Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, the USA and many other countries need only a valid passport (no visa) for a stay of up to three months. European Union nationals can enter for three months with just their national identity card or a passport expired for no more than five years. Nationals of most other countries need a so-called Schengen visa, valid for 90 days within a six-month period. Visa extensions are handled by the **Immigratie en Naturalisatiedienst** (Immigration & Naturalisation Service; ☎ 0900-123 45 61; www.ind.nl; Postbus 30125, 2500 GC Den Haag).

TRANSPORT IN THE NETHERLANDS

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Schiphol airport (AMS; ☎ 0900-01 41; www.schiphol.nl) is the Netherlands' main international airport. **Rotterdam airport** (RTM; ☎ 010 446 34 44; www.rotterdam-airport.nl) is much smaller.

The following airlines have offices in Amsterdam:

Air France (code AF; ☎ 654 57 20; www.airfrance.nl)

British Airways (code BA; ☎ 346 95 59; www.britishairways.com)

British Midland (code BD; ☎ 1332 854 321; www.flybmi.com)

Cathay Pacific (code CX; ☎ 653 20 10; www.cathaypacific.com)

easyJet (code EZY; ☎ 023-568 48 80; www.easyjet.com)

KLM (code WA; ☎ 474 77 47; www.klm.nl)

Lufthansa (code LH; ☎ 582 94 56; www.lufthansa.com)

Northwest Airlines (code WH; ☎ 474 77 47; www.nwa.com)

Qantas (code QF; ☎ 569 82 83; www.qantas.com.au)

Ryanair (code FR; ☎ 0900-2022184; www.ryanair.com)

Transavia (code HV; ☎ 406 04 06; www.transavia.nl)

United Airlines (code UA; ☎ 201 37 08; www.unitedairlines.nl)

Land

BUS

The most extensive European bus network is maintained by **Eurolines** (UK ☎ 08705 143219; www.eurolines.com). It offers a variety of passes with prices that vary by time of year.

Busabout (UK ☎ 020-7950 1661; www.busabout.com) is a UK-based budget alternative. It runs coaches on circuits in Continental Europe including one through Amsterdam; passes are available for two weeks, and for three weeks to three months. Services to/from Amsterdam run from April to October.

Gullivers Reisen (Berlin ☎ 030-3110 2110; www.gullivers.de in German) links Berlin to Amsterdam.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

You'll need the vehicle's registration papers, third party insurance and an international drivers permit in addition to your domestic licence. The **ANWB** (☎ 673 08 44; Museumplein 5; Amsterdam) provides a range of information and services if you show a letter of introduction from your automobile association.

TRAIN

The Netherlands has good train links to Germany, Belgium and France. All Eurail, Inter-Rail, Europass and Flexipass tickets are valid on the Dutch national train service, **Nederlandse Spoorwegen** (Netherlands Railway, NS; international inquiries ☎ 0900-9296; www.ns.nl).

Major Dutch train stations have international ticket offices and, in peak periods, it's wise to reserve seats in advance. You can buy tickets on local trains to Belgium and Germany at normal ticket counters.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Domestic commercial flights link Schiphol to Eindhoven and Maastricht airports, chiefly used by business passengers transferring to international flights at Schiphol; flights are relatively expensive.

Bicycle

The Netherlands has 20,000km of cycling paths. The **ANWB** (☎ 673 08 44; Museumplein 5)

publishes cycling maps for each province, and tourist offices have numerous routes and suggestions. Major roads have separate bike lanes, and, except for motorways, there's virtually nowhere bicycles can't go. You'll often need legs like tree trunks to combat the North Sea headwinds.

More than 100 stations throughout the country have bicycle facilities for rental, protected parking, repair and sales. To hire, in most cases you'll need to show your passport and leave an imprint of your credit card or a deposit. Private operators charge €6 to €8 per day, and €30 to €35 per week. Train station hire shops may be slightly cheaper.

Boat

Ferries connect the mainland with the five Frisian Islands. Other ferries span the Westerschelde in the south of Zeeland, providing road links to the bit of the Netherlands south of here as well as to Belgium. These are popular with people using the Zeebrugge ferry terminal and run frequently year-round. There is also a frequent ferry service on the IJsselmeer linking Enkhuizen with Stavoren and Urk. You'll also find a few small river ferries providing crossings for remote stretches of the IJssel and other rivers.

Renting a boat is a popular way to tour the many rivers, lakes and inland seas. Boats come in all shapes and sizes, from canoes to motorboats to small sailing boats to large and historic former cargo sloops. Prices vary widely, and there are hundreds of rental firms throughout the country.

Bus & Tram

Buses are used for regional transport rather than for long distances. The national *Strippenkaart* (strip card) is used on most regional buses and trams. The fares are zone-based – in most towns you punch two strips (one for the journey and one for the zone), with an additional strip for each additional zone. In the central areas of cities and towns, you usually will only need to stamp two strips – the minimum fee. A 15-strip card costs €6.70 and is available at tobacco shops, post offices, train-station counters, bookshops and newsagencies.

Plans are afoot to phase out the *Strippenkaart* by the end of 2007 and replace it

with chip cards. At the time of research information was thin on the ground, but the cards will work like debit cards: money can be loaded onto them, then used to validate travel on buses, trams and metro. For more information, consult a tourist office or train station ticketing office. The authorities were also working on phasing out coin-operated ticket machines and luggage lockers at train stations, but apparently you will still be able to ask a human for service.

Car & Motorcycle

DRIVING LICENCE

You'll need to show a valid driving licence when hiring a car in the Netherlands. Visitors from outside the EU will also need an international driving permit (IDP). Car-rental firms will rarely ask for one, but the police might do so if they pull you up.

HIRE

Outside Amsterdam, the car-hire companies can be in inconvenient locations if you're arriving by train. You must be at least 23 years of age to hire a car in the Netherlands. Some car-hire firms levy a small surcharge for drivers under 25. Most will ask either for a deposit or a credit-card imprint as a guarantee of payment.

INSURANCE

When hiring a car we strongly recommend you take out collision damage waiver (CDW), an insurance policy that limits your financial liability for damage. Note that at most car-rental firms, CDW does not cover the first €500 to €1000 of damages incurred, so you're liable for this amount.

ROAD RULES

Traffic travels on the right and the minimum driving age is 18 for vehicles and 16 for motorcycles. Seat belts are required and children under 12 must ride in the back if there's room. Trams always have the right of way and if turning right, bikes have priority. At roundabouts approaching vehicles have right of way, but in practice they yield to vehicles already travelling on the roundabout.

Speed limits are 50km/h in built-up areas, 80km/h in the country, 100km/h on major through-roads, and 120km/h on freeways (sometimes 100km/h, clearly indicated). The blood-alcohol limit when driving is 0.05%.

Train

The train network is run by **Nederlandse Spoorwegen** (☎ national inquiries 0900-9296; www.ns.nl). Trains have 1st-class sections but they're hardly different from the 2nd-class areas.

Tickets can be bought at the window (for an extra €0.50 for one ticket, €1 for two or more) or from ticket machines. At the machine, check your destination and enter its code. Choose 1st/2nd class, then *zonder/met korting* (without/with discount), and finally *vandaag geldig/zonder datum* (valid today/without date). 'Without date' is for travel on another day; stamp the ticket in a yellow gadget near the platforms.

Consider a one-year Voordeel-Urenkaart (€55) for a 40% discount on travel weekdays after 9am, on weekends and public holidays, and all of July and August. The discount applies to up to three people on the same trip, as well as up to 65% cheaper evening returns from 6pm.