

AMSTERDAM

There's never a dull moment in one of Europe's most vibrant and cultured cities, reports **Luciano Di Gregorio**.

WHY GO?

Sporting the elusive appearance of a small town but the vibe of an epic metropolis, Amsterdam is the pulsating heart of Dutch culture. Few cities have so rapidly evolved from a sleepy fishing village to a distinguished world centre of social liberalism. From its time as the wealthiest and most important port in Europe during the Middle Ages, Amsterdam has welcomed and fostered all conceivable elements, and with just cause. Water may be the determining factor of Amsterdam life but a propensity towards all things wild and wacky is its driving force. Throw into the mix impossibly picturesque canals dotted with crooked ancient buildings, an arts scene to cherish and a dining experience to knock your socks off, and Amsterdam becomes the ideal destination for an all-encompassing getaway catering to an eclectic range of tastes. From the delights of slow-food cafés framed by 16th-century houses and world-class museums to the fast paced and convivial nightlife, it's all waiting for you in the Dutch capital.

WHAT TO DO

Don those walking shoes and bicycle clips and beat the bumpy waterside pavements. Amsterdam is a rewarding walking and cycling city full of nooks and crannies begging to be explored. Start your day on Damrak, across the road from Amsterdam's Central Station, and become enthralled in the fast-paced spectacle of life as the locals sit down for breakfast and the smell of freshly brewed coffee lingers in the air. Damrak, dotted with restaurants, museums and backpacker haunts, is an arterial lifeline of Amsterdam and can become quite busy in

the evenings but look past this and admire the city's unique architecture.

If Damrak is the artery, then Dam Square (or simply 'The Dam'), some 700 metres from Central Station, is the heart of the city as it is here where all Amsterdam experiences inevitably converge at some point. Spend some time appreciating the opulent Royal Palace, a former city hall converted into a royal residence early in the 19th century. The Nieuwe Kerk (New Church), built in the 14th century, is found beside the Royal Palace and is one of the most important buildings in the city. No longer used for church services it now hosts a variety of museum exhibits. The opposite side of the square is flanked by the National Monument, a war memorial erected in 1956.

Leave the buzz of the Dam and wind your way to Nieuwendijk, a narrow street running parallel to Damrak. Its history stretches back to the 12th century, making it one of the oldest shopping districts in Amsterdam. Nieuwendijk is brimming with quirky boutiques and high street chain stores that will easily part you from your hard earned cash. Once you've finished spending your entire holiday fund head to Herenstraat for a spot of canal life before heading southwest to the Anne Frank House. Located on Prinsengracht, the famous house-turned-museum made famous by the popular *Diary of Anne Frank*, is perhaps one of the most worthwhile and sobering cultural experiences to be had in Europe. The bedroom of Anne Frank, with a number of her posters and pictures still adorning its walls, evokes both a sense of sadness and inspiration.

Leave the droves of visitors behind and immerse

Below: Amsterdam is famed for its many architectural styles. The landmark gabled buildings are all found inside the old city which is ringed by 17th century canals known as the Grachtengordel.



Opposite page (clockwise from top): The best way to see the city is with a canal cruise; Traditional Dutch porcelain for sale at a stall in Waterlooplein market; A multi-storey bicycle parking lot near Central Station; Photo opportunity in front of the 'I Love Amsterdam' sign at the Rijks museum; Amsterdam fans out south from Central Station; Poached egg with hollandaise sauce over asparagus is a popular local dish; The 17th-century Royal Palace is found on Dam Square; Damrak is Amsterdam's oldest shopping street; Self-portrait of the artist at the Van Gogh Museum.



GRAPHIC

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Above: Tourists, trams and street musicians all meet at the outdoor cafés on Rembrandt Platz in summer.

yourself in Amsterdam's unrivalled café culture at Spanjer & Van Twist, one block north of the Anne Frank Museum. Sitting at a waterside terrace is a favourite pastime of all locals and it is the best vantage point for watching the real Amsterdam at play. Amongst the splashes of water in the canal and the pink-haired mohawks of Dutch teenagers whizzing past in flashes of colour, you will notice the Amsterdam Tulip Museum, across the canal from the famed café. Here, you can gaze wistfully at the much loved flower and delve into its complicated history.

Next, hop on a bike and wind your way through the narrow laneways lined with chocolate shops and framed by old bridges to the area around the National Museum. A stroll through the greenery of Vondelpark is a must before delving into the country's most treasured display of art and historical artefacts at the Rijksmuseum and the amazing collection of paintings at the Van Gogh Museum.

WHERE TO STAY

For airport convenience, stay at the excellent value Hotel Ibis at Amsterdam International Airport. The rooms may be of the no frills variety, but they are comfortable. Prices start at around €69 and the hotel provides a free and frequent shuttle service to the airport, from where Amsterdam city centre is easily reached by train. Alternatively, Sofitel's The Grand, right in the thick of the action, lacks very little. The opulent common areas complement the wonderful rooms. Prices average around €250 per night.

WHAT TO EAT AND DRINK

Whilst the neighbouring Belgians may not agree, some of the best French fries in Europe are to be had along Damrak. Keep an eye out for a vendor, and do smother the fries in the city's popular mayonnaise. To wash it all down, head to the canal-side De Gekraakte Ketel (The Cracked Kettle), a pub specialising in over 500 beers from all corners of the globe. For a classy dinner, go to D'Vijff Vlieghe (The Five Flies), a quirky Dutch institution frequented by the who's who of Amsterdam.

There are some who claim the Dutch only have food – not cuisine. They are mistaken. There are a number of staple Dutch dishes to try, most of which include filling portions of meat and potatoes. But for a different kind of culinary experience try a dish such as asparagus hollandaise. Whilst it is widely thought that the sauce originated in

France, Dutch historians believe it was conjured up on Dutch soil. Accompany the dish with a variety of Dutch cheeses and finish off your meal with a warm apple pie.

TRIP TIP

Driving in central Amsterdam is a nightmare and therefore the city is a cyclist's haven. Avoid walking on dedicated cycling lanes, which are clearly marked throughout town.

MUST DO

Water is intrinsic to Amsterdam life and so a canal cruise is a definite must. Amsterdam Canal Cruises (amsterdamcanalcruises.nl) offers a comprehensive circuit of the historical city centre for just €13. For around an hour and 15 minutes you can observe the spectacle that is Amsterdam life slowly passing you by. ❖

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Whilst Amsterdam does experience very cold winters, its position close to the coast means that temperatures are moderated by the sea. December to January can be wet and cold. For sunny days and pleasant temperatures visit between May and September. Autumn is a particularly striking time in Amsterdam as the trees shed their leaves and the canals seem to become wider and more visible. The official currency is the Euro (€1 = \$1.33 approximately).

GETTING THERE

EMIRATES flies daily between Dubai and Amsterdam. Visit emirates.com or emirates-holidays.com for further information.

RESOURCES

The Dutch tourist board's *I AM AMSTERDAM* website (iamamsterdam.com) contains a wealth of information including accommodation options, places to visit, shopping guides and canal cruise bookings.

FURTHER READING

The *GET LOST! COOL GUIDE TO AMSTERDAM* explores the quirky side of Amsterdam and highlights various options for a wild and wacky holiday. Try the *ROUGH GUIDE AMSTERDAM* for a comprehensive look at everything the city has to offer.

FAST FACT

Amsterdam is a hive of cultural buzz as the city boasts the world's highest number of museums per square kilometre. Officially, there are over 50 museums in Amsterdam. The city also has more bicycles (around one million) than people, with its population of around 750,000.