



TRAVEL

Amsterdam: Venice of the North



By Richard Levy

Only one city has the most Van Gogh's, the most canals, the most bridges, the most Rembrandts, the most windmills and most of just about everything you'd ever want in one place: Amsterdam. So for the "most" vacation you'll ever take, you must consider going to Amsterdam: the perfect city for an unforgettable one-week vacation and one of my favorites. In fact I could see myself living there if I could just find an old windmill that's been converted into a cozy condo. (Hard to find and very expensive, once you do.)

I've been to Amsterdam many times, but I'll never forget my first visit, in the summer of '75. I was in my twenties, had just graduated and needed to let my hair down. So of course, I went to Amsterdam. A Dutch hippie sold me a half-price ticket to the Dutch production of the Broadway musical, Hair, while I was hanging out in the Leidseplein, the main square, on my first day there. Since I never saw Hair in NY, I was thrilled and totally mesmerized for the next three hours, without understanding a single word of the songs, probably because they were singing them in Dutch.

Over the next ten days I discovered that Amsterdam had much in common with the vitality of Hair. Amsterdam and its people, no matter their age, seemed to possess the same irreverent and inspirational vibes which Hair had so dramatically projected. I lost myself in one of Amsterdam's chaotic, booming underground discos, where in the wee hours, I met a lovely Finnish architectural student, with whom I spent the rest of my vacation. In fact, I still remember how to say: "I love you" in Finnish: "Mina rakastan sinua".

Whatever your age, Amsterdam will make you feel young, alive and optimistic;

it is a place where you feel anything is possible --and it usually is. Amsterdam is a place that is old and new at the same time; traditional and groundbreaking; religious, yet very liberal. Amsterdam is a bustling modern city. Shops are filled with fashions by acclaimed Dutch designers, product design worthy of MOMA, galleries with artwork and architecture that's 20 years ahead of its' time.

The Dutch love food. The city has eight Guide Michelin restaurants and the Dutch appear to be snacking all day long. Their favorite snacks are "Flemish frites" served in paper cones with mayo. Residents of this city by the sea also love their herring, sold from small street carts. FEBO vending machines are everywhere, filled with delectable and affordable snacks, their favorite being Kroketter: breaded and fried dough-balls or croquettes filled with a variety of delicious things. (Try to eat just one.) The Dutch also adore their stroomwafels, delicious waffles filled with caramel and cinnamon syrup. For breakfast, Dutch kids still eat an old-fashioned favorite: bread and butter smothered with chocolate sprinkles. For charming Dutch cafes, you can't go wrong with any of their very old Brown Cafés, where local folks have been stopping by for a beer and good conversation for over 300 years.

Vacationing in Amsterdam is easy: the Dutch all speak English. Friendly and hospitable; they will stop to help you --or even take you to where you are going. I was surprised to learn that Amsterdam has more "canals" than Venice and so is referred to as, "The Venice of the North." Not surprisingly, this city of canals also has more bridges than any other city in the world.

Amsterdam boasts more paintings by Van Gogh and Rembrandt than all the of the world's museums combined. They also have the largest Red Light



Oude kerk

District of any city, but it is not as the name suggests. Amsterdam's Red Light District is the very charming historic part of the city where almost nothing' has changed since the 1700's. The district is filled with wonderful little restaurants, intimate bars, boisterous cafes, coffee shops serving marijuana, lovely little hotels and unusual boutiques. Of course, since it's the Red Light District, you'll find working girls on display in windows of small shops, but only in one small area.

You must rent a bike to experience Amsterdam the way the locals do, but be sure to follow all the bike-traffic rules, by watching how the natives ride and they don't wear helmets. You will find bike rentals in main squares for 14 Euros a day and for memorable bike tours, check out "Orange Bikes". Be sure to take a bike tour to the huge, stunning tulip fields outside of Amsterdam.

If you are not an art lover, you will be one, after a visit to the Van Gogh Museum, home to more of Van Gogh's paintings, than all of the world's museums combined. Not far from the Van Gogh Museum is the Rijksmuseum, one of the finest museums in the world. Spend at least 20 minutes admiring Rembrandt's magnificent painting, Night Watch.

Check out his other renowned painting, The Jewish Bride, showing a couple's intimate caress. This painting so much impressed Van Gogh, he reportedly told a friend, "I would give ten years of my life to be allowed to sit before this painting for 14 days with just a crust of bread to eat". Afterwards, visit the "Stedelijk Museum," one of the world's best collections of modern masters like Picasso, Mondrian and Warhol. And finally, take a taxi to the other side of town and visit the Museum Het Rembrandthuis, the ancient house



Self Portrait, Vincent Van Gough

on a canal where Rembrandt lived and painted from 1639 to 1658. His studio looks exactly the way it did when he was alive. In fact, you can imagine him coming right back at any moment. Be sure to visit Amsterdam's most popular tourist attraction and one of the grandest buildings in Europe, The Royal Palace built in 1665, when Holland was of the wealthiest countries in the world. Amsterdam's oldest building is the Oude Kerk, a magnificent church built in 1300.

Where should you stay in this living museum of a city? I strongly suggest, that since you are in "the Venice of the North, you must stay in a charming, small hotel next to one of its canals. My favorite is the Seven Bridges, but you might also enjoy the Canal House or the "Seven-on-Seven Hotel, which is not on a canal but definitely the most romantic place to stay.

On your first night in Amsterdam, make reservations at a restaurant right on one of the many canals. The Cafe Restaurant Open, sits on top of an old railway bridge and De Belhamel offers stunning views of the canal. On a sunny day stroll through beautiful Vongelpark, the largest park in Amsterdam, filled with flowered paths and street musicians: a destination for lovers and a great place to mingle with the local folks.

I suggest that you plan to visit the "Anne Frank Huis" late in the afternoon when the long lines are a bit shorter. Once inside the house you'll walk up a flight of stairs and on the landing will be a bookcase; actually it's a revolving bookcase and then you'll walk up another very steep, narrow flight of stairs into the dark, damp, cramped living quarters where Anne Frank and her family lived and hid until she was eventually betrayed by a neighbor and sent to Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, where she died. You'll see the bed she slept in and her precious diary, enclosed in a glass case. A very moving

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Leidseplein, Amsterdam



Design, Amsterdam



Tulip Fields



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experience for anyone, but more so for me, you see my relatives in Hungary were taken away by the Nazis and exterminated, just two weeks before the war ended. As you can imagine, tears filled my eyes as I peered into Anne's brief sanctuary, imagining what a strong, brave young woman Anne must have been.

Be sure to take a boat trip around the canals in an open boat so wind can rush through your hair. You will be awed by the spectacular houses that line the canals. Many houses are hundreds of years old and leaning every which way, requiring support beams to keep them from toppling into canals.

As for my favorite restaurants, for authentic Dutch cooking try, La Falote and order their stewed fish or meatballs with endives, or "Gebr Hartering" for a full menu of Dutch favorites. At Buffet Van Ordette, order the old-fashioned, but popular, Dutch dish stamppott, or "steam pot" which is potatoes mashed with veggies and served with smoked sausage.

One night, splurge and go to one of Amsterdam's eight Guide Michelin restaurants, my favorite is, Ciel Bleu, 23 stories above Amsterdam offering spectacular food and panoramic vistas. (If you are trying to stretch your budget,

just go for drinks, take in the great view and order their Guide Michelin" bar snacks.) Ron Gastobar is another Guide Michelin restaurant famous for its Dutch tapas, or try De Kas, famous because it is a greenhouse that's also a restaurant, serving only what it grows: Vegan Heaven. Also consider dining at Pont 13, a charming restaurant nestled in an old car ferry on a canal. For Indonesian food (the Dutch occupied Indonesia for years), go to Sama Sebo, and order their delicious rice table or riptafel: 17 small dishes filled with beef, chicken, fish, veggies and rice for about \$30 (enough for to share). For the very best frites in Amsterdam, it's worth the wait on the long line at the famous, Vleminick, hole-in-the-wall frite stand.

Which airline should you take to Amsterdam? I'd consider KLM, the Dutch airline, they have most non-stop flights and you'll also get fabulous Dutch hospitality. Research the best fares for dates you're considering at KLM.com. (For a rate comparison, go to google.com/travel.) Save some shopping money for Schiphol Airport on your way home for great savings on Duty Free shopping. Allow plenty of time to get there so you have time to really shop. Bring home some Delft plates for your mother-in-law, wooden shoes for your kids or grandkids, prints of your favorite Van Gogh paintings,



Statue Rembrandt, Amsterdam

Stroopwafels, bottles of "Jenever" Dutch Gin, some Dutch Tulip Bulbs (check to see if US Customs will allow you to bring these into the country), and a wheel of "Dutch Cheese". (You can only bring back "hard cheeses".)

For more information about Amsterdam go to Holland.com. To send an email requesting information send to: information@Holland.com.

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Mills, Zaanse Schans



Central Train Station Amsterdam David Bourw VisitFlanders.com



Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, Amsterdam



Open Garden Days, Amsterdam

COMMUNITY

Cratered: Our Streets Are Pockmarked With Potholes

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the out-of-power Republicans? What is their excuse for silence and inaction? Have they nothing to offer?

Herein, the inherent weakness of the modern democratic model: minority party legislators (and in New Rochelle, they are lucky to hold even one seat, never mind two) are obsessively concerned with retaining their precariously held offices. So nervous are they that the majority faction, or just an unprofessional civil servant in the normally professional city hall bureaucracy will be incensed at their criticisms of the city's precarious state of health and the condition of its physical plant, that they would rather be silent when constructive voices of protest are needed most!

How has the state of our democracy gotten so bad? Little is reported on the issue and few seem to really care. As noted earlier, print coverage, has decreased with the proliferation of cable and social media. Westchester's slenderized daily newspaper devoted a cover story to the deterioration of our roadways recently, but it focused mainly on the futility of seeking county and state compensation for related property damage; left unmentioned was the perversity of so much infrastructural squalor in the midst of so much private wealth and possible means of redress.

Ultimately, the fault lies with an electorate that accepts the status quo, party machine domination, (usually Democratic party-based, but not exclusively so), and general and widespread public complaisance.

There are some "swells" in my neighborhood who would refuse a sirloin steak served two degrees too cold at their favorite restaurant, but who have no opinion on the sorry state of governance and livability in their hometown. Few have a clue that they are paying double for the over-funded Department of Public Works collection of garbage and recyclables thanks to an unprecedented and sleazy (but so-far NYS Supreme Court sanctioned) three-year old garbage tax. Most couldn't name their local councilperson, county legislator or state or federal representative (but likely know the identity of the mayor courtesy of city hall and public school press operations).

Until the local gentry become sensitized to the issues of municipal safety, living quality and governance, there seems to be little prospect for improvement on this year's abominable driving landscape, next winter. The DPW budget of some \$22 million already strains New Rochelle's ability to pay, and as-yet uncalculated millions more (certainly an appropriate future research project) will be required for the men, women and materials necessary for improved planning, maintenance and reconstruction.

But the public is not powerless and palliative measures are available. In government as well as in business, economic conditions change, "Acts of G-d" intrude and environmental conditions vary which might justify increased funding of one department,

The last Republican Senator from New York, Alphonse D'Amato, was often dismissed by the fancy pants of the Democratic and (now extinct) Liberal parties as "Senator Pothole." This was no compliment of course; the elitists were simply trying to portray this assuredly non-intellectual Long Island pol as a mere doer of deeds, instead of an advocate of airy rhetoric like the hallowed Governor Mario Cuomo. After this season's disgraceful record of roadway maintenance and repair, however, what wouldn't New York State voters "give" to find a modern day "Senator, Congresswoman, Assemblyman or councilor Pothole?"

Call your nearest elected representative; inform him or her of the parlous state of the community's "public works" (as if he weren't aware of it himself!). Let him know how your locality's "value proposition" stacks up against that of a neighboring town or village, and how this reflects upon his abilities as a public servant.

If he or she is flummoxed by your charge or does not comprehend potholes to be this year's most serious threat to community safety and public health, commit yourself to voting the laggard out of office at the next opportunity.

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