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PORT GUIDE AMSTERDAM

The Dutch capital's forward-thinking approach to culture and creativity makes it the ultimate art and architecture hub, says Rashmi Narayan



Flicking through a guidebook in a park near Leidseplein, I'm interrupted mid-sentence by Amsterdam local Anneke and her dog. "This city is so much more than what that book is telling you," she says with a smile. She then points to a hand-carved wooden figure fixed to a tree above me – a tiny woodcutter, frozen mid-saw. "That's Amsterdam. A work of art just sitting there for no real reason. You have to look around to really experience it."

She's right. Fortunately, you don't have to venture far to see Amsterdam through a local's lens. Wherever you look, gabled merchant houses slant like falling dominoes, geraniums spill over bridges and cyclists weave past canals lined with graceful elms. There are intimate jazz clubs, vinyl record shops and indie cinemas aplenty, yet the 'Venice of the North' is also home to the futuristic NEMO Science Museum and new contemporary galleries celebrating boundary-pushing art. In fact, whatever your tastes, this is a city that welcomes you with open arms.

3 UNMISSABLE THINGS TO DO

ANNE FRANK HOUSE

Up the steep stairs of a modest canal house lies this sobering but essential pilgrimage for all first-time visitors. Here is the secret annexe where the teenage Anne Frank and her family hid from the Nazis for 761 days, until they were discovered and sent to their deaths in 1944. Their hiding place has been preserved, and you can still see faint pencil markings on the walls, made by Anne's father to track the heights of his children. Light filters through gauze curtains, floors slope underfoot and you quickly realise that you stand where eight people whispered, waited and listened for footsteps below.

CANAL CRUISE

Amsterdam's 165 canals have been the city's lifeblood for centuries and were pivotal to its transformation from a small medieval town to a booming centre of trade in the 17th century.

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT
Modern art meets the Old Masters at the Rijksmuseum; a classic canalside scene; Anne Frank House

Book a private tour with Amsterdam Odyssey to get a unique perspective on the city's architecture. Canals widen and narrow as you drift beneath historic bridges, past merchant houses, waterside cafés and opulent hotels.

RIJKSMUSEUM

Located in the heart of the leafy Museumplein district, the Rijksmuseum is where Amsterdam exhibits its most precious treasures, with more than 8,000 works spanning 800 years of Dutch art and history. Stroll these grand hallways and marvel at world-famous masterpieces including Rembrandt's brooding *The Night Watch*, Vermeer's serene domestic scenes and Van Gogh's self-portraits. A new £50m sculpture park is set to open this autumn, expanding the museum's contemporary art collection via a combination of permanent and temporary exhibits. ▶



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The Anne Frank mural at NDSM Wharf; relaxing in Vondelpark; the Prinsengracht, one of the city's four main canals



3 ACTIVITIES FOR REPEAT VISITORS

OFFBEAT

Take the ferry across the IJ waterfront to NDSM Wharf, once a derelict former shipyard, now a canvas for Amsterdam's experimental artists. Vibrant murals depict icons from Anne Frank to Frida Kahlo, while daredevils bungee-jump from cranes overhead. Once a month, the wharf is taken over by Europe's largest flea market. For a €6.50 entry fee you can shop for vintage clothes, antique maps and all manner of unusual souvenirs from this richly cultured city.

OUTDOOR

Ask any Amsterdammer where they go to get away from it all on a sunny day and they'll point you in the direction of Vondelpark. Grab picnic supplies and spread a blanket beside the open-air theatre - time it right and you'll be front and centre for one of the park's impromptu shows. Afterwards, stroll through the beautiful rose garden or go searching for Picasso's *l'Oiseau*, a huge concrete sculpture in the form of a bird, donated by the artist to mark the park's centenary in 1965.

The Begijnhof is a rare glimpse of medieval history, preserved almost completely intact

UNIQUE

Step through an unassuming doorway into the Begijnhof, a courtyard hidden in the spider's web of Amsterdam's canals. Houses encircle a quiet garden where visitors must keep absolute silence. Admire the city's oldest wooden home, the Houten Huys, and tiptoe into the chapel, where paintings depict the Miracle of Amsterdam - a 14th-century event that enshrined the city as a place of pilgrimage. It's a rare glimpse of medieval history, preserved almost completely intact.



4 ACTIVITIES FOR CURIOUS CRUISERS

SOLO TRAVELLERS

Resembling a Bond villain's HQ, the striking Eye Filmmuseum dominates the IJ waterfront. Inside, explore more than 60,000 films, from silent-era classics to experimental international screenings, alongside engaging exhibitions on Dutch cinema. After wandering the galleries, step next door to A'DAM Lookout, a sky-scraping observation deck offering panoramic views of the city and an 'over the edge' swing that's the highest in Europe (€7.50 a go, if you're feeling brave).

COUPLES

Spend a morning at the Van Gogh Museum where you can admire the brushstrokes of *Starry Night* and *Sunflowers*. Then take a private canal cruise with Romantic Tour (romanticamsterdamtour.com) and experience *gezelligheid*, the Dutch word for feeling warm and cosy. Alternatively, make a day of it and rent an e-bike or tandem from MacBike for a guided tour around charming nearby Dutch villages such as Monnickendam and Broek in Waterland.

KIDS

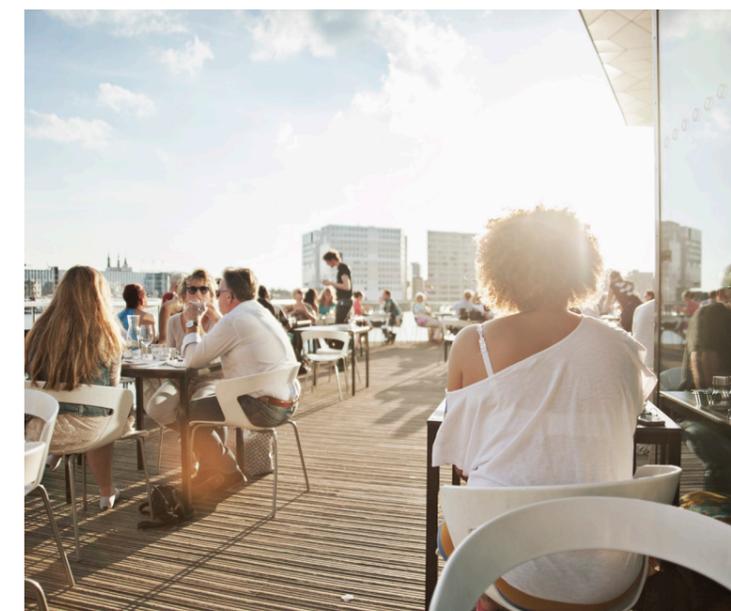
Some people have the idea that Amsterdam isn't child-friendly, but that's far from the truth. Treat the tribe to a visit to Artis Royal Zoo, where they can explore the aquarium and planetarium, then head to Micropia - a fascinating on-site museum with more than 40 species of living microbe for them to examine under microscopes. A short walk away is the National Maritime Museum, which is also well worth a visit for its insights into the Netherlands' rich seafaring history.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Amsterdam is a city built for two-wheeled exploration; drinks on the terrace outside the Eye Filmmuseum; street art at NDSM Wharf

MULTI-GEN FAMILIES

The Wereldmuseum is educational for all age groups, sharing honest stories of the country's colonial past and exploring the Dutch impact on communities in Indonesia, the Caribbean and South America. Alternatively, join a guided walk in Amsterdamse Bos, a vast forest south of the city, where freely grazing Highland cattle provide plenty of photo ops. ▶



3 PLACES TO EAT

BUDGET

Stroopwafels, thin waffles sandwiching sticky caramel syrup, originated in 18th-century Gouda as a way to use leftover crumbs. Meanwhile, the tiny fluffy pancakes known as *poffertjes* have been enjoyed since the 17th century, cooked over charcoal and dusted with icing sugar. You can try both at the 120-year-old Albert Cuyp Market. Or, for a cheap and cheerful savoury snack, grab a *frikandel* (fried Dutch sausage) from a FEBO vending machine.

MID-RANGE

Foodhallen is a vibrant indoor market housed in a former tram depot, with benches for shared dining and plenty of lively chatter. Slurp fresh oysters, sip locally brewed ales or browse the dozens of food stalls offering everything from Mexican and Vietnamese to macarons and burgers. Alternatively, there's Rijsel restaurant on Marcusstraat, serving French/Flemish fusion cuisine in a converted school (don't miss the excellent rotisserie chicken).

Dine high above the city, tasting caviar and vadouvan-spiced red mullet

PREMIUM

Everyone knows that the most memorable meals come with a view. At legendary Ciel Bleu, you dine high above the city, tasting caviar and vadouvan-spiced red mullet, with floor-to-ceiling windows framing the canals below.

For something equally classy but quietly radical, book a table at Flore. Chef Bas van Kranen's two Michelin stars crown a plant-forward menu shaped by smoking and fermentation, using local ingredients (even tulips) and paired with an award-winning wine list.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Flore's dining room; choices at Foodhallen; a Dutch stroopwafel



LOCAL INSIGHT



"Amsterdam may just be the best place in the world to drink beer. Its rich history has shaped a culture that's self-assured yet outward-looking. Top spots are Café Golle, Arendest and In de Wildeman."

JAMES KELLOW
beer sommelier



"The Haarlemmerdijk is one of the most scenic shopping streets in Amsterdam. Don't be surprised if you run into beautifully dressed stilt walkers or a bunch of dogs in a cargo bike."

SIGRID STANKOT
writer



"My favourite street is Zandhoek, home to restaurant Tannay, where you can eat on the terrace during spring and summer. It's one of the oldest streets, and if only the walls could talk."

SABINE DE WITTE
journalist



ABOVE Centrally located, the Pulitzer hotel offers an inviting cocktail bar

HOW TO TRAVEL RESPONSIBLY

Given how walkable Amsterdam is, you can reduce your carbon footprint a fair bit by getting to each destination on foot. And if you want to give something back to the local community, find projects through Volunteer Centre Amsterdam (vca.nu), where you can sign up and join short-term activities including cooking for the homeless.

SAVE

Hotel Arena

In the trendy neighbourhood of Oosterparkbuurt is Hotel Arena, a former youth hub where artists like Oasis and Norah Jones performed. By the leafy Oosterpark, it is conveniently close to the canals, independent shops and restaurants. Even their basic room looks extravagant, as it is set over two levels with a high ceiling and park views. hotelarena.nl

WHERE TO STAY

SPLURGE

Pulitzer Hotel

Historic architecture meets modern luxury at the Pulitzer. Apart from its ideal location at Prinsengracht, near the trendy Jordaan district, the hotel offers family suites with beautiful canal views and a sizeable living room, so it's ideal if you're travelling with children. And once the kids are in bed, the Pulitzer's stylish bar is the perfect place to sample *jenever*, the locals' favourite spirit. pulitzeramsterdam.com

Get on board

Cunard 7-night Zeebrugge voyage aboard *Queen Victoria*, return from Southampton via Zeebrugge, Amsterdam and Cherbourg, departing 27 November 2026, from £699 cunard.com

Have you cruised to or from Amsterdam? Share your story with us at hello@worldofcruising.co.uk