



When It's Spring Again

Fifteen years after her last visit to the Dutch capital, VERNE MAREE drops into Amsterdam for three short days in search of the things of spring: tulips, new herring and the Late Rembrandt exhibition at the Rijk's Museum.

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Did you know?

In the 13th century, a bunch of entrepreneurial types built a rough system of dikes and dams in the Amstel River – hence “Amsteldam” – as a base from which to demand tolls from passing herring and beer traders. Count Floris of Holland granted the growing merchant town special toll privileges and it got its first charter in 1300.

The five-star Hotel Krasnapolsky – or, to give it its full name, the NH Amsterdam Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky – was where Roy and I stayed last time; so, being creatures of habit, here we are again. Located on Dam Square, opposite the Royal Palace, it’s a veritable institution at the very heart of Amsterdam, where the city began.

Named for the German-born tailor of Polish extraction who opened a Polish coffee shop, added a few hotel rooms and determinedly expanded that modest site over the next several decades,

Hotel Krasnapolsky’s “grand” legacy is nowadays most apparent in the magnificent Winter Garden restaurant – an expanse of black-and-white chequered floor-tiles with a soaring Victorian-style wrought iron and glass ceiling.

Service is luxurious but low-key. Having just seen that marvellous film *The Grand Hotel Budapest*, I’m trying hard to make a connection. It might just be there in the series of young Eastern European-looking men who bring Roy different pillows from the pillow menu until they finally get it just right.



DAY ONE

You can cover a lot in a day if you put your mind to it, as long as your hotel is centrally located. Our 7am arrival on Singapore Airlines at Schipol Airport gets us to the hotel by 8.30am, swiftly checked into our Superior Room, and soon heading out through the back of the hotel down to the canal – and right in the middle of the Red Light District.

It's Sunday morning coming down, with a vengeance. We're here before anyone's had time to clean up the seamy, graffiti-plastered and vomit-streaked canal-side paths and streets, and, to be honest, it's not the best re-introduction to Amsterdam.

Prostitution is both legal and regulated here, of course; even at 9am on the Sabbath, a scattering of bored-looking and variously naked women are on show from behind their street-side windows. (You're not supposed to photograph them, remember.) Let's just say that the light of morning shows a harsher reality than the kinder light of a summer evening, especially without the blurring effect of a few drinks beforehand. Tip: Don't go sightseeing in the Red Light District before breakfast.

Barging around

Dam Square is a fantastic location, I must say again, with high-end shopping mall De Bijenkorf right next to our hotel on the one side, and a couple of people-spotting pavement cafés on the other. And it's barely a ten-minute walk from here to Centraal Station, where our Eyewitness travel guide promises we can buy tickets for a canal boat trip. As it's been so long since our last holiday visit to Amsterdam, a canal cruise seems like a good way to get reoriented.

Opposite the station is the ticket office, right next to the ever-popular De Looije café, which, judging from the constant stream of tourists literally lining up to drink coffee and eat appelbakken in today's glorious sunshine, might as well have a licence to print money. I've been immersed in Dutch for Dummies for the past few weeks (it's much easier if you already know Afrikaans), so I'm grateful to the nice young man who humours me by replying in Dutch to my halting "Waar zijn de toiletten?"

It's 16 euros (about S\$25) for an hour-long cruise of the various canals or grachten – Prinsen-, Heeren-, Singel- and more, with a fairly basic recording to explain where you are and what you're seeing:

- Seventeenth-century gabled warehouses, now mainly residential, with hooks attached to their slanted gable tops for the purpose of lifting cargo from boats piled high with commodities from all over the world, including spices from the East. During the Netherlands' Golden Age (roughly the 17th century), we're told, almost anything that was traded globally came through the entrepôt of Amsterdam. The hooks still come in handy when residents move house.
- The inevitable crushing queue waiting to tour the house of Anne Frank, the Jewish girl whose moving account of her experiences here during the Second World War – before her death in Belsen at the age of 15 – is one of the Western world's most famous works of literature.
- Thousands of houseboats, some colourfully painted, others stylishly matte black in what seems to be the fashion de jour.





The Old Town

It's fun to join the tourists and locals who throng the Old Town, also known as Nine Small Streets (De 9 Straten, in Dutch), shopping, eating, drinking and generally chilling. It's in fact made up of three streets crossing two canals: Herengracht and Kaisersgracht, and full of trendy cafés, boutiques, bookstores and galleries.

Nieuwe Market, in the shade of Nieuwe Church – well, the church was new when they started building it in 1395 – is a good place to buy a fine-woven Panama hat to replace the one I left in a taxi. Next up is a good spot for our first round of Amstel on tap: CVB (Café van Beeren) on Nieuwendijk. Pints are pulled by a no-

nonsense English barmaid, who'll order in delicious bacon-and-cheese burgers from the C&W (Crepes and Waffles) over the road, if you like.

Plenty of walking – and this is an eminently walkable city – builds up an appetite for dinner. De Reiger (Nieuwe Lelie Straat, in De Jordaan) is just a ten-minute stroll from Dam Square. This is a pretty good eetcafe (bistro) with plenty of character, heavenly fresh mackerel with roasted potatoes and buttery mustard sauce. Two main courses, a couple of icy shots of oude jenever (old gin) to start, plus several glasses of house wine brings a reasonable bill of 70 euros.

Changing Attitudes

Amsterdam has for centuries been known for its broad-minded tolerance in matters such as religious affiliation, gender orientation, substance enjoyment, prostitution and more. On one hand, nothing much seems to have changed: every street corner brings a new and pungent whiff of herbal smoke, openly gay couples abound and sex workers gaze indifferently (at me, anyway) through glass-fronted boudoirs.

According to one middle-aged resident I speak to, however, the past ten years have brought some unwelcome social changes. Amsterdam no longer deserves a reputation for tolerance, he says, citing frequent attacks on LGTVs and similar "hate crimes". He puts this down to a too-rapid influx of immigrants from religions such as Islam – but not only Islam – that has ghetto-ised certain areas of the city.

That's a great shame, especially in view of the city's proud history of welcoming and sheltering refugees of all persuasions. As he reminds me, the name of the De Jordaan area is a mangling of the French phrase *le jardin* (the garden), referring to this previously low-rent district where Amsterdam gave refuge to a flood of Protestant French Huguenots fleeing persecution in their own country during the 17th century, and later to a stream of Spanish and Portuguese Jews and other refugees.



DAY TWO

The 17-euro buffet breakfast at De Roode Leeuw down the Damrak is a good if obvious spot for watching the passing parade; we had dinner here in summer 2000, and may just pop in again around 2030 for lunch – if we're still alive and kicking, that is.

From Dam Square it's a short tram-ride – number 2, 13 or 14 – to the Rijk's Museum, way over at the other side of the map. Having booked online a couple of weeks in advance, we're just in time to catch its Late Rembrandt exhibition, the cultural highlight of the year. What makes this so special is that most of these works from the last few years of Rembrandt's life are owned by private collections, rather than museums, and have been specially lent to the Rijk for this once-in-a-lifetime event.

My Roy has a strict "only one museum per city" rule, to go with Rule Number Two: "Only one temple or similar place of worship". (Harsh, but fair.) With so much to see in addition to the special exhibition, a museum like the Rijk deserves the better part of a day. I also recommend the wonderful Van Gogh Museum, which we enjoyed so much last time.

Dinner is again in De Jordaan, this time at tourist hot-spot Moeder's. Though the traveller is warned never to eat anywhere called Mama's, it's fun to sit at a long table,



cheek by jowl with a United Nations of diners, all tucking into typically hearty and rather heavy Dutch fare: hapjes (small bites), hotchpotch, mashed potato and sauerkraut, washed down with a rough oude jenever and an even rougher house red. Superb Irish coffees, though, and charmingly cheerful service. Again, it's around 70 euros for two, and we're more than stuffed.



DAY THREE

On our first morning, at the ticket office next to De Looije, we were just in time to book a 5.5-hour trip (50 euros) to Keukenhof Gardens. We're in luck: this annual floral extravaganza comes to an end next weekend, in mid-May.

(You could, if you liked, top that up to 85 euros and make it a full-day trip to see more windmills, plus the traditional village of Volendam. For me, though, there are only so many times you can dress up in traditional Dutch costume and pose in front of a painted studio windmill – just once, actually – and I did that way back in the eighties.)

It's a 45-minute bus ride south to Keukenhof is located. The name "Keukenhof" means "kitchen garden", and its history goes back to the 15th century, when the Countess Jacqueline of Bavaria foraged there for fruit and vegetables for her kitchen. In 1857, the extensive gardens of Keukenhof Castle were redesigned in the English style by the same landscape artists who designed Amsterdam's famous Vondelpark; and it has been the site of a wildly popular spring flower show from March to May each year since 1950.

This two-month period is the short growing season for the bulb industry, and had we been here earlier in

the season, en route to Keukenhof we would have seen mile upon mile of fields carpeted brilliantly with flowers. Now, they're almost at an end; and shockingly, we're told, these gorgeous blooms are not harvested for sale: instead, they're left to flower as long as possible to ensure healthy, saleable bulbs – and then the blooms are fed to cattle!

Keukenhof itself is still magnificent, however, with an estimated seven million blooms on display. Plenty of cafés and restaurants cater for the crowds of visitors from all over the world, most of whom seem focused on taking selfies with everything from amaryllis to zinnias.

Last Supper

Hotel barmen can be a great source of recommendations for dinner. Ours gives us an old-fashioned look when, on our last night, we ask him to name a good restaurant that's close to the hotel but not touristy. After some reflection, he points us to the fantastic Lucius Seafood Restaurant in Spui Street: across Dam Square and just two streets behind the Royal Palace.

It's the start of the *nieuwe haring* (new herring) season, and Roy's is served deliciously creamy



just as it is, with chopped mild white onion and a shot of smooth oude jenever. My delicately marinated eel with wasabi sauce channels a Japanese influence, yet it's perfectly Dutch. We'd compliment the chef, but all he's really done is to put this top quality fish on the plate.

Main courses include a bourride of various poached fish with a fresh chilli rouille for me, and for Roy, a generous trio of fried soles and buttery potatoes. This classy yet cosy place is the perfect way to round off three nights in one of the world's most picturesque cities.

Onward to Rotterdam

It's about an hour's drive to the shipping hub of Rotterdam, where we're spending a couple of nights on business (Roy's). It's one of Europe's oldest ports and its busiest, and worth more time than we gave it.

If you have the opportunity to visit, do stay at Hotel New York. Built as the headquarters for the Holland America Line, it has a lovely location on the New Maas river, from where thousands of European emigrants left to make new lives in the fledgling United States. Creatively repurposed, each distinctively decorated room in this Art Deco treasure has its own character; the popular restaurant attracts lots of discerning locals, and sought-after alfresco tables bask in the spring sunshine.

Reluctant to leave Holland without having seen what I regard as my fair share of windmills, we persuade our airport chauffeur to make a detour to Kinderdijk, the UNESCO World Heritage site just 15km from Rotterdam. This group of 19 monumental, still-working windmills was built in 1738 and 1740 as part of an ongoing water drainage project. We park just off the road and I'm allowed an hour to wander off and explore to my heart's content. Mission accomplished! 🇳🇱

