

GOING PLACES

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GOEDE MORGEN AMSTERDAM!



When it comes to destinations that ought to be on your 'bucket list', cities are over-rated, in my opinion. Flashing lights, graffitied buildings, snarling traffic, littered footpaths, and pedestrians in a knock-you-down hurry – cities are much of a muchness the world over. But, every now and then, you meet one that stands out from the bunch. And, on a sunny Wednesday morning, I met and fell in love with Amsterdam ...

Holland is just one-tenth the size of New Zealand (you can drive from north to south in a couple of hours) with four times the population (16 million people). The country's famous for its dikes (to hold back the sea) ... bikes (the Dutch pedal everywhere) ... and bridges (Amsterdam alone boasts more than 400 of them). And with its lumbering windmills, cobbled streets, colourful markets, old crooked houses and cosy cafés, the Netherlands' capital is one of the most captivating cities in Europe.

Our hotel was just a hop-step-and-jump from the popular Dam Square, so we hopped-stepped-and-jumped in that general direction, ate a very long bread roll under a very red umbrella, and watched other tourists watching other tourists watching other tourists.

Then, arm-in-arm, my beloved and I wandered beside a picturesque waterway,

wondering out-loud what it would be like to live in one of the ancient wooden houseboats tied up along both banks.

Amsterdam, a city perched upon 70 islands, is criss-crossed by more canals than you'll find even in Venice. And, the following morning, we explored them in earnest aboard a glass-roofed riverboat. Liza (our guide-for-the-day) was a hoot: "Amsterdammers are pig-headed, arrogant and rude!" she warned. "But we compensate by having a wonderful sense of humour!" And her instructions

were simple: "You must, when visiting our city, look up – and look out!" Up, because the gabled rooflines of the old houses are truly a highlight all in themselves. And out, to avoid get run over by mad Dutch cyclists!

Accompanied by other boats of all shapes and sizes, we glided along under overhanging trees and ancient stone





Anne Frank memorial



archways ... past converted warehouses, leaky houseboats, posh Burgher's mansions, famous kerks (churches), museums and historic sites – and (at one intersection) a multi-story bikepark, where a zillion sturdy two-wheelers owned by the city's workforce stood lined-up, side-by-side.

Then, disembarking, we paid a respectful, thoughtful visit to the museum-plus-hiding-place of Anne Frank ...

I don't know if you've seen the movie or read her famous diary (now published in more languages than any other book, save the Bible), but teenager Anne Frank was one of the six million Jewish victims of Nazi persecution during World War 2. When the German army occupied the Netherlands in 1940, Anne and her family (plus several other Jews) went into permanent hiding in the rear of this

building on Prinsengracht. Anne kept a diary right up until 1944, when someone finally betrayed them to the SS. She died of typhus in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, March 1945.

It's hard to describe the thoughts and feelings that wash over you as you climb the narrow staircases and move room by room through this one-time secret annex. The horrors inflicted by this shameful regime and the courage of this innocent young girl stand in painful contrast ... and we all came away feeling pretty sober.

We followed that with a wander through the magnificent Van Gogh Museum, where we witnessed the talent of this brilliant but unhappy young artist. And then cheered ourselves up with a slice of moist appelgebak (Dutch apple-cake) in a pokey basement cafe.

Yummmm ...

On our third-and-final day in the Netherlands, we headed out of the city through flat green farmland to picture-postcard Zaanse Schans – a ‘dike village’ dating back to the 13th century. Here we inspected a windmill close-up (watching a 300-year-old monster-mill grind peanuts into oil and stockfeed) ... sampled a range of tasty red- and yellow-cased Dutch cheeses ... and witnessed a clog-maker at work, making the clunky wooden shoes some Dutchmen (and women) still prefer to wear.

Then we were off again for another leisurely wander – this time through a very old, stunningly-preserved fishing village: Edam. It was gorgeous, quaint, oozing with charm ... and we had the good fortune to be there on the final day of Edam’s 650th anniversary celebrations. The town’s streets, alleyways and canal-banks were crawling with locals decked out in olde worlde costumes and engaging in hilarious role-plays.

Music and laughter filled the air, the atmosphere was warm and infectious, and it was a struggle to tear ourselves away, I tell you!

But that’s Amsterdam. It gets under your skin ...



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