

Amsterdam – Boats and Bikes

By Graceann Macleod



I recently had the opportunity to take a mini-break in this friendly and beautiful city. There is so much to see and do that I'm sure I'll have things to say in the future regarding the art museums, historic sites and other wonders, but for now I will have to content myself with an overview of a place I hope to visit again and again.

Getting There

Amsterdam is a very easy, 90-minute flight from London. The airport, Schiphol, is outside of the city itself, but a fast, clean and efficient double-decker train gets you to the city center in no time at all. Clearly, this is a commuter's delight and, having been subjected to some fairly grim business travel, I was deeply envious of the folks who work in Amsterdam.

Upon arrival, our first stop was the travel center near the train station, where we purchased two-day GVB passes for use on the buses, trams and Metro. This is an excellent value (at the time of this writing, the cost is € 10,50 for a 48-hour pass), and the two days don't start running until the time of your first use. Renting a car in this city is a waste of time and money – it is a very compact, walkable city and anything you can't walk to is only a 10-minute ride on any of the public conveyances. In all the things we visited during our stay, I don't think we were on any public transport for longer than 20 minutes, and that was the train from the airport.



Renting a bicycle may be your cup of tea, and it's certainly a quick way to zip around. Bikes seem to vastly outnumber cars here, and they most assuredly have the right of way. What may seem at first to be a generously-proportioned sidewalk is actually the bike lane, and woe to the distracted tourist taking snapshots and who doesn't see the rider approaching. Not that I would have any personal experience regarding this....

Abundant and Interesting Lodgings

You can have a hotel that is as familiar or unusual as your heart desires. Well-known names such as Holiday Inn and Hilton sit alongside bed & breakfasts and independent proprietors. We chose The Botel, which is, as the name implies, a boat/hotel, permanently berthed within easy walking distance of the city center. The room was small yet welcoming, but I discovered that, as a Yank, I am fairly spoiled by the sheer volume of freebies available in most US hotels. This hotel did not have sample-sized toiletries (or even washcloths), so I made a mental note to bring these items along on my return visits. This is a minor quibble however, when



contrasted with the fact that I could

look out of my window at the ducks swimming past and the historic buildings on the other side of the canal.

Working Up an Appetite, and then Satisfying It

As I said earlier, Amsterdam is an immensely walkable city. What you don't realize is just how much walking you're going to end up doing because everything seems like such a short jaunt ("it's just on the other side of the canal"). After a full day of short jaunts, my feet were aching and my tummy was grumbling. Be sure to pack your most comfortable shoes if you're planning a visit here. My fiancé, who knows Amsterdam extremely well, knew just what to do for my empty stomach. Very near The Botel is a floating restaurant called Sea Palace. Their specialty is something called the "rice table," which is a set menu of many, many small portions of delectable items, meant for two or more to share. We had a glorious time sampling the different items, and ran out of room long before we ran out of choices. We were seated at a window table and were able to enjoy the sunset as we made our leisurely way through the meal. We strolled back to the hotel in the twilight and rested in preparation for the full rich day to follow.

Tourist Season on the Canals – Join the Crowd!

If you like people, you'll love Amsterdam in the summertime. It gets very busy, and the variety



of accents and languages is a treat for the ear. Even at its busiest, it was completely manageable for me (and I tend to avoid crowds whenever possible). I suspect the warmth and friendliness of the people can be credited for this.

After having a continental breakfast at the hotel, we headed out to explore the shops and sights in the city itself. We visited various bookshops and boutiques, and strolled centuries-old streets that created a trip through time for me. The cornerstones on some of the buildings were a revelation. I have

spent most of my life in a city that is less than 200 years old. To look up and see a building date of "Anno 1640" on an apartment house or shop, rather than on a monument, is quite new to me.

Anne Frank Huis

It would be impossible to write about a visit here without sharing my experience at this most moving of places. When I was about the same age that Anne was when in hiding, I first read her diary, and like most young women, I was enthralled by her story and saddened by its end. As you can imagine, "The Secret Annex" is one of the most visited sites in Amsterdam, and well worth the time. It is imperative that you book in advance, however. We bought tickets online before we left home, and were very glad that we had done so. We walked right in without waiting in any lines, while there were people standing outside who were clearly not going to get in before closing time.

I must admit that I didn't experience the emotion I expected as I was actually moving through the hiding space that Anne and her family used for more than two years. It was difficult to understand the isolation and confinement when I was moving through in a surge with so many other visitors. At



many historic sites, I can still feel the former resident's "presence," but that wasn't the case here. I think if I had been able to spend some time in quiet meditation in these rooms, my feelings would have been quite different. When I got to the museum section, however, and saw the actual red-checked diary, "Kitty," in which Anne confided for all that time, I was overcome. I was surprised to see it there, for some reason, and the idea that I was just a few inches away from something that she not only touched, but which was an instrument of her emotional refuge, overwhelmed me and the tears flowed freely.

People Watching and Romantic Cruises

After all this somber reflection, we were in need of more light-hearted activity. One of the delightful surprises we discovered, just around the corner from the Anne Frank Huis, was an open-air photography exhibit featuring wildlife photos taken by numerous artists. It was a beautiful way to enjoy the late afternoon, before making our way down to the boat dock for our candlelight cruise.

The canals are the most fascinating feature of Amsterdam to me. If you've been reading my travel columns for any length of time, you know my love of water, and anytime I get a chance to be out in a boat, I take it. This was a marvelous opportunity to see the city in a way that I hadn't yet, and to enjoy a delicious repast while I did so. My fiancé and I were escorted to a prime table on the boat, and presented with plates of sumptuous food. As we dined, we were steered through the canals while a friendly, interesting multi-lingual guide pointed out the many sights of the city, old and new. It was so informative and relaxing. We curled up together and listened to the stories, enjoying the view, the city and each others' company.

Beasts in an Historic Setting

Artis is the oldest zoo in the Netherlands, having been founded in 1838, and is extremely popular not only for its natural habitats but for the winding paths and gardens that make for a gorgeous day out. Also present are an aquarium, geological museum, planetarium, and other interesting diversions, with many programs geared to families. It's right in the heart of the city, but you'd never know it by the scenery. It's as serene and relaxing as a country garden. This provided me with an excellent opportunity to practice my photography, and we wandered the grounds for far longer than we expected we might.



After all that exercise, we were ready for a cool drink and a sweet before our return to the airport. We found a nice little café where we chatted and people-watched while we rested our feet and enjoyed a nice piece of cake. Feeling restored, we returned to the train from which we had just parted only 48 hours earlier, and made our return to Schiphol for our homeward flight. It all just zipped by in a blink, and I can't wait to return to one of my new favorite cities.

Links to Explore:

General Information about Amsterdam: <http://www.amsterdam.info/> & <http://www.amsterdamtourist.nl/en/default.aspx>

Airport: www.schiphol.nl

Travel Passes: <http://www.gvb.nl/english/travellers/ticketsandfares/GVB-24-hours-ticket.html>

The Botel: <http://www.amstelbotel.nl/>

The Sea Palace: <http://www.seapalace.nl//index.php?vermouth=home&lang=en>

Anne Frank Huis: <http://www.annefrank.org/content.asp?pid=1&lid=2>

Canal Tours: <http://www.lovers.nl/> (click on the Union Jack for information in English)

ARTIS Royal Zoo: <http://www.artis.nl/international/index.html>