



# The Netherlands

IN FULL BLOOM





BY SUE DE PASQUALE

## Best known for its tulips and windmills, the nation is also home to rich cultural treasures

**I**T'S HARD TO IMAGINE A SETTING MORE BEAUTIFUL than the vast fields of North Holland in mid-April, when the region's legendary tulips are at their peak. The Bollenstreek, a 30-kilometer stretch (19 miles) between the cities of Leiden and Haarlem, blooms aglow with color—a kaleidoscope quilt of magenta, goldenrod, scarlet and deep plum—that visitors can gaze upon while hiking, driving or pedaling by on bikes.

Indeed, the Netherlands is a nation rich in natural beauty, with its fine, sandy beaches, rolling green plains dotted by windmills and picturesque villages. Compact enough to traverse with ease (it encompasses just 41,547 square miles, or 66,863 square kilometers, about one-tenth the size of California), it is a country where water plays a starring role. The French poet Voltaire once famously said, “God created the Earth—except Holland, for the Dutch did that,” referring to the Dutch's centuries-long efforts to reclaim their land from the sea (through, among other methods, their famous dikes). These methods have worked: Almost half of today's provinces of North and South Holland were underwater during the Middle Ages.

Water also brought trade. While the rest of Europe struggled economically in the 17th century, merchant ships brought great prosperity to the region, making the Netherlands the financial center of the world by the mid-1600s. During this Golden Age, the city of Amsterdam became a hub for artists like Rembrandt, scientists like Van Leeuwenhoek and architects. Three great canals, bordered by magnificent houses, were built in a triple ring



The cheese market in Alkmaar; the Peace Palace in The Hague; Self-Portrait with Grey Felt Hat, 1887, at the Van Gogh Museum.

### WHAT'S IN A NAME

While many people use “the Netherlands” and “Holland” interchangeably, it’s worth noting that Holland comprises just two of the nation’s 12 provinces (North and South Holland). Because this central western region historically dominated foreign trade (it is home to Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague), it’s easy to see why the Netherlands came to be called Holland overseas. But even the locals often opt for the moniker, particular in sports, where the national football team (soccer) is cheered on with the cry “Holland!”

around the city during this period, and many great buildings were erected.

Fortunately for visitors, much of this original architecture survives today—in the merchant houses of Delft, the Lakenhal in Leiden and the Mauritshuis in The Hague.

### Amazing Amsterdam

Amsterdam, located just a 15-minute train ride from the Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, makes an ideal home base for your travels.

Start your visit with an overview canal tour of the city. The 100 Highlights Tour, offered through Amsterdam City Tours, slips through the old center of the city, with its merchant mansions, carillon-crowned churches and warehouses dating back to Holland’s Golden Age. Keep your camera handy: Each waterway, church and merchant house you pass is more

picturesque than the next. You can also use the canal boat as a way to get around the city. There are hop on/hop off canal bus packages that can be combined with discounted tickets to a host of museums.

Once you have your bearings, you might best explore Amsterdam on foot, with leisurely strolls along the canals and cafes. Don’t miss the bustling Dam Square, a mecca for tourists—and pigeons. The historical city center is flanked by the neoclassical Royal Palace (City Hall from 1655 until 1808), the 15th-century Gothic Nieuwe Kerk (New Church), Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum, the NH Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky and the upscale department store De Bijenkorf.

Stay alert as you walk the narrow streets of Amsterdam. Many of the locals rely on bikes to get them around (there are many more bikes



## DAY TRIPS Visit the destinations below to get a full flavor of the Netherlands:



**1) Delft:** Best known for its blue-and-white pottery (on sale across the city), Delft is the resting place of William of Orange (1533-84), the “father of the Netherlands” who led resistance against the Spanish in the 80 Years War. His imposing mausoleum sits inside the Nieuwe Kerk, a church with a 100-meter-high tower (328 feet) overlooking the Delft market. The De Porceleyne Fles factory, dating from 1652, is just one of several Delftware potteries that offers tours to the public.

**2) Volendam:** Step back in time in this old fishing village on the IJsselmeer, just north of Amsterdam, where the locals are decked out in traditional garb: tight bodices, lace caps and striped shirts for the women; and loose jackets and trousers for the

men. You can also don an outfit and have your picture taken. Built along a dike, Volendam has a bustling harbor where fishmongers hawk their catches. On the other side of the dike lies an ancient maze of narrow streets, wooden houses and canals.

**3) Marken:** Isolated as a fishing community for nearly 800 years, Marken became linked to the mainland with the construction of a causeway in 1957. But visitors will find a tranquil sanctuary of 17th-century wooden homes, where little has changed. Rent bikes and pedal your way around the seaside village for a relaxing afternoon. Be sure to visit the Paard Lighthouse and the Marken Museum (six historic houses), as well as the clog-

making workshop and cheese factory.

**4) Rotterdam:** Much of Rotterdam was decimated during World War II by the German blitz, forcing the city to reinvent itself. Today it is one of Europe’s most vibrant and multicultural cities, featuring cutting-edge architecture and a lively cultural life. Most importantly, Rotterdam boasts the largest port in the world. Home to the *Rotterdam V*, a floating museum/hotel, the port also serves as the launching point for Holland America Line cruises bound for Northern Europe and the Mediterranean.

### The Provinces of The Netherlands





Clockwise: Science museum NEMO; bikes at Central Station in Amsterdam; a canal in Amsterdam.

than people in the city) and they zip to and fro at great speed, seemingly from both directions. Likewise, it's not unusual for cars to drive in the bike lanes or even park up on the sidewalks.

With the city's rich cultural heritage, museums abound. Art lovers will want to devote at least a day or two to the Museum Quarter, one of the wealthiest districts in Amsterdam, which features a stately green park ringed by major cultural centers. Among them: the

the national museum of modern art, with works by Picasso, Matisse and Monet, among many others; and the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam's premier concert hall.

There are many more attractions outside the district, too many to list here, but a few bear noting. The Anne Frank House, where the Jewish Frank family hid from the Nazis during World War II and young Anne penned her now-famous diary, draws nearly 1 mil-

NEMO, the Netherlands' largest science museum, which is built in the shape of a gigantic ship and offers plenty of hands-on fun and learning. A short walk from there is the Artis Royal Zoo, constructed in 1838; the historical zoo/park features a butterfly pavilion, planetarium and a bird house, as well as animals of every stripe—from wildebeests to zebras.

While Amsterdam is family friendly, it is also known for its decidedly "adult" side, exemplified in the bawdy Red Light District, which dates back to the 14th century when sailors arrived looking for female company. Today this area, with its garish sex shops and seedy clubs, is relatively tame by day. By night, it's best not to wander off the main streets, for safety's sake. Smoking marijuana is legal in parts of Amsterdam, and smoke-filled "coffee houses" are not confined just to the Red Light District. But the district is

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Rijksmuseum, a Neo-Gothic wonder that offers the best collection of Dutch art in the world; the Van Gogh Museum, featuring exhibits of 19th-century art; the Stedelijk Museum,

lion visitors each year. Lines are long, so it's best to purchase tickets online in advance for the 45-minute tour. Parents traveling with children can balance this somber experience with a trip to



home to the Museum of Hash, Marijuana, and Hemp, which includes a small room where hemp plants are grown under artificial light.

Beer lovers will feel right at home in Amsterdam, where the numerous cafes are well stocked with Belgian brews and local favorites like Heineken. To learn more about that beer's origins, visit the Heineken Experience—a tour that culminates in a couple of crowded bars where you can partake of two nice-sized samples of the amber brew.

Foodies will be pleased to find a wide variety of gastronomic offerings in the restaurants and cafes of Amsterdam and beyond. Be sure to sample a tosti or two—variations on grilled cheese and ham that vary by establishment—and a *broodje kroket* (croquette), as well as some *drop* (licorice) that comes both sweet (*zoete*) and salty (*zout*), or a piping hot box of *vlaams frites huis* (fries with Belgian mayonnaise). And, of course, the city

is dotted with cheese shops, which offer shelves of giant waxed rounds of Edam, Gouda and other locally made cheeses.

For those less than enthusiastic about meat-and-potatoes Dutch fare (and herring!), take heart: Amsterdam embraces global cuisine with a vengeance. Restaurants offer Thai, Ethiopian, South African, Moroccan, Italian, Greek and Indian food, with the most popular foreign cuisine being spicy Indonesian. For dinner, it's best to make reservations in advance: Restaurants fill up quickly and once gregarious Amsterdamers sit down, they are usually there for the evening.

One last tip ... on tips: Restaurant and hotel staff in the Netherlands do not expect the 18 to 20 percent gratuity that is customary in the United States. Feel free to tip for good service if you'd like, but you won't be considered a cad if you leave 5 or 10 percent—or nothing at all. ■

## THE ESSENTIALS

**Currency:** The Netherlands uses the euro, though some souvenir shops accept U.S. dollars. The best place to change money is at a bank ATM.

**Language:** English is widely and fluently spoken, particularly in the major cities. But learning a few Dutch phrases ("Dag" for "Good Day") will earn you points with the locals.

**Climate:** Cool summers (20C, or 68F) and mild winters (temperatures rarely dip below 0C or 32F) characterize the region. Pack a raincoat and umbrella; showers are frequent, especially in summer.

**Getting Around:** For traveling between major cities, trains are a great bet; they run frequently and on time. For inter-city travel, use the well-established public transportation system (buses, light rail), or rent bikes.

**Accommodations:** The Netherlands offers a wide range of places to stay, from bed-and-breakfasts to hotels (budget to luxury) to old castles and historical buildings that have been converted to lodgings.

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