

TRAVEL PAGE



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Amsterdam - City of Contrasts

by Bob Rice

Deirdre was very quiet as we walked away from 263 Prinsengracht and back to our tour bus. The same look of sadness and disbelief was on the faces of most of the people in our party. The building known as the Anne Frank House will remain in our memories forever. For Deirdre the visit was even more poignant since one of the men who hid the Frank family had later immigrated to Canada and she had worked with him in Toronto. Her thoughts were as much about him as they were of the little girl who tugged at the heartstrings of the world.

A few minutes later we stopped at a beautifully restored mansion that is home to some of the world's best diamond cutters and the sparkle of hundreds of carats bounced around the showroom.

This is Amsterdam. At one turn of your head you are bombarded with memories of the past and with another you are back in the present.

You don't really visit Amsterdam, you become a part of it.

Whether it be a small chocolate shop you find a few blocks from your hotel or perhaps a restaurant where you are made to feel you are more than just a customer, you want to claim these as your own.

The Dutch are very fond of Canadians. From the time our liberation forces entered

the Netherlands during World War II, Canucks have been viewed as special friends of the locals and wearing a pin of our flag will get you additional smiles and service.

A canal cruise is obligatory when visiting Amsterdam. Once used to move goods throughout the city, the waterways are now the domain of long, narrow cruise boats. The narration is usually done in three languages and it is a relaxing and unique way to go sightseeing.

The other way to get around is on the trams. The streetcars are clean and comfort-

able and it only takes a few minutes to learn the system and how to get where you want to go.

Once in the downtown area, or the old inner city, you find many of the top attractions within easy walking distance. There are almost 7,000 National Trust buildings in the old part dating back as far as the 16th century. The city has more than 40 museums, 100 art galleries and 60 or so concert halls and theatres.

The architecture of Amsterdam varies from the style of the 17th century, typified by

the Royal Palace on the Dam, to that of the late 1800s of which the massive Central Station is a good example.

Sad to say, there is graffiti almost everywhere in the inner city with spray-painted slogans and symbols detracting from the beauty of the historic buildings. It is hoped that something can be done about this.

At night the inner city shows a different face. Nightclubs and discos entice the younger crowd while those of us who enjoy meeting the citizenry head for the famous brown pubs for a drink and some conversation. The canals also put on a show at night with thousands of lights strung along the major routes and bridges creating a fairy tale effect.

Our favourite place to eat was The Poort in the Hotel Die Port van Cleve. Don't be afraid to try Dutch cooking. Deirdre had a steak the likes of which she still raves about and my meal came with names I couldn't pronounce but had no problem enjoying.

In the daytime you should plan to spend some time sitting in one of the sidewalk cafes, enjoying some excellent coffee and a cream cake, and pretend that, at least for the moment, this fascinating city of contrasts has claimed you as one of her own.



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