

Understand Amsterdam

AMSTERDAM TODAY 220

From Golden Age to modern age; Amsterdam is a blend of Renaissance values emboldened by a visionary hyper-modernity.

HISTORY 222

How did this land of swamps and marshland come to be transformed into the city it is today?

DUTCH PAINTING 232

Holland has produced some of the world's most iconic painters.

CANAL ARCHITECTURE 242

The grand buildings that line the canals are among the city's greatest treasures.

ARCHITECTURE 246

The cityscapes depicted in centuries-old paintings remain remarkably unchanged.

MUSIC 251

Amsterdam is an energised epicentre of converging musical traditions.

Amsterdam Today

As the architecture on the banks of the IJ river comes into focus as the city's future frontier, this area seems perfectly positioned to embody a metaphor for 21st-century Amsterdam: an ever-shifting blend of Renaissance values emboldened by a visionary hypermodernity. Is the city where the ghosts of Rembrandt and Anne Frank not only endure, but also are enlivened by a multicultural community, still one of the freest communities on earth? Its citizens seem committed to making sure that the answer is yes.

Best on Film

Oorlogswinter (Winter in Wartime; directed by Martin Koolhoven; 2008) Voted by Dutch critics as the top film of 2008. The film centres on a young boy whose integrity and loyalty is tested when he decides to help the Dutch Resistance who are sheltering a downed British pilot.

Zwartboek (Black Book; directed by Paul Verhoeven; 2006) This action-packed story explores some of the less heroic aspects of the Dutch Resistance in WWII. It launched the international career of today's hottest Dutch actor, Carice van Houten.

Best in Print

The Diary of Anne Frank (Anne Frank; 1952) A moving account of a young girl's thoughts and yearnings while in hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam. The book has been translated into 60 languages.

Netherland (Joseph O'Neill; 2008) When a Dutch man faces the breakdown of his marriage in post-September 11 New York City, the game of cricket, memories of the Netherlands and a mysterious friendship complicate his life yet inexplicably repair his spirit in this comically dark novel.

Culture

Laid-back. Tolerant. Fun-loving. Bilingual (sometimes trilingual). Industrious. Aware. International. Amsterdam's locals embody these qualities in spades for their famously tolerant attitudes towards diversity and differences. Perhaps this is why Amsterdam is celebrated for being a consummately easy and relaxed place to travel.

You'll find that local life goes on in public in Amsterdam: this is not a city that conducts its business behind closed doors. In fact, walk down any street and notice the abundance of open windows – even in the toniest neighbourhoods – where families and couples openly cook, eat, watch TV and play with their children in full view.

Despite recent strain between the Dutch far-right government and Amsterdam's far-left-leaning politics, the city's lasting legacy of tolerance transcends politics and has become part of its character. Eccentric conduct in public might pass without comment, hence the Dutch saying: 'Act normal, that's crazy enough'.

The Dutch also have a moralistic streak (coming from the Calvinists) and a tendency to wag the finger in disapproval. They may seem stunningly blunt, but the impulse comes from the desire to be direct and honest.

Sex & Drugs Redux

It's like a throwback to the 1960s and '70s, but this time, the radical movement is on the right, not the left.

Most of the ever-practical Dutch argue that vice is not going to disappear, so you might as well control it. Yet a growing faction of voters in the Netherlands, along with the elected officials they support, have come out vocally against several of the civil liberties that Amsterdammers cherish – regardless of whether or not they partake in them. So far, the liberties under fire have been the most obvious forms of vice: the freedom to purchase and consume soft drugs without criminal