Understand Amsterdam

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Amsterdam Today

Amsterdam’s famed tolerance is on display wherever you wander, despite right-leaning national policies that almost snuffed out the coffeeshops. Despite the economy taking a hit, dramatic architecture and grand urban projects continue to rise up and transform the cityscape, merging Golden Age charm with hypermodernity. Meanwhile, a new king has the keys to the palace, but it’s his stylish, practical wife who steals the spotlight.

Best on Film

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.

Het Diner (The Dinner; directed by Menno Meyjes; 2013) Two brothers and their wives go out to a fancy dinner together. As the meal progresses, it’s revealed that their sons are linked by a terrible crime.

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.

Rock Bottom (Michael Shilling; 2009) A washed-up Los Angeles band ends up in Amsterdam for their last show on tour. The rockers wander the city on various paths of destruction, excitement, stupidity and possibly redemption.

A New King

Amsterdammers aren’t obsessed with their royal family as some other cultures are, but when Queen Beatrix stepped down after 33 years, it was the headline of 2013. Her son, Willem-Alexander (b 1967), became king – the first male to accede to the Dutch throne since 1890. The investiture took place at the Nieuwe Kerk on April 30, followed by a city-rocking party. (Incidentally, the nation’s biggest holiday – known as Queen’s Day – has become King’s Day and now takes place on Willem-Alexander’s birthday on 27 April.)

If locals had to admit to one royal fascination, it would be Queen Máxima. The stylish, blonde Argentinean, married to the king since 2002, has been known to ride her bike to royal functions and reuse her elegant dresses.

Tolerant Culture

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

It’s an open society in the literal sense. Walk down any street and notice the abundance of open windows – even in the ritziest neighbourhoods – where families and couples cook, eat, watch TV and play with their children in full view.

And while the economy has sputtered a bit over the past few years, the Dutch still rank among world’s most satisfied people, according to the 2013 World Happiness Report by Columbia University. Only citizens of Denmark, Norway and Switzerland are happier with their lot in life.