

welcome to the Netherlands



Art & Icons

In the world of art the Netherlands has given us Rembrandt and Van Gogh. Sure, there's also Frans Hals, Hieronymus Bosch and Piet Mondrian – but when you've got the first two, why mention the rest? (OK that Vermeer guy, he's big...). Then there are icons: classic windmills, the ultimate green machines that are back in vogue a century after the Dutch used these twirling beasts to pump the country dry. Clogs? Renewable. Affordable. Floatable (if the dykes break). Tulips? The Dutch have made a fortune from little bulbs that go in the ground, then burst forth with beauty that is universally loved.

Big in Size & Spirit

The Dutch themselves seem oversized (actually they are statistically the tallest nationality on the planet.) Gregariousness, thrift, good sense and wry humour are all national traits, as is no-holds-barred honesty. This is not the country for the neurotic to ask: 'Do you think I look fat in this?' (Not that this can be much of a worry in the best place to ride a bike on the planet.)

Essential Amsterdam

For Amsterdam – the entire city is also a Dutch icon – current upheavals will merely create more ripples in a city used to waves of change. Misunderstood by



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Discover the many secrets of this gently beautiful country and its masterpieces, canal towns and windmills. Revel in the welcoming yet wry culture at a cafe, then bike past fields of tulips.

(left) Windmills, Kinderdijk, near Rotterdam (p181)
(below) Tulips, Bloemenmarkt, Amsterdam (p60)



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many, the virtual heart of the Netherlands is not what many people expect on their first visit. The sex and drugs are mostly kept to one 'hood (convenient to the train station) while the rest of the city keeps to its own beauty along the murky canals.

And the Rest

Other places as old as Amsterdam have evocative beauty and come in a variety of sizes: Edam, Haarlem, Delft and Deventer to name just some of the smaller delights. Moving up the league tables in size, there's the canal towns of Leiden, Haarlem and Utrecht. And Rotterdam is a modernist feast all of its own.

Perhaps the best way to get to the heart of the Netherlands is to do as the Dutch do. Join them in the city centres of classic towns as far flung as Groningen, Maastricht and Den Bosch, lively places filled with cafes that heave with happy Dutch socialising on a sunny day. Or join them on the thousands of kilometres of bike routes as they add not a molecule of carbon to the atmosphere while riding through the lush countryside and past sweeping watery vistas at sea (or is it see?) level. You don't have to travel far to find a lot.