

Utrecht



Don't underrate the petite province of Utrecht. Yes its famous namesake city and its throngs of students plus tree-lined canals and a medieval quarter hog the limelight. But this is no city-state. By bike you can explore scores of evocative castles and tiny towns in under a day.

The splendid Kasteel de Haar on Utrecht's doorstep is one of the country's most beautiful castles. Amersfoort oozes medieval character but also honours native son Piet Mondrian and his minimalist, angular palette plus the anti-way works of Armando. Then there's Oudewater in the southwest, synonymous with witchcraft (Monty Python fans will dig it) and a good bike ride from the capital. Palatial mansions in Doorn, where a defeated German Kaiser went into exile, and in Amerongen, seat of well-to-do aristocrats since the 13th century, make for another good day's ride across canals, farms and forests.

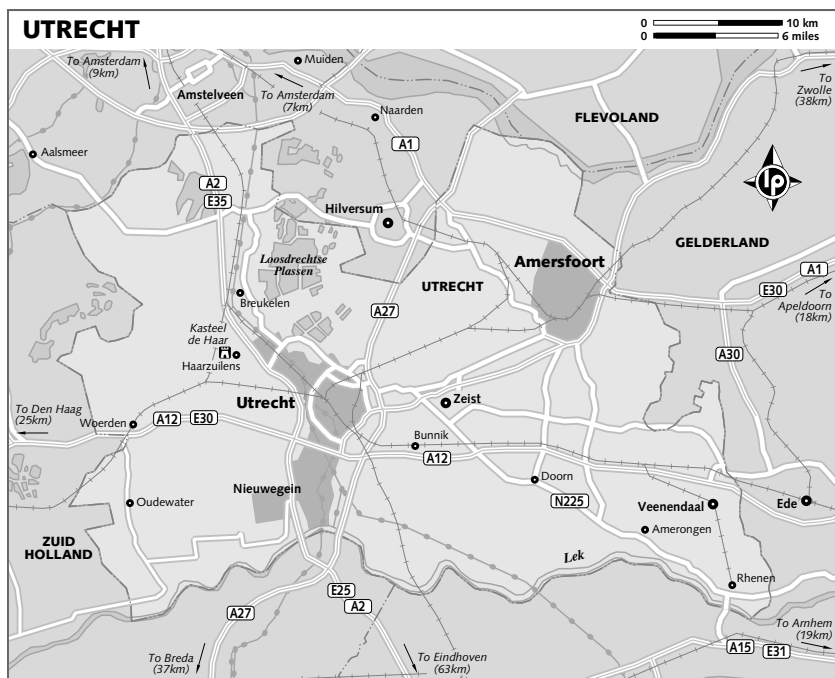
Back in Utrecht city, all those students at the ancient university support a plethora of edgy, fun bars and cafes. Those with calmer tastes can visit more than a dozen museums big and small. All will enjoy the many fine places to eat.

Yes, Utrecht has come some way since James Boswell whinged in 1763, 'I groaned with the idea of living all winter in so shocking a place'.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Look out towards Amsterdam, 50km north-west, from the top of Utrecht's **Domtoren** (p174)
- Find your own favourite spot along Utrecht's unique **bi-level canals** (p174)
- Feel the weight of history at the imposing **Kasteel de Haar** (p179)
- Discover the narrow canals and medieval confines at **Amersfoort** (p180)
- Find out if a witch weighs the same as gravy at **Oudewater** (p182)





UTRECHT CITY

☎ 030 / pop 302,000

Utrecht is one of the Netherlands' oldest cities, with a compact, almost medieval centre set out around canals unique to the Netherlands. There's a lower level where warehouses were located in the 13th century, giving them a split-level character and meaning that diners and drinkers can nip off the street and enjoy a snack or a toot down at water level.

Of course a toot is what many people need after arriving in Utrecht, as the train station feeds into a vast enclosed mall, the Hoog Catharijne shopping centre, which goes on and on in all its unattractive glory until you are spat out at ground level in what seems to be a construction site. Wandering east you find the old town and suddenly you realise why you came.

Fortunately, the entire station region is undergoing the kind of rebuilding that will please anyone who thought the area needed to be blown up. Roads such as Catharijnebaan are being turned back into the canals they once were and the tatty, modern station is being replaced by something that will both inspire and relate to the old town. One down-

side: the project will last for a couple more decades (www.cu2030.nl).

Meanwhile, Utrecht's student population of 40,000 is the largest in the country, making the city one very vibrant place.

History

In Roman times the Rhine passed through present day Utrecht, then called Trajectum. In the following centuries the town had religious ties and was part of various empires. From the 11th century it was a centre of culture and learning while Amsterdam was still just a grubby fishing town to the west.

In 1579 several regions of today's Netherlands united under the Union of Utrecht (p25). The Protestant religion was made official but, in an early nod to tolerance, it was decreed that Catholics would not be persecuted. Utrecht's university was founded in 1636, the year after René Descartes, a local, wrote *Discourse on Method*.

In 1702 centuries of simmering animosity between the bishops of Utrecht and the Roman Catholic Church came to a head when the bishop was booted out of his job for