

INTRODUCING AMSTERDAM



The city is home to around 600,000 bicycles

Pale-yellow light suffuses the gabled buildings, which lean against each other like fond old friends. A small boat glides along the canal, its occupants laughing and hoisting drinks. Rembrandt might have painted this very scene.

Just then your beer arrives (two fingers' froth atop) and jars you from the reverie. This is modern-day Amsterdam, though the 17th-century merchants' homes, curving waterways and smoke-stained 'brown cafes' mean the aura of centuries past is never far away.

Besides its fairy-tale looks, many revere Amsterdam for its progressive mindset. Coffeshops sell cannabis. Prostitutes join the local union. The mayor marries gay couples. Tolerance has been a core Dutch value from the start, though there has been some soul-searching in recent years over whether it should have limits.

Meanwhile, the city grooves onward. Art lovers will be hard-pressed to find more riches per square kilometre than the mega-collections at the Rijks, Van Gogh, Rembrandt and Hermitage museums. Foodies can chow on hot-spiced ethnic eats and traditional Dutch treats, much of it locally sourced. Music fans can tune in to concert halls booked solid with entertainment from all over the globe. And outdoor enthusiasts? Look no further than your bicycle, to ride to the lush parks and cow-dotted outer districts.

Queen's Day, in April, reigns as the world's biggest party-cum-garage sale. In summer the Holland Festival, Roots Music Festival, Gay Pride Parade and many more events take over streets and stages. Actually, Amsterdam parties any time of year, rain or shine. Pack an umbrella, and you're good to go.

AMSTERDAM LIFE

Amsterdam's spirit is famously *gezellig*. Loosely translated, this means convivial, able to kick back, mellow out and not get hung up on someone else's preferences. The vibe sprouted centuries ago, when Amsterdam's citizens had to respect one another and cooperate to achieve the epic task of keeping their town above water.

Current events have ruffled the mood a bit. Earlier in the decade, two high-profile murders and protests over immigration caused city-wide anxiety. Then came the news of various coffee shop closures, a mushroom sales ban and a reduction in the number of Red Light windows. 'The measures are necessary to stamp out crime,' proponents say. 'Let Amsterdam be Amsterdam,' opponents retort.

The debate continues, but Amsterdammers are getting back to business in the interim. They settle into their beloved candlelit bars, flock to the clubs and pedal their bikes to work and back. They show off their designer savvy, from catwalk-style wares at Fashion Week festivities to green architectural marvels rising from former docklands. Then there's the new metro line, tunnelling under the city centre from north to south – an amazing feat of design, assuming engineers can pull it off.

It's certainly something to discuss over dinner. Amsterdammers go out en masse to meet friends and chat at cafes, lingering over implausibly long meals. It's *gezellig*, you know, and only gets more so as the candle burns low on the tabletop.

Barely 750,000 people live in the Netherlands' capital city – remarkable for a place that supports 141 art galleries, 55 theatres and 51 museums. And let's not forget the 600,000 bicycles rolling down the street. You want to see Amsterdam's ingenuity and freewheeling style in all its glory? Check out those bikes – how they're tricked out, what they're carrying and the spaces locals find to lock 'em up.



Amsterdam's signature flower – the tulip

THE AUTHORS

Karla Zimmerman



During her Amsterdam travels, Karla admired art, bicycled crash-free, ate an embarrassing number of Droste chocolates and bent over to take her *jenever* like a local. She has been visiting Amsterdam since 1989, decades that

have seen her trade space cakes for *stroopwafels*, to a much more pleasant effect.

Based in Chicago, Karla writes travel features for newspapers, books, magazines and radio. She has authored or co-authored several Lonely Planet guidebooks covering the USA, Canada, the Caribbean and Europe. She coordinated this edition of *Amsterdam*, and wrote the *Introducing Amsterdam*, *Getting Started*, *Background*, *Neighbourhoods* and *Eating* chapters.

KARLA'S TOP AMSTERDAM DAY

Assuming it's not raining, an early morning canal walk around Prinsengracht awakens the senses. Houseboats bob, bike bells *cling cling*, and flower sellers lay out their wares. The old merchants' houses tilt at impossible angles, and it's easy to imagine the era when boats unloaded whale oil, spices and other commodities out the front.

Near Waterlooplein I stop at a cafe for a bit of sustenance, then browse the flea market, where porcelain teapots, Buddha statues and other bric-a-brac tempt. Rembrandt had the same attraction to curios if his studio is any indication, which must be why Museum Het Rembrandthuis is one of my favourites. It gives a real-deal feel as to how the master etched his days away, with soft light coming through the upper-storey windows and his shelves lined with everything from seashells to Roman busts to stuffed alligators.

I grab a quick bite for lunch – maybe a roti or Indonesian fried noodles – then, because this is Holland and I can, I go see windmills. Zaanse Schans is a 20-minute train hop north, and though it's kitschy there's no denying the utter coolness of those big,

creaking blades turning in the North Sea breeze. Cows moo in the surrounding fields, and the scene seems light years away from fair Amsterdam.

But return I must, and I'll circle back to where I started the day: canalside. I pull up a chair at Crea Café with a beer wearing a frothy cap. In the water below all manner of locals drift by in boats: a lithe couple sipping wine, lads chugging Heinekens and passing around *frites*, old folks, guitar strummers, hyperactive Fidos, scantily clad ladies snuggled against older beaus – everyone out enjoying the evening. Me included.

Caroline Sieg



Caroline's relationship with Amsterdam began during her tenure as a commissioning editor in Lonely Planet's London office. Subsequent trips to the 'Dam yielded a profound obsession with Dutch apple pie with whipped cream.

These days, this half-Swiss, half-American travel writer tools around Berlin on her much-loved Dutch bike.

Caroline wrote the *Architecture*, *Shopping*, *Drinking & Smoking*, *Nightlife & the Arts*, *Gay & Lesbian Amsterdam*, *Sleeping*, *Transport* and *Directory* chapters.

Ryan Ver Berkmoes



Ryan Ver Berkmoes first ate pancakes in Amsterdam when he was staying in an unlicensed hostel for US\$6 per night and the free ones at breakfast were all he could afford (many went into his pockets for a dinnertime

feast). These days he lives in Portland, Oregon. Learn more at ryanverberkmoes.com. Ryan wrote the *Day Trips* chapter.

GETTING STARTED

Amsterdam is so incredibly well organised that you won't need to plan ahead (much). Getting there is a cinch, the handsome canal-laced centre is compact and easy to explore, and regardless of the season there'll be oodles of things to do. The city is extremely popular with visitors, so booking accommodation is likely to be your most demanding task. A key thing to bear in mind: while it's possible to 'do' the Dutch capital on a busker's income, you'll breathe easier with a medium-sized wallet.

WHEN TO GO

Try as you will, there's not really a bad time to visit Amsterdam. In any given month the festivals and celebrations will keep you going nonstop, and in a rare lull there are plenty of museums and exhibitions to hold your interest. When the weather warms up, Amsterdammers rejoice by flocking into the streets, canals and parks, while cafes happily move their seating outdoors.

The summer agenda teems with open-air concerts, theatre and festivals, often free. The party to end all orange parties is Queen's Day on 30 April, an unforgettable experience. Major cultural events include the Holland Festival and Roots Music Festival in June, Julidans in July and the Uitmarkt in August. Outdoors enthusiasts will want to take in National Cycling Day or one of the road races throughout the year.

A few of the events listed in the following section are out of town but are worth the trip. See p250 for a list of public holidays – when the city has a tendency to shut down. Accommodation is cheaper from November to December, and can fall to ludicrously low levels in the bigger hotels in January and February. July and August are the peak months.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The annual calendar is a never-ending procession of parties, exhibitions, concerts, festivals, sports challenges and other events. Things slow down a little after New Year's as the city nurses its collective head. See www.amsterdamfestivals.com for the full slate.

January

AMSTERDAM INTERNATIONAL FASHION WEEK

www.amsterdamfashionweek.com

Amsterdam's fledgling fashion scene takes flight with events around the city. There's

usually a substantial program open to the public at various clubs, galleries and shops.

JUMPING AMSTERDAM

www.jumpingamsterdam.nl

One of the top equestrian sports events in Europe, held at the RAI convention centre (p121) in late January.

February

COMMEMORATION OF THE FEBRUARY STRIKE

25 Feb

Wreaths are laid at the Dockworker monument in the former Jewish quarter in memory of the 1941 general strike against the Nazis.

March

STILLE OMGANG (SILENT PROCESSION)

www.stille-omgang.nl, in Dutch

On the Sunday closest to 15 March, Catholics walk along the Holy Way (the street 'Heiligeweg' is a remnant) to commemorate the Miracle of Amsterdam (see the boxed text, p70).

April

NATIONAL MUSEUM WEEKEND

www.museumweekend.nl, in Dutch

Usually held in early April, with free entry to all museums and crowds to match.

AMSTERDAM FANTASTIC FILM FESTIVAL

www.imaginefilmfestival.nl

Horror, sci-fi, anime and more flicker across the screen at this 11-day genre-fest. Best of all, it's at the gorgeous Tuschinskithheater (p202).

QUEEN'S DAY (KONINGINEDAG)

30 Apr

www.koninginnedagamsterdam.nl

Celebrated on the birthday of Juliana, mother of the current Queen Beatrix, Queen's Day is an uproarious madhouse and a highlight of the annual calendar. A 'free market' is held throughout the city, meaning anyone can sell anything they like, and the vast terrain of pavements (staked out by vendors well ahead of time) becomes a comical open-air showroom of items ranging from precious heirlooms to outright junk. Grab your orange wig and suspenders and hang on tight for musical revelry, rivers of beer and about two million happy visitors. And expect to walk a lot, as the streets are too packed for the buses and trams to run.

WORLD PRESS PHOTO

www.worldpressphoto.org

Pictures shot by the best photojournalists on the planet are on display at the Oude Kerker (p72) from late April till late June.

May

REMEMBRANCE DAY

4 May

Queen Beatrix lays a wreath for the victims of WWII at the Nationaal Monument (p70) on the Dam and the city observes two minutes' silence at 8pm.

LIBERATION DAY

5 May

The end of German occupation in 1945 is commemorated with speeches, concerts and street parties. The Vondelpark (p106) is a good place to be.

LUILAK (LAZYBONES)

In the early hours on the Saturday before Whit Sunday, children go around ringing door bells, making noise and waking up people who haven't bought earplugs. Luilak is a hold-over from a pre-Christian festival celebrating the awakening of spring.

ART AMSTERDAM

www.artamsterdam.nl

Formerly known as KunstRAI, this international four-day art fair, held mid-month, draws buyers with deep pockets – it's chic and commercial.

NATIONAL WINDMILL DAY 2nd Sat in May

On this day 600 windmills throughout the country unfurl their sails and welcome the public into their innards.

NATIONAL CYCLING DAY

Held in mid- to late May, it includes family cycling trips along special routes.

PINKPOP

www.pinkpop.nl

This three-day outdoor rock festival held around Pentecost (May/June) takes place near Landgraaf, about 135km southeast of Amsterdam. Past events have featured bands such as the Smashing Pumpkins and the Arctic Monkeys.

June

HOLLAND FESTIVAL

www.hollandfestival.nl

For all of June the country's biggest music, drama and dance extravaganza practically

ADVANCE PLANNING

Book your hotel well in advance, especially if you'll be visiting in the summer – top choices fill up very fast.

Check the calendars for the Concertgebouw (p201), Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ (p202), Melkweg (p200) and Paradiso (p200), and buy tickets for anything that looks appealing. Ditto for the city's special events (www.amsterdamfestivals.com). Football fans should scan for matches of leading Dutch teams on www.soccerway.com. Apart from the events themselves, you'll get clues about the crowd levels in town and the demand for hotel rooms.

A few days before you go, make reservations at your top dinner choice for your first night in town (and your second, if you're organised enough). Buy tickets to the Rijksmuseum (p103), Van Gogh Museum (p101) and Anne Frank Huis (p87) online. Decide if there are any walking, cycling or boat tours (see p253) you want to do – many must be arranged in advance.

Take a brush-up spin on a bicycle and attune your ears to the sound of a bike bell. Finally, pack layers of clothing and a raincoat, bearing in mind that the Dutch weather is notoriously fickle and there can be chilly spells even in summer.

takes over Amsterdam. Highbrow and pretentious meet lowbrow and silly.

VONDELPARK OPEN-AIR THEATRE

www.openluchttheater.nl, in Dutch

A popular Amsterdam tradition featuring classical music, dance, musical theatre, cabaret and children's shows in a wonderful park setting. Early June through to mid-August.

OPEN GARDEN DAYS

www.opentuinendagen.nl

On the third weekend in June, the public has a unique opportunity to view some 30 gardens of private homes and institutions along the canals.

ROOTS MUSIC FESTIVAL

www.amsterdamroots.nl

A lively, week-long extravaganza of world music, theatre, dance and film held at the Oosterpark (p226), Concertgebouw (p201) and other key venues in late June.

PARKPOP

last Sun in Jun

www.parkpop.nl

Europe's largest free pop festival is also one of its best organised – and with crowds of up to 250,000 or so partying fans, it needs to be. Held at Den Haag's Zuiderpark.

INTERNATIONAL THEATRE SCHOOL FESTIVAL

www.itsfestivalamsterdam.com

For 10 days around the end of the month, Dutch and international drama, dance and other performing arts students strut their stuff.

July

5 DAYS OFF

www.5daysoff.nl, in Dutch

Electronic music festival with dance parties at the Melkweg, Paradiso and Heineken Music Hall mid-month.

OVER HET IJ FESTIVAL

www.overhetij.nl

Large-scale theatre, music and fine-arts do, in off-beat venues at the NDSM shipyards in Amsterdam-Noord, for 10 days in early July. Always fresh and exciting.

JULIDANS

www.julidans.nl

Renowned dance festival with influential choreographers. It draws some 20,000 visitors during the first half of July, and takes place at venues around town.

KWAKOE

www.kwakoefestival.com, in Dutch

Every weekend in July and early August, this massive food, football and music fair takes place in Bijlmer Park in the city's southeast, celebrating Amsterdam's Surinamese, African and other cultures in fine style.

NORTH SEA JAZZ FESTIVAL

www.northseajazz.nl

The world's largest indoor jazz festival takes place in Rotterdam's renowned Ahoy complex in mid-July. The performers list reads like a 'who's who' of jazz, and many of the musicians play venues in Amsterdam as well.

DANCE VALLEY

www.dancevalley.com

Held mid-July on a fairground at Spaarnwoude, near Amsterdam. Tens of thousands groove in circus tents as celebrity DJs spin their spells.

ROBECO SUMMER CONCERTS

www.robecozomerconcerten.nl, in Dutch

Annual showcase of classical concerts featuring up-and-coming talent and a spate of events in the Concertgebouw (p201). Mid-July through August.

AMSTERDAM INTERNATIONAL FASHION WEEK

www.amsterdamfashionweek.com

The five-day summer edition of the city's fashion festivities is held late in the month, with many events at the Westergasfabriek (p119).

August

AMSTERDAM PRIDE FESTIVAL

www.amsterdampride.nl

The rainbow flag blankets Amsterdam on the first weekend of the month, with oodles of parties and special events. The climax, the Gay Pride Parade, is the world's only waterborne spectacle of its flesh-baring kind.

PARADE

www.deparade.nl, in Dutch

In the first half of the month, this old-time funfair and theatre festival at Martin Luther King Park is a magnet for small fry and parents alike.

SAIL AMSTERDAM

www.sail2010.nl

Sail is a massive, once-every-five-years convention of the world's great tall ships. Amsterdam's harbour, crowded with masts, is a beautiful vision of yesteryear. The next event is scheduled for 19–23 August 2010.

GRACHTENFESTIVAL (CANAL FESTIVAL)

www.grachtenfestival.nl

This music festival delights with classical concerts around the Canal Belt in the second half of August. The Prinsengracht Concert takes place on barges in front of the Hotel Pulitzer.

HARTJESDAGEN ZEEDIJK

www.zeedijk.nl, in Dutch

Held on the third weekend of August, this festival, dating back to medieval times, features street theatre, a transvestite parade and all kinds of costumed extroverts on Zeedijk and Nieuwmarkt.

UITMARKT

www.uitmarkt.nl, in Dutch

On the last weekend of August, local theatre troupes and orchestras present their forthcoming repertoires free of charge in the Eastern Docklands. It's a bit like Queen's Day in April, but more relaxed.

September**OPEN MONUMENTENDAG**

www.openmonumentendag.nl

Registered historical buildings are thrown open to the public on the second weekend of September.

JORDAAN FESTIVAL

www.jordaanfestival.nl, in Dutch

Held on the third weekend of September, with music, amateur contests and other festivities around the Westerkerk and elsewhere in the charming Jordaan district. Hundreds of small boats take to the canals.

DAM TOT DAMLOOP

3rd Sun in Sep

www.damloop.nl, in Dutch

This is a 16km foot race between the Dam in Amsterdam and the Dam in Zaandam. Expect up to 20,000 runners and many times that in spectators.

October**AMSTERDAM MARATHON**

www.amsterdammarathon.nl

Thousands of runners lope along the canals in this epic race that begins and ends at the Olympic Stadium. Held mid-month, with several types of runs.

AMSTERDAM DANCE EVENT

www.amsterdam-dance-event.nl

A club music powwow, with 700 DJs and more than 80,000 avid dancers attending parties all over the city – all on one long, sweaty weekend late in the month.

November**MUSEUM NIGHT**

1st Sat in Nov

www.n8.nl, in Dutch

Some 40 museums stay open late, with live music, DJs and a liver-wilting array of after-parties.

INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

www.idfa.nl

Ten days in late November are dedicated to screening fascinating true stories from all over the world.

SINTERKLAAS PARADE

www.sintinamsterdam.nl, in Dutch

St Nicholas arrives by boat from Spain in mid- to late November (see the boxed text, p20).

CANNABIS CUP

www.hightimes.com

Hosted by *High Times* magazine, this far-out festival doles out awards for the nicest grass, biggest reefer and best 'pot comedian'. Held in late November, complete with hemp expo and fashion show.

December**NEW YEAR'S EVE**

31 Dec

Fireworks displays over the Amstel and elsewhere around town (try Nieuwmarkt). The

SINTERKLAAS

Every year on 6 December, the Dutch celebrate Sinterklaas in honour of St Nicholas (Klaas is a nickname for Nicholas, or Nicolaas in Dutch). Historically St Nicholas was the bishop of Myra in western Turkey around AD 345, but he's better known as the patron saint of children, sailors, merchants and pawnbrokers – not to mention the city of Amsterdam.

In mid- to late November the white-bearded saint, dressed as a bishop with mitre and staff, arrives in Amsterdam by steamboat from 'Spain' and parades down the Damrak on horseback to receive the city keys from the mayor. He is accompanied by a host of mischievous servants called Zwarte Pieten (Black Peters), Dutch helpers in blackface (or politically correct blue- or greenface) who throw sweets around and carry sacks in which to take naughty children away. Well-behaved children get presents in a shoe that they've placed by the fireplace with a carrot for the saint's horse (which stays on the roof while a Black Peter climbs down the chimney).

On the evening of 5 December, people give one another anonymous and creatively wrapped gifts accompanied by funny or perceptive poems about the recipient written by Sinterklaas. The gift itself matters less than the wrapping (the greater the surprise, the better) and poetry (the more the recipient is put on the spot, the better).

The North American Santa Claus evolved from the Sinterklaas celebrations at the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam, which eventually became New York.

Dutch are absolutely mad about pyrotechnics, making even the most informal celebrations a spark-showering spectacle.

COSTS & MONEY

The cost of living in Amsterdam is about average for a northern European city, but less expensive than London or Paris. If you're coming from the UK, prices may look the same numerically but the exchange rate on the pound can make Amsterdam a bargain. That said, it's disturbingly easy to spend more money than you planned on, though with a few simple measures you can stop the rot.

Accommodation will likely be your major expense. Although budget lodging can be relatively inexpensive, you'll pay dearly for anything of quality. Booking package deals, taking advantage of internet discounts and visiting in the low season can drastically cut your hotel bill. Prices ease slightly in the budget and midrange brackets as you move away from the old centre, and though you're slightly further away from the action, the standard of facilities tends to go up.

The majority of hostels charge around €20 to €30 for a bed, though at rock-bottom you can find digs from around €17. Budget hotels charge around €55 to €80 for a basic double. A room in a midrange hotel or B&B goes for €80 to €160 for a standard double, with the average somewhere around €125. For a flashy boutique or luxury hotel, expect to pay from €160, though things start to get really comfy around €200 (see also p214).

As for food, you'll find lots of cafes and restaurants with three- or four-course meals for

anywhere from €18 to €40, though most will be around €27 to €37, and the bill can easily be more in swanky places. You can economise by taking your main meal at lunchtime (€10 or so will buy a daily special and a drink) and then having a snack for dinner. Self-catering is an attractive option, as delis and supermarket chains like Albert Heijn stock sandwiches and prepared meals (see p158). A consolation is the reasonable price of drinks in bars and cafes, though wine tends to be overpriced in a land of beer lovers.

Museums can be a drain on resources at about €12 a pop for the top exhibitions, but discounts are available – see p249 for information on discount cards and special passes. Remember that many of the summer festivals cost nothing to attend, and some cultural institutions offer free treats such as the lunchtime concerts at the Concertgebouw (p201).

HOW MUCH?

- Litre of bottled water €1
- Litre of unleaded petrol (gasoline) €1.42
- Glass of Heineken €2.50 to €3
- Kroket sandwich at Van Dobben €2.50
- Parking per hour €5
- Tram or bus ticket €2.60
- Joint from a coffeeshop €3 to €6
- Bike rental per day €7 to €14
- French fries with mayo (large) €4
- Tip in a public toilet €0.50

Public transport costs €2.60 per regular journey in the city centre, and you can get a day pass for €7 (see p247). Bicycle rental will set you back €7 to €14 per day. If you're looking to save money, avoid taxis! Fares vary but are generally €3.50 at flag fall and another €1.98 per kilometre, and the total bill mounts quickly. Petrol (gasoline) is among the priciest in Europe at around €1.42 per litre of unleaded but, then again, you'll hardly need a car once you're in Amsterdam.

To sum up, budget travellers staying in hostels or cheap hotels, eating in modest restaurants and visiting a museum or two should be able to scrape by on €50 to €70 a day. Staying in midrange hotels and eating in midrange restaurants equates to €100 to €150 per person per day in peak season. From around €200 per day, you can stay in four- and five-star hotels, dine at fancy restaurants and hire a private boat, provided a few others chip in.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Amsterdam is a pretty switched-on place and the web is a fertile source of information. Here's a selection of relevant sites – some for practical planning, others for feeding your head. For websites about feeding your face, see p159.

<http://homepage.mac.com/schuffelen> Dutch pronunciation (MP3s to download).

www.bonhighheels.com Hip local girls – aka Backpackers on High Heels – give good shopping and sightseeing tips.

www.dutchnews.nl The latest news stories from the Netherlands, plus event listings.

www.expatica.com For expats and all those who strive to be one.

www.iamsterdam.com Excellent site run by the city of Amsterdam.

www.nlstreets.nl A cool scrolling interface leads you through Amsterdam's best shopping quarters.

www.panoramsterdam.com For 360-degree views of your favourite city.

www.startamsterdam.com Link-rich site for art, culture and places of interest.

SUSTAINABLE AMSTERDAM

Amsterdammers are acutely aware of the strains on their fair city, and though visitors aren't expected to go overboard, your contribution to a cleaner environment will be much appreciated.

You can start by taking a low-emission train or bus to Amsterdam to reduce your carbon output. There's little need for a car once you're here; it's more a curse than a blessing in the perennially clogged lanes of the Canal Belt. The efficient web of bus, tram and metro lines is a much better option and feeds seamlessly into the national transportation system. Amsterdam's long-standing policy of curbing motor-vehicle use reduces not only congestion but also air pollution (electric cargo trams were launched recently for the very same reason).

The petite city centre is tailor-made for bicycles and foot traffic. Bike-hire shops are everywhere – including one that offers bikes made from recycled parts (see p244).

It's becoming easier to eat sustainably, thanks to farmers markets and a restaurants that source ingredients locally (see Foodie Favourites, p171, and www.eatgreen.nl).

As for recycling, bins for *papier* (paper) and *glas* (glass) are fairly common around town; p41 has further information.

top picks

GREEN OPTIONS

- **Recycled Bicycles** (p244) The name says it all.
- **Brouwerij 't IJ** (p194) Organic brews.
- **Conscious Hotels Museum Square** (p223) A proper eco-hotel.
- **De Kas** (p175) Meals from the greenhouse.
- **Boerenmarkt** (p146) Farmers market with fresh cheese.

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