



EYEWITNESS TRAVEL

TOP 10

AMSTERDAM



THE 10 BEST OF EVERYTHING

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ESSENTIAL TIPS

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INTERACTIVE MENUS

1 Museums 

2 Churches 

Navigate by using our interactive table of contents, click each link to be taken to that section. These appear at the beginning of each chapter.

NAVIGATION

The best way to explore this guide is to begin at **Highlights**. This first chapter shows you, quite simply, the best sights in the destination. This is followed by: **Top 10 of Everything** – themed Top 10 lists that allow you to make the most of your time away; **Around Town** – must-see sights, area by area; **Streetsmart** – essential practical information; and the **Image Gallery** – A selection of great images that accompany many of the sight listings.

INTRODUCING AMSTERDAM



Amsterdam has an appeal that is absolutely unique. It's a vibrant place, a treasure-trove of extraordinary artistic riches, and the living embodiment of 900 years of history, during which it rose to become the centre of a huge global empire. After a period of decline, it matured into today's relaxed and tolerant modern metropolis. Elegant and serene, Amsterdam also has its seamy side, and this too is part of its character, as much as its famous network of canals. Whatever you are looking for, this small city packs a big punch.

AMSTERDAM

10

TOP 10

AMSTERDAM
HIGHLIGHTS

THE MUST SEE SIGHTS AND EXPERIENCES

AMSTERDAM HIGHLIGHTS



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CANALS & WATERWAYS



CANALS AND WATERWAYS

With their delightful views, pretty bridges (1,703 in all), idiosyncratic gabled houses and relaxed waterside cafés, Amsterdam's 75 km (47 miles) of canals are full of interest and perfect for a leisurely stroll. They are a constant reminder that the Netherlands is the world's flattest country, half of which has been reclaimed from the sea with the aid of dykes, canals and huge tidal barriers. Before you start exploring Amsterdam's canals on foot, however, you should take a boat tour (for further details see [The Cat Boat&Canal Tours](#)) for a fascinating overview. In 2010 the 17th-century canal ring was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

1. HERENGRACHT

Stateliest canal of the [Grachtengordel](#), the Herengracht is famous for its Golden Bend – a grand but rather lifeless stretch of mansions built for the richest merchants. A more beautiful stretch lies between Huidenstraat and Leidsestraat, best viewed from the east side.

2. KEIZERSGRACHT

The central canal of the Grachtengordel has fine stretches between Brouwersgracht and Raadhuisstraat, and again between Runstraat and Leidestraat.

 [View photo](#)

3. PRINSENGRACHT

The outermost canal of the Grachtengordel, designed for warehouses and artisans' housing, has a breezy, laidback air. It is peppered with cafés, art galleries and houseboats. Cycle its 3 km (2 mile) length, or explore short stretches on foot.

 [View photo](#)

4. ENTREPOTDOK

An imposing stretch of former dockland has been restored to provide offices and apartments, with outdoor cafés overlooking colourful houseboats.

 [View photo](#)

5. REGULIERSGRACHT

Much loved for its pretty houses and hump-backed bridges, Reguliersgracht was cut in 1664. Look out for Nos 57, 59 and 63.

6. AMSTEL RIVER

Until the construction of the Grachtengordel pushed it out of focus, the river Amstel was the city's *raison d'être*. It is still used by barges to transport goods to the city's port.

7. BROUWERSGRACHT

The happy-go-lucky feel of the “brewers” canal’ makes a pleasant contrast to the sophisticated elegance of the Grachtengordel.

 [View photo](#)

8. BLOEMGRACHT

A charming canal crossed by cast iron bridges, Bloemgracht is known locally as “the Herengracht of the Jordaan”, because of its elaborately gabled houses.

 [View photo](#)

9. LEIDSEGRACHT

This lovely – and exclusive – canal was cut in 1664, when it was the main barge route from Amsterdam to Leiden.


 [View photo](#)



10. SINGEL

Once a fortified moat, the Singel is now home to Bloemenmarkt, the domed Ronde Lutherse Kerk and the soaring NeoGothic Krijtberg church.

How Amsterdam’s Houses are Built

Each house is built on wooden piles sunk into the marshy, porous subsoil. It wasn’t until the 17th century, when the piles could be sunk deep enough to reach the hard layer of sand that lies at 13 m (42 ft), that any real stability was achieved. Some reach even further, to a second layer of sand at 18 m (58 ft). If piles come into contact with air, they rot, so today, concrete is used instead of wood.

 **Tip:** Three perfect canal side cafés are Papeneiland, at Prinsengracht 2, Van Puffelen, where you can sit on a barge in summer.

 **Tip:** If you are in the centre of Amsterdam, with no time to explore the city’s canals, at least take a stroll to the Huis op de Drie Grachten, (House on Three Canals), step-gabled on all three of its canal-facing sides, at  [Oudezijds Voorburgwal 249](#). Visit [Het Grachtenhuis](#) for a fascinating exhibition on the creation of Amsterdam’s triple canal ring.

UNEXPECTED SIGHTS ON A CANAL TOUR

1. THE SAFEST VAULTS

The vaults of the Dutch National Bank are sunk some 15 m (48 ft) below ground level. In the event of an alarm, they have been designed to allow the waters of the Singelgracht to flood into them.

2. THE PRISON BRIDGE

The Torensluis – the widest bridge in Amsterdam – spans the Singel on the site of a 17th-century sluice gate. A lock-up jail was built into its foundations.

3. THE CAT BOAT

Hundreds of feline waifs and strays are given refuge in *De Poezenboot* (The Cat Boat), moored on the Singel.

 [View photo](#)

4. THE DRUNKEN TSAR

In 1716, Peter the Great got drunk at his friend Christoffel Brants' house at Keizersgracht 317, and kept the mayor waiting at a civic reception. That night, he stayed at the house of the Russian ambassador, Herengracht 527, where Napoleon also stayed in 1811.

 [View photo](#)

5. THE NARROWEST HOUSE

Is Singel 7 the smallest house in Amsterdam? No, it's simply the back door of a wedged-shaped house, whatever your tour guide tells you.

6. BLUE ANGEL

Cast your eye upwards to the beautiful Blue Angel statue perched on the former *Levensverzekering Maatschappij - Noord-Brabant* building, at the corner of Singel and Haarlemmerstraat.

7. THE MOST CROOKED CAFE

Teetering Café de Sluyswacht, built in 1695, makes an alarming sight as you glide by along the Oudeschans.

 [View photo](#)

8. THE WRAPPED-UP HOUSE

Look carefully at Victoria Hotel, near the station, and you will see two tiny 17th-century houses embedded in the monumental 19th-century façade. A little old lady, so the story goes, refused to sell up, so the hotel had to wrap itself around them.

9. THE FLOATING PAGODA

The famous Sea Palace, Amsterdam's floating Chinese restaurant, makes an unusual sight and romantic dinner spot, with its twinkling lights and many windows.

10. THE TOWER OF TEARS

This medieval defensive tower has the saddest of names: Schreierstoren (Tower of Tears), where weeping women waved farewell to their seafaring men.

The Grachtengordel

Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2010, Amsterdam's magnificent semicircle of three canals – Prinsengracht, Keizersgracht and Herengracht – is the city's defining characteristic. Lined by elegant gabled houses, and connected by intimate cross-streets, it was devised in the early 17th century to cope with the rapid rise in population, and was built in two stages during the century. This costly Plan of Three Canals was purely aesthetic – the land along the banks was sold in single plots; the wealthy bought two together so that they could build larger houses. Amsterdam had its unlikely beginnings some 400 years before, when a fishing settlement grew up on the marshy banks of the river Amstel. (It was dammed in 1222 – hence the name, a contraction of Amstelledamme.) As the town began to expand, canals were cut to drain more land and provide transport channels, and outer canals were fortified. A glance at a map clearly shows the limits of the medieval town, bounded by the curved Singel, with the Grachtengordel fanning out beyond.


 [View photo](#)

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RIJKSMUSEUM



RIJKSMUSEUM

The magnificent national museum of the Netherlands possesses nearly one million works of art, only a fraction of which is on display. It was established by King Louis Napoleon in 1808 in the Royal Palace on the Dam, moving to its present location near the Vondelpark in 1885. The main building, designed by P J H Cuypers, underwent extensive renovation for 10 years, reopening in 2013. The museum possesses a collection of Dutch art, with more than 8,000 pieces currently on display.  *Museumstraat 1 • 020 674 7000 • www.rijksmuseum.nl • Open 9am–5pm daily • Admission €15 (under 19s free); garden free*

 [Google Map](#)

1. THE NIGHT WATCH

The museum's most prized possession is *The Military Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq* – otherwise known as *The Night Watch* (1642), given pride of place in a section of the Philips Wing.

2. THE JEWISH BRIDE

In creating one of the most tender double portraits ever painted (1667), Rembrandt depicted in an unusually free style – an unknown couple in the guise of biblical characters Isaac and Rebecca.

3. THE KITCHEN MAID

The sense of realism in this magical painting by Vermeer (c.1658) is conveyed by his mastery of light, colour and perspective. Seen slightly from below against a bare wall, the simple, sturdy girl seems almost tangible – quiet and still, but for the milk flowing from her jug.

 [View photo](#)

4. PORTRAIT OF A GIRL DRESSED IN BLUE

This portrait by Johannes Vermeer (1641) is a wonderful example of the artist's signature polished style of painting. Smooth, almost invisible brush strokes contrast significantly with the rougher style of contemporaries such as [Frans Hals](#).

5. TEMPLE GUARD

This depiction of temple guard Naraen Kongo (Ungyo) dates from between 1300 and 1400 and is made from wood with traces of polychromy.

 [View photo](#)


6. WINDMILL ON A POLDER WATERWAY

Paul Joseph Constantin Gabriel's balanced composition is heavily influenced by Impressionist ideas, with its use of quick brushstrokes. It was acquired by the Rijksmuseum in 1889 and was considered modern for the time.

 [View photo](#)

7. OUR LADY OF SORROWS

This unique Flemish terracotta bust (c.1500–1510) is a lifelike depiction of Mary in mourning; the Mater Dolorosa.

 [View photo](#)

8. FK23 BANTAM


Designed by Frits Kookhoven in 1917, this aeroplane is an icon of the Dutch contribution to aviation. Featuring a fuselage with wooden frames, wooden propeller and wicker pilot's chair.

9. THE SQUARE MAN

The Square Man (1951) is typical of Karel Appel's work during his CoBrA years, defining the face of Dutch art in this period.


10. TWO TOILET CASKETS


Created by the celebrated Parisian furniture maker, André-Charles Boulle (c.1688), these paired toilet caskets are a fine example of the artist's work, representing the Renaissance styles of tortoiseshell and gilded bronze.

 [View photo](#)

Gallery Guide

The museum is split into eras with the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Special Collections and Asian Pavilion housed on the ground floor; 18th- and 19th-century art on the first floor; 17th-century Golden Age on the second floor; and 20th-century pieces on the third floor. There are two main entrances, all located within the Atrium. One leads to the East wing, and one to the West. Due to the extensive renovation, items on display may be moved around the gallery.

 **Tip:** The Rijksmuseum Café on the ground floor overlooking the Atrium is a great place to crowd watch while you rest your weary feet.

 **Tip:** Be prepared: the museum has more than 8,000 items of Dutch art dating from the Middle Ages to the 20th century. With 80 rooms spread over four floors, don't expect to see everything in a single visit. Temporary exhibitions are held on the top floor of the Philips Wing. On the ground floor, you will find a café and restaurant.

1. THE BUILDING

The architect P J H Cuypers attracted strong criticism from the Protestant community, who took exception to the building's Neo-Gothic roofs and ornately decorated façade. King William III refused to set foot inside.

2. THE GARDEN

A little-known, immaculate haven, it is studded with statues and architectural curiosities.

3. ATRIUM

The entrance and heart of the museum, the two courtyards of the Atrium – now restored to their original 1885 condition – are linked by an underground passageway.

4. TERAZZO FLOOR

Covered in 1920 and hacked away in the late 20th century, Cuypers' original terrazzo floor has been restored to its former glory. Hundreds of thousands of small marble stones make up this floor, which is rich in symbolism.

5. LIBRARY

The library is only open to researchers of art history but, museum visitors can look through a large glass wall to view its impressive interior and book collection.

6. ASIAN PAVILION

A quiet, meditative place, this is a wonderful retreat from the swarming masses. Elsewhere, Dutch art proliferates; the Asian Pavilion offers an insight into a different culture and time – that of Asia many ages ago.

7. SPECIAL COLLECTION

The Special Collection ranges from amusing to bizarre: rooms full of boxes, animals, Meissen porcelain, miniature silver, an armoury, and even the hair of Jacoba of Bavaria, the 15th-century Countess of Holland and Zeeland.

8. THE GOLDEN AGE

Renowned the world over for its 17th-century collection, visitors flock to the Rijksmuseum to see paintings by Dutch Masters such as Rembrandt, Vermeer, Jan Steen and Frans Hals.

9. MODERN ART

Two loft-like spaces on the third floor house art from the 20th century: one 1900–1950; the other 1950–2000.

10. GREAT HALL

The Great Hall on the second floor has been entirely reconstructed to resemble how it looked in Cuypers' day, with elaborate and beautiful late 19th-century decoration.


Rembrandt and The Night Watch

Popular belief holds Rembrandt's greatest painting, *The Night Watch* (1642), responsible for his change in fortune from rich man to pauper. In fact, it was more a case of poor financial management than of public dissatisfaction with the artist, although it's very likely that the militiamen who commissioned the portrait would have been dismayed at the result. *The Night Watch* differs radically from other contemporary portraits of companies of civic guards, in which they are depicted seated, serious and soberly dressed (for further details see [Civic Guards' Gallery](#)). Rembrandt, by contrast, shows a tumultuous scene – the captain issuing orders to his lieutenant, the men taking up arms ready to march. This huge painting was originally even larger, but it was drastically cut down in 1715, when it was moved to the town hall, and the other pieces were lost. In 1975 it was slashed, but repaired.

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VAN GOGH MUSEUM

The most comprehensive collection in the world of Van Gogh's work was amassed by his art dealer brother Theo, and is housed in this museum. It includes more than 200 of his paintings, over 500 drawings and hundreds of letters, as well as his Japanese prints and works by contemporaries – though not all are on permanent display. Gerrit Rietveld's airy building, opened in 1973, sets off the paintings to perfection. The display follows Van Gogh's development from the murky peasant scenes of the early 1880s to the anguished final works.  [Museumplein](#) • 020 570 5200 • www.vangoghmuseum.com
Open Jan–Feb & Sep–Dec: 9am–5pm daily; Mar–Aug: 9am–6pm daily; (until 10pm Fri) • Admission: adults €15 (under 18s free) • Audio tours €5; group tours by appointment

 [Google Map](#)

1. SUNFLOWERS

This vibrant painting (1889) was intended to be one of a series of still life to fill the “Yellow House” at Arles. Van Gogh chose sunflowers because he was expecting Paul Gauguin, and knew his friend liked them. The predominant yellows and oranges contrast with strokes of brilliant mauve and red.

 [View photo](#)

2. THE POTATO EATERS

The culmination of his years in Nuenen, this was Van Gogh's first major composition (1885). He wanted to portray the peasants realistically, not glamorize them, but the painting was not the critical success he had hoped for.

3. THE BRIDGE IN THE RAIN

This work, painted in 1887, illustrates Van Gogh's interest in Japanese art, in particular Utagawa Hiroshige. However, Van Gogh used far brighter colours and greater contrasts.

4. A PAIR OF SHOES

Van Gogh gives character to a pair of worn boots in one of the first paintings after his move to Paris (1886). The dark palette harks back to his Nuenen work.

5. SELF-PORTRAIT AS A PAINTER

The last and most accomplished in a series of self-portraits painted in 1887, shortly before he left Paris, reveals Van Gogh's distinctive interpretation of Pointillism. He chose himself as subject since he could seldom afford models.

 [View photo](#)

6. FISHING BOATS ON THE BEACH AT LES SAINTES-MARIES-DE-LA-MER

A trip to the sea in 1888 produced these colourful, stylized boats. Look close and you will see grains of sand, blown on to the canvas and fixed there forever as the paint dried.

7. THE BEDROOM

The mastery of this painting (1888) lies in the simplicity of the subject and the subtly alternating blocks of colour. Van Gogh was so happy with the result that he made two copies.

8. THE REAPER

While undergoing treatment in Saint-Rémy, Van Gogh found solace painting people who worked the land. He painted three versions of The Reaper (1889).

9. ALMOND BLOSSOM

Van Gogh made this picture of white almond blossom against a blue sky for his new nephew, born in January 1890 and named after him.

10. WHEATFIELD WITH CROWS


One of the panoramic landscapes that Van Gogh painted in 1890, during the last days of his life, this famous picture with its dead-end track and menacing, crow-filled sky, perhaps reveals his tortured state of mind.

 [View photo](#)

Museum Guide

Van Gogh's paintings are displayed by date and place of execution on the first floor but are moved around regularly. Works by contemporaries are on the ground and third floor. Exhibitions of drawings and graphic art are staged on the second floor, which also has a study area, where drawings and documents too fragile to be displayed can be viewed. The Exhibition Wing has three floors, devoted to temporary exhibitions.

 **Tip:** The museum has a useful self-service café, situated on the ground floor.

 **Tip:** To avoid the crowds, arrive at opening time or buy tickets at the museum's website. Stick to the chronological order of the display.

1. VIEW OF PRINS HENDRIKKADE AND THE KROMME WAAL IN AMSTERDAM

Monet painted this cityscape in winter 1874 from a boat on the IJ river.

2. YOUNG PEASANT GIRL WITH A HOE

Jules Breton was an idol of Van Gogh. In rural scenes like this one (1882), he places an idealized figure in a realistic setting.

3. EXHAUSTED MAENADS AFTER THE DANCE

In this Lawrence Alma-Tadema painting of 1874, three devotees (maenads) of the wine god Bacchus have fallen asleep.

4. PORTRAIT OF GUUS PREITINGER, THE ARTIST'S WIFE

The vivid use of colour in Kees van Dongen's portrait of his wife (1911) is characteristic of Fauvism.

5. YOUNG WOMAN AT A TABLE, "POUDRE DE RIZ"

This early painting by Toulouse-Lautrec (1887), who became a friend of Van Gogh, is probably of his mistress, Suzanne Valadon.

6. PORTRAIT OF BERNARD'S GRANDMOTHER

Van Gogh swapped one of his self-portraits for this painting (1887) by Emile Bernard.

7. SAINT GENEVIEVE AS A CHILD IN PRAYER

An oil study (1876) by Puvis de Chavannes for the huge murals he painted on the theme of St Geneviève's childhood at the Panthéon in Paris.

8. SELF-PORTRAIT WITH A PORTRAIT OF BERNARD, "LES MISERABLES"

In his powerful self-portrait (1888), Gauguin identified himself with the hero of *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean.

9. "GRAND PAYSAN"

Jules Dalou shared Van Gogh's preoccupation with peasants, whom he saw as heroic labourers. He devised this life-size sculpture in 1889.

10. TWO WOMEN EMBRACING

Van Gogh's influence on the Dutch artist Jan Sluijters is obvious in the brushwork and colour of this painting of 1906.

The Life of Vincent van Gogh

Born on 30 March 1853 in Zundert, Vincent van Gogh was the eldest son of a pastor and his wife. Aged 16, he joined his uncle's business Goupil & Co., art dealers. Seven years later, displaying increasingly erratic behaviour, he was dismissed. After a couple of false starts as teacher and evangelist, in 1880 he decided to be a painter. From 1883 to 1885, he lived with his parents in Nuenen, but in 1886 he went to Paris to study in Fernand Cormon's studio. He lived with his brother Theo, met renowned artists and changed his style. In 1888, he moved to Arles where he dreamed of establishing an artists' colony with Paul Gauguin. Soon after Gauguin arrived, the friends had a fierce argument, and during a psychotic attack, Van Gogh cut off a piece of his own left ear lobe. He enrolled as a voluntary patient in a clinic in Saint-Rémy in 1889. The following year he left for the rural village Auvers-sur-Oise, where his state of mind deteriorated and he shot himself in the chest on 27 July 1890. He died, with Theo at his bedside, two days later.

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MUSEUM ONS' LIEVE HEER OP SOLDER



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