



AMSTERDAM CITY ROLL OR STROLL

From the Train Station to the Rijksmuseum

Amsterdam today looks much as it did in its Golden Age, the 1600s. It's a retired sea captain of a city, still in love with life, with a broad outlook and a salty story to tell.

Take this barrier-free Dutch sampler tour from one end of the old center to the other, tasting all that Amsterdam has to offer along the way. It's your best single roll or stroll through Dutch clichés, hidden churches, surprising shops, thriving happy-hour hangouts, and eight centuries of history.

ORIENTATION

The tour starts at the central-as-can-be train station. You'll roll or stroll about three miles, heading down Damrak to Dam Square, continuing south down Kalverstraat to the Mint Tower, then wafting through the Bloemenmarkt (flower market), before continuing south to Leidseplein and swinging left to the Rijksmuseum. To return to Central Station, catch accessible tram #5 or #2 from the southwest corner of the Rijksmuseum.

If this tour proves too much to tackle all at once, consider breaking it up into easy-to-tackle chunks. Along the way, tour the museums that you find interesting and suitable to your level of personal mobility (I've listed accessibility details for each one).

You can find public toilets at fast-food places (generally €0.30, often accessible) and near the entrance to the Amsterdam History Museum (fully accessible). Beware of silent transport—trams and bikes. Stay off the tram tracks. If you're walking, keep off the bike paths and yield to

bell-ringing bikers. If you're using a wheelchair, you may have to use these bike paths at times—do your best to avoid bikers.

THE TOUR BEGINS

Central Station

Here where today's train travelers enter the city, sailors of yore disembarked from seagoing ships to be met by street musicians, pickpockets, hotel-runners, and ladies carrying red lanterns. When the station was built (on reclaimed land) at the former harbor mouth, Amsterdam lost some of its harbor feel, but it's still a bustling port of entry.

Central Station, with warm red brick and prickly spires, is the first of several neo-Gothic buildings we'll see from the late 1800s, built during Amsterdam's economic revival. One of the towers has a clock dial; the other tower's dial is a weathervane. Watch the hand twitch as the wind gusts.



As you emerge from the train station, the first thing you see is a mess. All the construction is for the new cultural center and library (left of station) and subway line (in front of station). The new north-south metro line (scheduled to open in 2011) will complement the existing east-west one. While it sounds like a fine idea, the billion euros being spent on it is considered riddled with corruption. The big, ugly building in the canal directly in front of the train station will eventually be sunk underground and become part of the subway station.

Beyond the construction, the city spreads out before you in a series of concentric canals. Ahead of you stretches the street called Damrak, leading to Dam Square, a half mile away. To the left of Damrak is the city's old (*oude*) side, to the right is the new (*nieuwe*).

The big church towering above the old side (at about 10 o'clock) is St. Nicholas Church, built in the 1880s when Catholics—after about three centuries of oppression—were finally free to worship in public. The church marks the beginning of the Red Light District. The city's biggest bike garage, a multistory wonder, is on your right (in front of the Ibis Hotel).

• We'll basically head south from here to the Rijksmuseum. The art museum and the station—designed by the same architect—stand like bookends holding the old town together. Follow the crowds south on Damrak, going along the right side of the street.

Damrak

You'll pass every Dutch cliché at the tourist shops: wooden shoes, plastic tulips, Heineken fridge magnets, and windmill saltshakers. Listen to a hand-cranked barrel organ. Order french fries (called *Vlaamse frites*, or Flemish fries, since they were invented in the Low Countries) and dip them in mayonnaise, not ketchup. Eating international cuisine (Indonesian *rijsttafel*, Argentine steak, Middle Eastern *shoarma*—pronounced SHWAHR-mah) is like going local in cosmopolitan Amsterdam. And you'll find the city's most notorious commodity displayed at the Damrak Sex Museum (1st floor is moderately accessible—**AE, AI**—but upper level is not; see page *TK).

The street was once a riverbed, where the Amstel River flowed north into the IJ (pronounced “eye”) river behind today's train station. Both rivers then emptied into a vast inlet of the North Sea (the *Zuiderzee*), making Amsterdam a major seaport. Today, the Amstel is channeled into canals, its former mouth has been covered by Central Station, the North Sea inlet has been diked off to make an inland lake, and 100,000 ships a year reach the open waters by sailing west through the North Sea Canal.

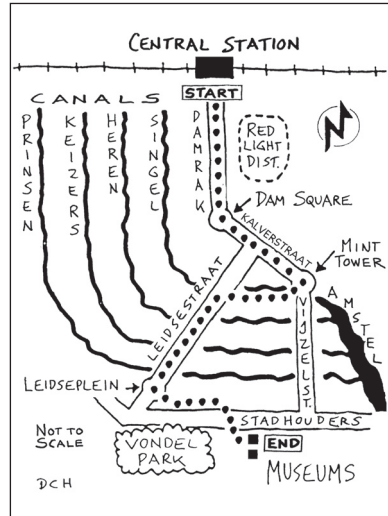
Local landowners are concerned that the tunneling for the new subway line will cause their buildings to settle. The snoopy-looking white cameras mounted on various building corners (such as the Beurs) are monitoring buildings to check for settling.

• *The long brick building with the square clock tower, along the left side of Damrak, is the...*

Stock Exchange (Beurs)

Built with nine million bricks on about 5,000 tree trunks hammered into the marshy soil, the Beurs stands as a symbol of the city's long tradition as a trading town.

Amsterdam City Roll or Stroll



Back when “stock” meant whatever could be loaded and unloaded onto a boat, Amsterdammers gathered to trade. Soon, rather than trading goats, chickens, and kegs of beer, they were exchanging slips of paper and “futures” at one of the world’s first stock exchanges. Traders needed moneychangers, who needed bankers, who made money by lending money...and Amsterdam of the 1600s became one of the world’s first great capitalist cities, loaning money to free-spending kings, dukes, and bishops.

This impressive building, built in 1903 in a geometric, minimal, no-frills style, is one of the world’s first “modern” (i.e., 20th-century-style) buildings, emphasizing function over looks. In 1984, the stock exchange moved next door (see the stock prices readout) to the Euronext complex—a joint, if overly optimistic, attempt by France, Belgium, and the Netherlands to compete with the power of Britain’s stock exchange. The old Beurs building now hosts concerts and a museum for temporary exhibits.

Amsterdam still thrives as the center of Dutch businesses, such as Heineken, Shell Oil, Philips Electronics, KLM Airlines, and Unilever. Amsterdammers have always had a reputation for putting business above ideological differences, staying neutral while trading with both sides.

• *Damrak opens into...*

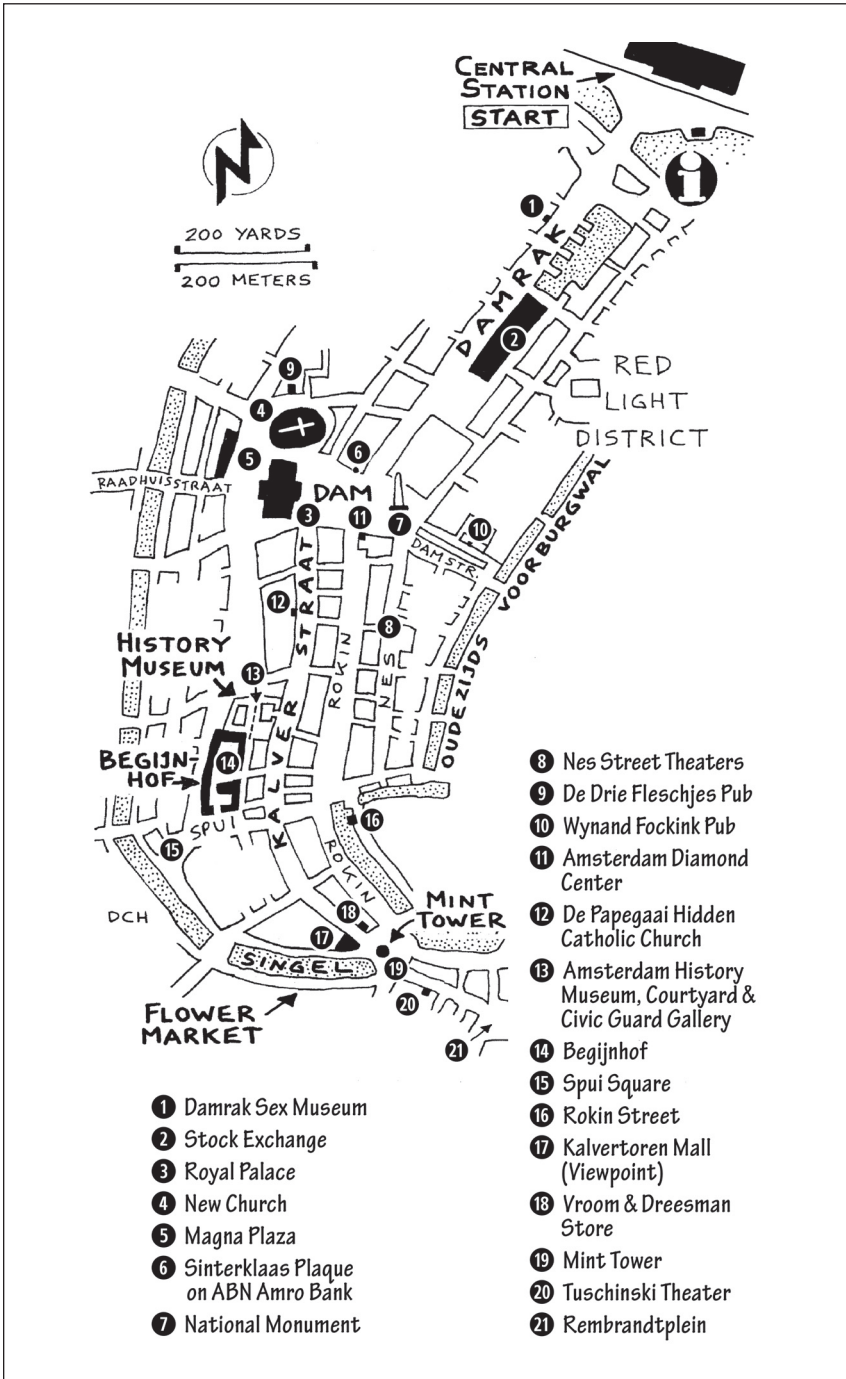
Dam Square

The city got its start right here around 1250, when fishermen in this marshy delta settled along the built-up banks of the Amstel River. They blocked the river with a *damme*, and created a small village called “Amstel-damme.” Soon the fishermen were trading with German riverboats traveling downstream and with seafaring boats from Stockholm, Hamburg, and London. Dam Square was the center of it all.

The dam on the Amstel divided the *damrak* (meaning “outer harbor”—for sea traffic) from the *rokin* (“inner harbor”—for river traffic). Land trade routes converged here as well, and a customs house stood here. Today, the Damrak and Rokin (roh-KEEN) are major roads, and the city’s palace and major department stores face the square, where mimes, jugglers, and human statues mingle with locals and tourists. This is the historic heart of the city. As the symbolic center of the Netherlands, it’s where political



Amsterdam City Roll or Stroll—First Half



demonstrations begin and end.

Pan the square clockwise to see the following: the Royal Palace (the large domed building on the west side), the New Church (Nieuwe Kerk), an ABN Amro bank, Damrak, the proud old De Bijenkorf (literally, “The Beehive”) department store, the Krasnapolsky Grand Hotel, the white, phallic obelisk of the National Monument, the Rokin, touristy Madame Tussaud’s, and the entrance to pedestrian-only Kalverstraat (look for *Rabobank* sign).

Royal Palace

The name is misleading, since Amsterdam is one of the cradles of modern democracy. For centuries, this was the Town Hall of a self-governing community that prided itself on its independence and thumbed its nose at royalty. The current building, built in 1648, is appropriately classical (like the democratic Greeks), with a triangular pediment featuring—fittingly for Amsterdam—denizens of the sea cavorting with Neptune (with his green copper trident.)

After the city was conquered by the French, Napoleon imposed a monarchy on Holland, making his brother Louis the king of the Netherlands (1808). Louis used the city hall as his “royal palace,” giving the building its current name. When Napoleon was defeated, the victorious powers dictated that the Netherlands remain a monarchy, under a noble Dutch family called the House of Orange. If the current Queen Beatrix is in town, this is, technically, her residence (though it’s currently under renovation, and closed to visitors through 2008; when open, it’s Level 1—Fully Accessible). Amsterdam is the nominal capital of the Netherlands, but all governing activity—and the Queen’s actual permanent home—are in The Hague (a city 30 miles southwest).



New Church (Nieuwe Kerk)

Access: AE, AI, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible. The associated restaurant (to the right) is also fully accessible and has adapted toilets.

Cost and Hours: €8, covered by *I Amsterdam* Card, Mon–Sat 10:00–18:00, Sun 13:00–18:00.

The Sight: The “New” Church is 600 years old (newer than the 700-year-old “Old” Church in the Red Light District). The sundial above

the entrance once served as the city's official timepiece.

The church's bare, spacious, well-lit interior (often occupied by temporary art exhibits) looks quite different from the Baroque-encrusted churches found in the rest of Europe. In 1566, clear-eyed Protestant extremists throughout Holland marched into Catholic churches (like this one was), lopped off the heads of holy statues, stripped gold-leaf angels from the walls, urinated on Virgin Marys, and shattered stained-glass windows in a wave of anti-Catholic vandalism.

This iconoclasm (icon-breaking) of 1566 started an 80-year war against Spain and the Hapsburgs, leading finally to Dutch independence in 1648. Catholic churches like this one were converted to the new dominant religion, Calvinist Protestantism (today's Dutch Reformed Church). From then on, Dutch churches downplayed the "graven images" and "idols" of ornate religious art.

From just inside the door, you can get a free look at the 1655 organ (far left end, often encased in its painted wooden cupboard); the stained-glass window (opposite entrance) showing Count William IV giving the city its "XXX" coat of arms; and the window (over entrance) showing the inauguration of Queen Wilhelmina. She grew to become the steadfast center of Dutch Resistance during World War II.

This church is where many of the Netherlands' monarchs are married and all are crowned. In 1980, Queen Beatrix—Wilhelmina's granddaughter—said "I do" in the New Church. When Beatrix dies or retires, her son, Crown Prince Willem Alexander, will parade to the center of the church, sit in front of the golden choir screen, and—with TV lights glaring and flashbulbs popping—be crowned the next sovereign.

• *Looking between the Royal Palace and the New Church, you'll see the fanciful brick facade of the Magna Plaza shopping center. Back in Dam Square, on the wall of the ABN Amro bank, find the colorful little stone plaque of..*

Sinterklaas—St. Nicholas

Jolly old St. Nicholas (Nicolaas in Dutch) is the patron saint of seafarers (see the 3 men in a tub) and of Amsterdam, and is also the model for Sinterklaas—the guy we call Santa Claus. Every year in late November, Holland's Santa Claus arrives by boat near Central Station (from his legendary home in Spain), rides a white horse up Damrak with his servant, Peter (in blackface), and arrives triumphant in this square while thousands of kids cheer.

December 5, the feast day of St. Nicholas, is when the Dutch exchange presents and Sinterklaas leaves goodies in good kids' wooden shoes. (Smart kids maximize capacity by putting out big boots.) Many Dutch



celebrate Christmas on December 25 as well.

Around the corner on Damrak, the bank has an ATM and a chip-loader (*Oplaadpunt*). The ATM is familiar, but what's that small keypad next to it? It's for loading up the Dutch cash card—an attempt to eliminate the need for small change. With the keypad, the Dutch transfer money from their accounts onto a card with a computer chip. Then they can make purchases at stores by

inserting the card into a pay-point, the way Americans buy gas from the pump.

National Monument

The obelisk, which depicts a crucified Christ, men in chains, and howling dogs, was built in 1956 as a WWII memorial. Now it's considered a monument for peace.

The Nazis occupied Holland from 1940 to 1945. They deported more than 100,000 Amsterdam Jews, driving many—including young Anne Frank and her family—into hiding. Near the end of the war, the “Hunger Winter” of 1944–1945 killed thousands and forced many to survive on tulip bulbs. Today, Dutch people in their 70s—whose growth-spurt years coincided with the Hunger Winter—are easy to identify, because they are uniformly short.



Circling the Square

You're at the center of Amsterdam. A few blocks to the east is the top of the Red Light District. Amsterdam is a world center for experimental theater, and several edgy theaters line the street called the Nes (stretching south from Krasnapolsky Grand Hotel).

Office workers do afternoon happy hours at crowded bars that stock *jenever*s and liqueurs in wooden kegs. De Drie Fleschjes (**AE, AI**, Level 2—Moderately Accessible), a particularly casual pub, is tucked right

behind the New Church. The more upscale Wynand Fockink (AE, AI, Level 2—Moderately Accessible; 100 yards down the alley along the right side of Hotel Krasnapolsky) serves fruit brandies produced in its adjoining distillery (which you can visit). Though the brew is bottled and distributed all over Holland, what you get here in the home-office bar is some of the best Fockink liqueur in the entire world.

At the Amsterdam Diamond Center (Level 4—Not Accessible; free, Mon–Sat 10:00–18:00, Sun 11:00–18:00, where Rokin street meets Dam Square), see cutters and jewelry-setters handling diamonds, plus some small educational displays and fake versions of big, famous stones. Since the 1500s, the city has been one of the world’s diamond capitals. Eighty percent of industrial diamonds (for making drills and such) pass through here, as do many cut and polished jewels, like the Koh-I-Noor diamond.

• *From Dam Square, head south (at Rabobank sign) on...*

Kalverstraat

This pedestrian-only street is lined with many familiar franchise stores and record shops. This has been a shopping street for centuries, and today it’s



notorious among locals as *the* place for cheesy, crass materialism. For smaller and more elegant stores, try the adjacent district called De Negen Straatjes (literally, “The Nine Little Streets”), where 190 shops mingle by the canals (about 4 blocks west of Kalverstraat).

• *About 120 yards along (across from the McDonald’s) is...*

De Papegaai Hidden Catholic Church (Petrus en Paulus Kerk)

Access: AE+A, AI, Level 2—Moderately Accessible. The wheelchair user can ring a bell to gain entry through the regular door instead of trying to get through the revolving door. The interior of the church is accessible, with flat aisles.

Cost and Hours: Free, daily 10:00–16:00.

The Sight: This Catholic church, while not exactly hidden (you found it), keeps a low profile, even now that Catholicism has been legalized in Amsterdam. In the late 1500s, with Protestants fighting Catholics and

City on a Sandbar

Amsterdam is built on millions of wooden pilings. The city was founded on unstable mud, which sits on stable sand. In the Middle Ages, buildings were made of wood, which rests lightly and easily on mud. But devastating fires repeatedly wiped out entire neighborhoods, so stone became the building material of choice. Stone is fire-resistant, but was too heavy for a mud foundation. For more support, pilings were driven 30 feet through the mud and into the sand. The Royal Palace sits upon 13,000 such pilings—still solid after 350 years. (The wood survives fine if kept wet and out of the air.) Since World War II, concrete, rather than wood, has been used for the pilings, with foundations driven 60 feet deep through the first layer of sand, through more mud, and into a second layer of sand. And today's biggest buildings have foundations sinking as much as 120 feet deep.

the Dutch fighting Spanish invaders, Amsterdam tried to stay neutral, doing business with all parties. Finally, in 1578, Protestant extremists (following the teachings of Reformer John Calvin) took political control of the city. They expelled Catholic leaders and bishops, outlawed the religion, and allied Amsterdam with anti-Spanish forces in an action known to historians as the Alteration.

For the next two centuries, Amsterdam's Catholics were driven underground. Catholicism was illegal but tolerated, as long as it was not practiced in public, but in humble, unadvertised places like this. (The stuffed parrot—*papegaai*—hanging in the nave refers to the house formerly on this site, with a parrot gable stone.)

Today, the church, which asks for a mere “15 minutes for God” (*een kwartier voor God*), stands as a metaphor for how marginal religion has long been in highly commercial and secular Amsterdam.

• *Farther along (about 75 yards) at #92, where Kalverstraat crosses Wijde Kapel Steeg, look to the right at an archway leading to the...*

Courtyard of the Amsterdam History Museum

Access: Museum is AE, AI, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible. The loft is Level 4—Not Accessible. The museum has wheelchair-accessible elevators (that do not go to the loft) and an adapted toilet (near the fully accessible David and Goliath café). Loaner wheelchairs are available.

Cost, Hours, Location: €6.50, covered by *I amsterdam* Card, Mon–Fri 10:00–17:00, Sat–Sun 11:00–17:00, Kalverstraat 92.

The Sight: On the arch is Amsterdam's coat of arms—a red shield with three Xs and a crown. Not a reference to the city's sex trade, the X-shaped crosses (which appear everywhere in the city) represent the crucifixion of St. Andrew, the patron saint of fishermen, and symbolize heroism, determination, and mercy. The crown dates to 1489, when Maximilian I (the Low Countries' first Hapsburg ruler and later Holy Roman Emperor) paid off a big loan from city bankers and, as thanks for the cash, gave the city permission to use his prestigious trademark, the Hapsburg crown, atop its shield. The relief above the door (see photo), dated 1581, shows boys around a dove, reminding all who pass that this was an orphanage and asking for charity. Go inside.



The pleasant David & Goliath café (with a shady courtyard; **AE, AI, AT**, Level 1—Fully Accessible) is watched over by a giant statue of Goliath and a knee-high David (from 1650). In the courtyard are the lockers for the orphans' uniforms and an accessible pay toilet.

• *The courtyard leads to another courtyard with the best city history museum in town, the Amsterdam History Museum (access details above; for more information, see page *TK). In between the two courtyards (on the left) is a free, glassed-in passageway lined with paintings, called the...*

Civic Guard Gallery (Schuttersgalerij)

In these group portraits from Amsterdam's Golden Age (early 1600s), look into the eyes of the frank, dignified men (and occasionally women) with ruffs and lace collars, who made Amsterdam the most prosperous city in Europe, sending trading ships to distant colonies and pocketing interest from loans. The weapons they carry are mostly symbolic, since these "Civic Guards," who once protected the town (fighting the Spanish), had become more like fraternal organizations of business bigwigs.



Many paintings look the same in this highly stylized genre. Military companies often sit in two rows. Someone holds the company flag.

Captains wield pikes (axe-like weapons topped with spearhead-shaped tips), lieutenants hold partisans (pikes with sword-like tips), and others wield hatchet-headed halberds or muskets. Later group portraits showed “captains” of industry going about their work, dressed in suits, along with the tools of their trade—ledger books, quill pens, and money.

Everyone looks straight out, and every face is lit perfectly. Each paid for his own portrait and wanted it right. It took masters like Rembrandt and Frans Hals to take the starch out of the collars and compose more natural scenes.

• *The gallery offers a shortcut to the Begijnhof, 75 yards farther south. But if the gallery is closed, backtrack to Kalverstraat, continue south, then turn right on Begijnensteeg. Either route leads to the entrance of the walled courtyard called the...*

Begijnhof

Access: AE, AI, Level 1—Fully Accessible. The entrance on the east side of the courtyard has no steps. The courtyard has fully-accessible pathways. The hidden Catholic church (AE+A, AI, Level 2—Moderately Accessible) has large doors and two 2” steps, one on either side of the landing.

Cost, Hours, Location: Free, open daily 8:00–17:00 for “tourist visits” (groups and guided tours). At other times, be quiet and stick to the area near the churches. Don’t photograph homes or the residents, and always remember that this is a private residence (on Begijnensteeg lane, just off Kalverstraat between #130 and #132). The English Reformed Church is sometimes open for tourists (free, open about 4 days a week 10:00–14:00 and always for English-speaking worshippers, Sun service at 10:30).

The Sight: This quiet courtyard (pronounced gutturally: buh-HHHINE-hof), lined with houses around a church, has sheltered women since 1346. This was for centuries the home of Beguines—women who removed themselves from the world at large to dedicate their lives to God. It literally was a “woman’s island”—a circle of houses facing a peaceful courtyard, surrounded by water.

The Beguines’ ranks swelled during the Crusades, when so many men took off, never to return, leaving society with an abundance of



single women. Later, women widowed by the hazards of overseas trade lived out their days as Beguines. Poor and rich women alike turned their backs on materialism and marriage to live here in Christian poverty. While obedient to a mother superior, the lay order of Beguines were not nuns. The Beguines were very popular in their communities for the unpretentious, simple, and Christ-like lives they led. They spent their days deep in prayer and busy with daily tasks—spinning wool, making lace, teaching, and caring for the sick and poor. In quiet seclusion, they inspired each other as well as their neighbors.

In 1578, when Catholicism was outlawed, the Dutch Reformed Church (and the city) took over many Catholic charities like this place. The last Beguine died in 1971, but this Begijnhof still provides subsidized housing to about a hundred needy single women (mostly Catholic seniors and students). The Begijnhof is just one of about 75 *hoffes* (housing projects surrounding courtyards) that dot Amsterdam.

Begin your visit at the statue of one of these charitable sisters. She faces the **wooden house** (*houten huys*) at #34. The city's oldest, it dates from 1477. Originally, the whole city consisted of wooden houses like this one. To the left of the house is a display of carved gable stones that once adorned housefronts and served as street numbers (and still do at #19 and #26, the former mother superior's house). Inside the covered passageway at the south end of the square (near the oldest house), find images of things forbidden in this all-female enclave—roosters (male), dogs (dirty), and male humans over age three (dangerous).



The brick-faced **English Church** (Engelse Kerk, from 1420) was the Beguine church until 1607, when it became Anglican. The Pilgrims (strict Protestants), fleeing persecution in England, stopped here in tolerant Amsterdam and prayed in this church before the *Mayflower* carried them to religious freedom at Plymouth Rock in America. If the church is open (sporadic hours), go inside to see a stained-glass window of the Pilgrims praying before boarding the *Mayflower* (far end), an old pew they may have sat on (right wall), and a 1763 Bible (on the altar) with *lots of old-style sff*.

The “hidden” **Catholic Church** (notice the painted-out windows, 2nd and 3rd floors) faces the English Church. Amsterdam's oppressed 17th-century Catholics, who refused to worship as Protestants, must

have eagerly awaited the day when, in the 19th century, they were legally allowed to say Mass. Go inside (through the low-profile doorway), pick up an English brochure near the entry, and rap softly on a “marble” column.

Today, Holland is still divided religiously, but without the bitterness. Roughly a third of the population is Catholic, a third Protestant...and a third list themselves as “unchurched.”

• *Backtrack to busy Kalverstraat, turn right, and continue south. Pause at the intersection with Spui straat and look to the right.*

Spui and the Rokin

A block to the right is the square called **Spui** (spow, rhymes with “cow”). Lined with cafés and bars, it’s one of the city’s more popular spots for nightlife and sunny afternoon people-watching.

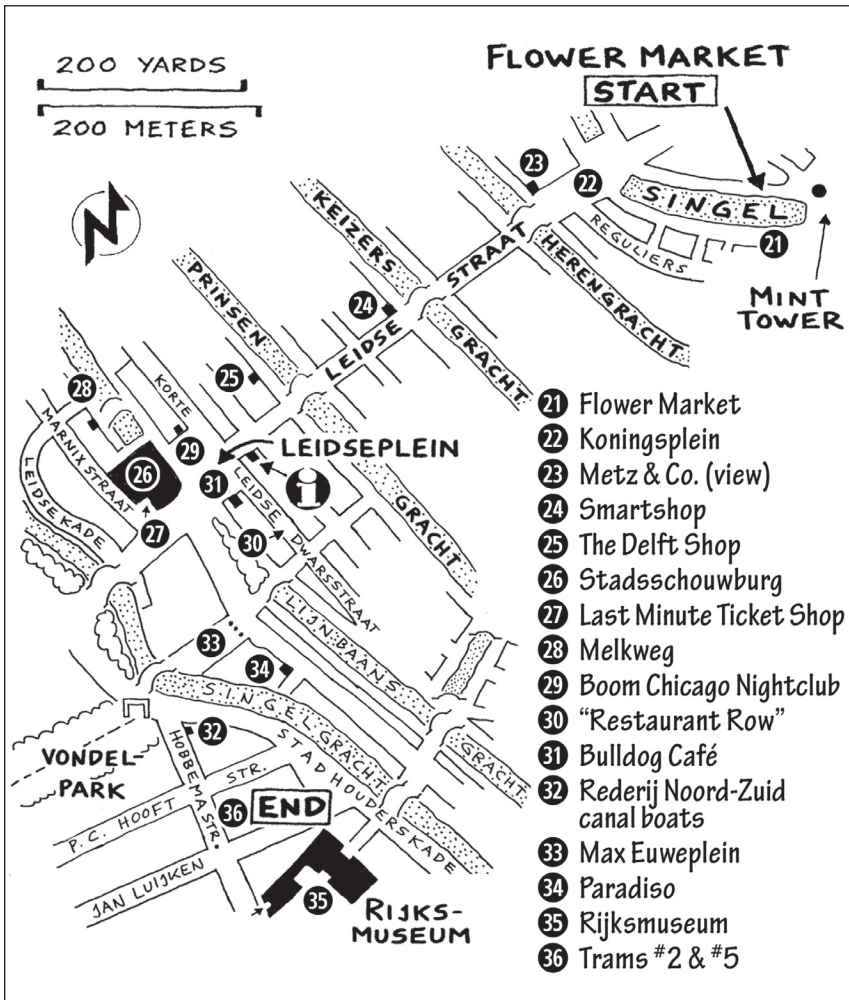


A block to the left is the busy street called **Rokin** (ro-KEEN). A statue of Queen Wilhelmina (1880–1962) on the Rokin shows her riding daintily sidesaddle. In real life, she was the iron-willed inspiration for the Dutch Resistance against the Nazis. Remember that today’s Queen Beatrix is Wilhelmina’s granddaughter.

The **House of Hajenius**, at Rokin 92 (50 yards left of the canal dock, toward the train station), is a temple of cigars, a “paradise for the connoisseur” showing “175 years of tradition and good taste.” To enter this sumptuous Art Nouveau building with painted leather ceilings is to go back to 1910 (**AE+A, AI**, Level 2—Moderately Accessible; free, Tue–Sat 9:30–18:00, Sun 12:00–17:00, Mon 12:00–18:00). One 6” entry step leads to the accessible ground floor. Don’t be shy—the place is as much a free museum for visitors as it is a store for paying customers. The brown-capped canisters are for smelling fine pipe tobacco. Take a whiff. The personal humidifiers (read the explanation) allow locals (famous local names are on the cupboard doors) to call in an order and have their cigars waiting for them at just the right humidity. Look up at the



Amsterdam City Roll or Stroll—Second Half



humidifier pipes pumping moisture into the room. Upstairs in back is a small, free museum (unfortunately, it's not accessible—up eleven narrow 5" steps).

Head back toward the pedestrian street, Kalverstraat, and turn left when you get there. You'll pass various department stores with cafeterias. At the end of Kalverstraat, the **Kalvertoren** shopping complex (AE, AI, AL, Level 2—Moderately Accessible) offers a top-floor viewpoint and café. Go straight into the glass atrium and go past the escalators to ride the accessible slanting glass elevator (Mon 11:00–18:30, Tue–Fri 10:00–18:30, Thu until 21:00, Sat 10:00–18:00, Sun 12:00–18:00). Across

Kalverstraat, the **Vroom & Dreesman** department store (at #200) is one of Holland's oldest chains. Inside, La Place (Level 3—Minimally Accessible, has stairs) is a sprawling self-service cafeteria—handy for a quick and healthy lunch (Mon–Sat 10:00–20:00, Thu until 21:00, Sun 12:00–20:00).

• *Continue on Kalverstraat, which dead-ends at the...*

Mint Tower (Munttoren)

This tower, which marked the limit of the medieval walled city, served as one of the original gates (the steeple was added later, in 1620). The city walls were girdled by a moat—the Singel canal. Until about 1500, the area beyond here was nothing but marshy fields and a few farms on reclaimed land.

From the busy intersection at Muntplein, look left (at about 10 o'clock) down Reguliersbreestraat. A long block east of here (where you see trees) is Rembrandtplein, another major center for nightlife. Halfway down the block (past the massive easyInternetcafé—**AE, AI, Level 2**—Moderately Accessible; daily 9:00–21:00, Reguliersbreestraat 33), the twin green domes mark the exotic Tuschinski Theater (**AE+A, AI, Level 3**—Minimally Accessible, four 7" entry steps), where you can see current movies in a sumptuous Art Deco setting (see page *TK). In the lobby, stare at the ever-changing ceiling, imagining this place during the Roaring '20s.

• *Just past the Mint Tower, turn right and go west along the south bank of the Singel, which is lined with the greenhouse shops of the...*



Flower Market (Bloemenmarkt)

This busy block of cut flowers, plants, bulbs, seeds, and garden supplies attests to Holland's reputation for growing flowers. Tulips, imported from Turkey in the 1600s, grew well in the sandy soil of the dunes and reclaimed land. By the 1630s, the country was in the grip of a full-blown tulip mania, when a single bulb sold for as much as a house, and fortunes



were won and lost. Finally, in 1637, the market plummeted, and the tulip became just one of many beauties in the country's flower arsenal. Today, Holland is a major exporter of flowers. Certain seeds are certified and OK to bring back into the United States (merchants have the details).

• *The long Flower Market ends at the next bridge, where you'll see a square named...*

Koningsplein

Choke down a raw herring—the commodity that first put Amsterdam on the trading map—with locals who flock to this popular outdoor herring stand (one 12" step to reach ordering platform). *Hollandse nieuwe* means the herring are in season.

• *From Koningsplein, we'll turn left, heading straight to Leidseplein. At first, the street southward is just labeled Koningsplein (Scheltema, Amsterdam's leading bookstore, is at Koningsplein 20; AE, AI, AL, Level 2—Moderately Accessible). Soon, Koningsplein becomes...*

Leidsestraat

Between here and Leidseplein, you'll cross several grand canals, following a street lined with fashion and tourist shops, and crowded with shoppers, tourists, bicycles, and trams. Trams must wait their turn to share a single track as the street narrows.



The once grand, now frumpy **Metz & Co.** department store (AE, AI, AL, Level 2—Moderately Accessible; where Leidsestraat crosses Herengracht) offers a rare above-the-rooftops panorama of the city from its fully accessible sixth-floor café.

Looking left down Herengracht, you'll see the “**Golden Curve**” of the

canal, lined with grand, classical-style gables.

• *Past the posh stores of Laura Ashley, DKNY, and Lush, find a humble establishment where Leidsestraat crosses the Keizersgracht...*

When Nature Calls Smartshop

Access: AE+A, AI+A, Level 2—Moderately Accessible. Two exterior 3" entry steps, then two more 8" steps after the landing. The rest of the store is very small, packed with display cases.

Hours and Location: Daily 10:00-22:00, Keizersgracht 508.

The Sight: “Smartshops” like this one are clean, well-lighted, fully



professional retail outlets that sell powerful drugs, many of which are illegal in America. Their “natural” drugs include harmless nutrition boosters (royal jelly), harmful but familiar tobacco, herbal versions of popular dance-club drugs (herbal Ecstasy), and powerful psychoactive plants (psilocybin mushrooms). The big item: marijuana seeds.

Prices are clearly marked, with brief descriptions of the drugs, their ingredients, and effects. The knowledgeable salespeople can give more information on their “100 percent natural products that play with the human senses.”

Still, my fellow Americans, *caveat emptor!* We’ve grown used to thinking, “If it’s legal, it must be safe. If it’s not, I’ll sue.” While perfectly legal and aboveboard, some of these substances can cause powerful, often unpleasant reactions.

• *Where Leidsestraat crosses the Prinsengracht, just over the bridge on the right (at Prinsengracht 440), you’ll find...*

The Delft Shop

Access: Level 4—Not Accessible. But if Delft is your thing, try the accessible shop at Prinsengracht 170, near Leidseplein.

The Sight: The distinctive blue-and-white design characterizes glazed ceramics made in Delft (30 miles southwest of here). Dutch traders learned the technique from the Chinese of the Ming dynasty, and many pieces have an Oriental look. The doodads with arms branching off a trunk are popular “flower pagodas,” vases for displaying tulips.

• *Leidsestraat empties into the square called...*

Leidseplein

Filled with outdoor tables under trees, ringed with cafés, theaters, and nightclubs, bustling with tourists, diners, trams, mimes, and fire-eaters, and lit by sun- or lantern-light, Leidseplein is Amsterdam’s liveliest square.

Do a 360-degree spin: Leidseplein’s south side is bordered by the city’s main serious theater, the **Stadsschouwburg** (AE, AI, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible, designated seating for wheelchair users), which dates back to the 17th-century Golden Age (present building from 1890). Tucked into a corner of the theater is the **Last Minute**



Ticket Shop (AE, AI, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible), which sells tickets to all the shows in town (including half-price, same-day tickets to select shows, Leidseplein 26, tel. 0900-0191). To the right of the Stadsschouwburg, down a lane behind the big theater at Lijnbaansgracht 234a, stands the **Melkweg** (literally, “Milky Way”;

AE, AI, AL, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible). This once revolutionary, now institutional entertainment complex houses all things youth-oriented under one roof; go into the lobby or check out posters plastered on the walls to find out who’s playing tonight. On Leidseplein’s west side, at #12, is the **Boom Chicago** nightclub theater, presenting English-language spoofs of politics, Amsterdam, and tourists (AE, AI, AT, ♥, Level 1—Fully Accessible, see page *TK; pick up their free, informative intro-to-Amsterdam magazine at the door). The neighborhood beyond Häagen-Dazs and Burger King is the “**Restaurant Row**,” featuring countless Thai, Brazilian, Indian, Italian, Indonesian, and even a few Dutch eateries. Next, on the east end of Leidseplein, is the **Bulldog Café and Coffeeshop** (Level 3—Minimally Accessible), the flagship of several café/bar/coffeeshops in town with that name. (Notice the sign above the door: It once housed the police bureau.) A small green-and-white decal in the window indicates that it’s a city-licensed “coffeeshop,” where marijuana is sold and smoked legally. Nearby are Rederij Noord-Zuid **canal boats**, offering one-hour tours (4 of their 6 boats are AE, AI, Level 1—Fully Accessible, ideally call ahead for schedule of accessible boats; see page *TK).

• *From Leidseplein, turn left and head along the taxi stand down the broad, busy, tram-filled boulevard called Kleine-Gartman Plantsoen, which becomes Weteringschans. At the triangular garden filled with iguanas, cross the street and pass under a row of tall, gray, Greek-style columns, entering...*

Max Euweplein

Access: AE, AI, Level 1—Fully Accessible.

The Sight: The Latin inscription above the colonnade—*Homo Sapiens non urinat in ventum*—means “Don’t pee into the wind.” Pass between the columns and through a passageway to reach a pleasant, accessible interior courtyard with cafés and a large chessboard with knee-high kings. (Max Euwe was a Dutch world champion in chess.)

Canals

Amsterdam's canals tamed the flow of the Amstel River, creating pockets of dry land to build on. The city's 100 canals are about 10 feet deep, crossed by some 1,200 bridges, fringed with 100,000 Dutch elm and lime trees, and bedecked with 2,500 houseboats. A system of locks (back near Central Station) controls the flow outward to (eventually) the North Sea and inward to the Amstel River. The locks are opened periodically to flush out the system.

Some of the boats in the canals look pretty funky by day, but Amsterdam is an unpretentious, anti-status city. When the sun goes down and the lights come on, people cruise the sparkling canals with an on-board hibachi and a bottle of wine, and even scows can become chick magnets.



The square gives you access to the Casino, and just over the small bridge is the entrance to accessible **Vondelpark**.

• *Return to Weteringschans street. Turn right and continue 75 yards east to a squat, red-brick building called...*

Paradiso

Back when rock-and-roll was a religion, this former church staged intimate concerts by big-name acts such as the Rolling Stones. In the late 1960s, when city fathers were trying hard to tolerate hordes of young pot-smokers, this building was redecorated with psychedelic colors and opened up as the first place where marijuana could be smoked—not legally yet, but it was tolerated. Today, the club hosts live bands and DJs and sells pot legally (for current shows, see www.paradiso.nl). Unfortunately, the entry is Level 4—Not Accessible.

• *Continue down Weteringschans to the first bridge, where you'll see the Rijksmuseum across the canal.*

The Rijksmuseum and Beyond

The best visual chronicle of the Golden Age is found in the Rijksmuseum's portraits and slice-of-life scenes (**AE+A, AI, AT**, Level 2—Moderately

Accessible, for access details see page *TK; €10, covered by *I amsterdam* Card, daily 9:00–18:00).

On this tour, we've seen landmarks built during the city's late-19th-century revival: Central Station, the Stadsschouwburg, and now the Rijksmuseum. They're all similar, with red-brick and Gothic-style motifs (clock towers, steeples, prickly spires, and stained glass). Petrus Cuypers (1827–1921), who designed the train station and the Rijksmuseum, was extremely influential. Mainly a builder of Catholic churches, he made the Rijksmuseum, with its stained glass windows, a temple to art. The building is currently closed for renovation, with the highlights of the collection beautifully displayed in its Philips Wing (around back, on the right). Next to the Philips Wing, a small, free exhibit describes the exciting renovation project.

Behind the Rijksmuseum are the Museumplein (always entertaining) and the Van Gogh Museum (**AE, AI, AT**, Level 1—Fully Accessible; €9, covered by *I amsterdam* Card, Sat–Thu 10:00–18:00, Fri 10:00–22:00, Paulus Potterstraat 7). The Heineken Brewery museum is a half mile east of the Rijks on Stadhouderskade (**AE, AI, AL, AT**, Level 1—Fully Accessible, €10 for self-guided tour and 3 beers, Tue–Sun 10:00–18:00, last entry 17:00, closed Mon), and the Albert Kuyp street market is a block south of Heineken.

• *The tour is finished. To return to Central Station (or to nearly anyplace along this tour), catch tram #2 or #5 (both accessible) or from the southwest corner of the Rijks.*