

An enriching excursion

The cultural city of Amsterdam is the perfect destination for a long weekend as Laura Lewis found out on her recent tour



Taking refuge from the pouring rain over a couple of hot chocolates and some delicious pastries in Rene's Croissanterie, my husband and I giggled at the irony, as before we arrived, the sunshine had reportedly been glorious.

Stepping off the early flight from Southampton made this trip seem like a hop, skip and a jump away from the cosy bed we had left just a few hours before with a list as long as my arm of things we 'simply had to do' in Amsterdam. For our first stop we decided to pop into our hotel, the beautifully decorated, ultra-modern boutique Canal House Hotel on Keizersgracht, or Emperors Canal.

It was quickly apparent that Amsterdam was easy to navigate even for someone like me, who gets lost in a supermarket. After a warm welcome both in smiles and central heating, our luggage was stored as a pot of tea was brewed for us while we rested. Our lovely hotel manager sat with us and helped us to get our bearings on the map and the service with a smile was definitely what we needed to brighten up an otherwise rainy day.

We decided to head straight to the Anne Frank Museum, seeing as it was only a five-minute walk to Prinsengracht, where we could see Westerkerk, Amsterdam's biggest church up ahead.

Set in the actual house where the Frank family hid away from persecution from the Nazi's in the Second World War, this fascinating journey into Anne's



Above: Canal House Hotel

Right: Dam Square Edwin van Eis



world left us feeling humbled and in awe of the strength and determination she showed. The queues were huge as we left, stretching around the corner, so it was well worth turning up early.

Heading back out onto Prinsengracht, we noticed a little cheese museum across the water. We found it charming, and it felt nice to support the small, local businesses. It's well worth tasting the wares in the upstairs shop and then browsing the museum downstairs for a nominal fee. We came out with a bag full of gorgeous cheeses, and a jar of fig chutney, which just wasn't going to stay on the shelf.

Food wise, we were spoilt for choice, and to be honest, there is something to suit all taste buds, but if you want to try traditional Dutch food then visit Haese Claes restaurant for a scrummy Stampot or Hotchpotch, both deliciously hearty dishes that will give you the fuel you need for touring the city.

After a marvellous night's sleep, a long soak in the fantastic bathtub and a relaxing breakfast overlooking the huge garden, we set off out for our second day – spending our morning at Vincent – the Van Gogh exhibition which was currently at The Hermitage awaiting the finishing touches at its original home in Museumplein.

This collection of Vincent's letters to his brother Theo along with a 75 piece collection of paintings would give even a beginner a full overview of this gentle and passionate but haunted life, with the highlights for me being The Sunflowers and The Yellow House, a study which is close to my heart after

years of studying art as a youngster.

For a truly arty day a stop off at the Stedelijk Museum will fill your appetite, with highlights including Chagall, Kandinsky and Warhol. History buffs will enjoy a few hours spent at Het Grachtenhuis, a museum dedicated to the development of Amsterdam's canals and introduction of Keiserzgracht, Herengracht and Prinsengracht, which circle Amsterdam, and helped its popularity grow when it outgrew its small beginnings around the Damrak.

After a long day sightseeing we were thankful for a restful night's sleep at the traditional, Hotel Estherea before our early flight the next morning.

Free hot drinks and snacks are always available in reception, which

was a really nice touch, and it was a great place to chill out in between busy mornings and afternoons.

Before we knew it, it was time, unfortunately, to go home and we were boarding our flight, with bellies full of cheese and heads full of history, art and architecture. }

Address Book

Restaurant Haesje Claes

Spuistraat 273-275
info@haesjeclaes.nl

Westerkerk

Prinsengracht 281
www.westerkerk.nl

Anne Frank House

Prinsengracht 267
www.annefrank.org

Stichting Het Grachtenhuis

Herengracht 386
mail@hetgrachtenhuis.nl
www.hetgrachtenhuis.nl

Stedelijk Museum

Museumplein 10
www.stedelijk.nl/

Van Gogh museum

The Hermitage until April 25th 2013, normally at Museumplein. Visit website for latest information. Amstel 51, Amsterdam
info@vangoghmuseum.nl
www.vangoghmuseum.com
Rene's Croissanterie, Damstraat 20

Essentials

Fares for Southampton to Amsterdam are available from £43.99 each way including taxes and charges. Book via www.flybe.com.

Iamsterdam City card available from 42 Euros for unlimited public transport, entrance to 50 plus major attraction and valuable discounts at 60 venues. www.iamsterdam.com

Rooms start from £190 at the Canal House Hotel
+31 (0)20 622 51 82

Rooms start from £93 at Hotel Estherea
www.estherea.nl/en/index.html
+31 (0)20-6245146