

>5 things to do in: amsterdam

TAKE 5 IN AMSTERDAM

By Jan Schroder



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After a recent mother-son riverboat trip in Europe, we stayed a few extra days in Amsterdam, as my son had never been. He joked about delving into the city's devious side with his mother, but while that never happened, we did find plenty to keep us occupied. We boated on canals, posed on the big red "I Amsterdam" sign, strolled through Vondelpark, feasted on rijsttafel, and dodged many of the city's almost 880,000 bicycles as we walked miles around the streets and along some of the city's 165 canals. Here are five ways to pass time in this capital city in the country branding itself as "Holland. The Original Cool."

1. TAKE A TRAVELGIRL BREAK My son happily set off on his bike to tour the city while I spent two blissful hours in the Tassen Museum of Bags and Purses. More than 4,000 handbags are displayed in a canal home that was the residence of the mayor in 1664. It all started when founder Hendrikje Ivo found one tortoiseshell plate bag in an English country village antique shop and her passion for collecting was sparked. The museum covers 500 years of handbag history with beautiful examples from every era, some of them exquisite works of art. Handbags are made of just about every material, from ivory and plastic to leather from lizards, armadillos, ostriches and even fish! Shapes range from a cupcake to a champagne bucket to a leather clutch in the shape of the cruise ship *Normandie* from 1935. Of course, I managed to do a bit of damage in the gift shop, but resisted the lure of adding yet another lovely handbag to my collection. If you love handbags like I do, you won't want to miss this charming museum. www.tassenmuseum.nl

2. STAY IN A HOTEL ON A CANAL We loved La Ambassade

from the moment we discovered it right on the Herengracht Canal, excavated in 1614. The hotel consists of 10 connecting canal homes with 58 rooms, each with a different décor and layout. (Travelgirls may want to book #32, where pink is the prevailing theme.) The maze of red-carpeted hallways that link the homes is painted bright white and lined with art collected by the owner. Our two-level suite had a view of the canal and a bathroom with a charming claw-foot tub, luxury toiletries and a heated tile floor (my favorite feature!). We had breakfast each morning in a gorgeous room on the first floor where we helped ourselves to the buffet while our eggs were cooked to order. Free Wi-Fi, a fantastic location and bicycles available for rental made La Ambassade even more appealing. www.ambassade-hotel.nl/en

3. CRUISE THE CANALS In other cities you might hop on a bus for a general tour, but in Amsterdam there's only one way to go: by boat. This year the city is marking the 400th anniversary of its Canal Ring, which was added to UNESCO's World



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Heritage List in 2010. We glided along several of the canals in a glass-top boat with excellent views of 17th- and 18th-century estates, churches and other sites, including the very long line for entrance into the Anne Frank House. Our captain lined us up perfectly on a section of the Reguliersgracht Canal where you can view seven bridges in a row. Take your choice of short narrated cruises, hop-on and hop-off options or private canal cruises. *Travelgirl tip: The I Amsterdam City Card includes one free canal cruise and also allows unlimited use of public transportation and free entrance to 38 top museums and attractions.* www.amsterdam.info/tours/canalcruise

4. LEARN ABOUT DUTCH HISTORY AND ART This year also marks the grand reopening of two major museums that underwent massive renovations. The Van Gogh Museum reopened in May after a seven-month, \$26-million renovation, with the exhibition "Van Gogh at Work," which runs through January 2014. The Rijksmuseum, the national museum, reopened in April after a 10-year, \$480-million epic overhaul that kept large portions of the museum shut down. We visited on the last day it was open prior to being completely shuttered before the grand reopening, and saw the *Night Watch* by Rembrandt, the only work of art still in its previous location and my son's favorite. The new Rijksmuseum features 8,000 works in 80 rooms that chronicle Dutch history from 1200 to the present. We enjoyed our visit to the smaller and powerfully moving



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Dutch Resistance Museum that detailed the Dutch response to the Nazi occupation in World War II, when the city lost 60,000 Jewish residents and 5,000 died of hunger and cold during the "Hunger Winter" of 1944-45. I wanted to see what life was like for residents of the grand canal homes, so we toured the Willet-Holthuysen Museum, built in 1687 and willed to the city in 1885 along with an extensive art collection.

5. INDULGE IN LOCAL CUISINE I had been introduced to *rijsttafel* on a previous visit and wanted to share the experience of this elaborate Dutch colonial feast made with Indonesian cuisine with my son. At the suggestion of a flight attendant, we ate at Kantjil & de Tijger, where we chose the 12-item rijsttafel and giggled delightedly as the plates just kept coming. We feasted on fish and pork satay, grilled banana leaves, coconut soup and various other dishes we couldn't identify but enjoyed just the same. We tried some casual treats as well: stopping at a French fry stand one day for my son to buy a cone of crispy *Vlaamse frites*, as they are called in Amsterdam, with traditional toppings of mayo, curry sauce and peanut sauce. Another low-calorie delight, the pancake is a different experience in Amsterdam: We were surprised when the pancake with ham my son ordered was more like a crepe with two large slices of ham — and filled the entire plate. www.kantjil.nl

Learn more at www.iamsterdam.com.



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