

The magic of Amsterdam

Brian and Denise Claridge discover the delights of Amsterdam on a mini-break and admire millions of colourful tulips at Keukenhof

THERE CAN be few experiences more memorable than a short break to Amsterdam, one of the most vibrant and historic cities in the world.

Amsterdam has many attractions and is renowned for its world-famous museums, art galleries, Dutch masters, historic cathedrals, Anne Frank House, diamonds, tulips, cheese, canals, red light district and much more.

There are many ways of exploring the city, on foot, by cycle, tram, hop-on

hop-off bus, or by canal boat. We decided the latter was a relaxing way of getting acquainted with Amsterdam.

Known as the 'City of Canals' its 165 canals were created over the centuries to stimulate trade and transport and reclaim land to expand the city and in 2010 Amsterdam's canal ring was recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The cost of a one hour canal boat cruise costs €16 (£12.50) per person and departs from the boat terminal opposite Amsterdam Central Train Station.

Our boat tour, with Lovers, took us through narrow canals, with picturesque houseboats and elegant merchants' houses. Since its development in the 17th century, Amsterdam's canal ring has grown to be one of the world's most unique urban landscapes.

If you fancy seeing Amsterdam by night, you can wine and dine with a candle-lit cruise with cheese and wine, or a four-course dinner with drinks. It's an opportunity to see the nightlife of Amsterdam from a different perspective.

You can, if you prefer, hire a cycle to get about and join the locals who go everywhere by bike.

There are more than 800,000 bicycles in Amsterdam and cycling is by far the most popular mode of transport, made easier by the city's network of bike paths, cycle routes and flat landscape.

Museums

Amsterdam has more than 50 museums, the most famous and largest being the Rijksmuseum, a Dutch national art museum dedicated to arts and history in Amsterdam and home to hundreds of famed Dutch old masters, including Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*.

The museum, situated in Museum Square, has 8000 artistic and historical objects telling the story of 800 years of Dutch history, from the year 1200 right up to the present, including masterpieces by Rembrandt, Frans Hals, and Johannes Vermeer. In 2013 and 2014, it was the most visited museum in the Netherlands.

The Van Gogh Museum is also located in Museum Square and dedicated to the works of Vincent van Gogh and his contemporaries. The museum opened in 1973 and holds the largest collection of Van Gogh's paintings and drawings in the world, with 200 paintings, 400 drawings and 700 letters by Vincent van Gogh. In 2013, the museum was the second most visited museum in the Netherlands and the 35th most visited art museum in the world.

Another popular attraction is Anne Frank House, which is dedicated to Jewish wartime diarist Anne Frank. It was in this 17th century house, located on the Prinsengracht canal, that Anne had to go into hiding during the Second World War. Together with seven others, she hid in a secret annex and after almost two years in hiding they were discovered and deported to concentration camps.

Anne's father, Otto Frank, was the



only one of the eight people to survive. After her death, Anne became world-famous because of the diary she wrote whilst in hiding.

City of Diamonds

For 400 years, Amsterdam has been known as the 'City of Diamonds' and no visit to Amsterdam would be complete without a tour round a diamond factory.

We visited Gassan Diamonds which is situated on Nieuwe Uilenburgerstraat, overlooking one of Amsterdam's most picturesque canals. Here, you can watch skilled craftsmen at work as they turn rough diamonds into dazzling, exquisitely polished stones.

There's an opportunity to purchase diamonds after the tour in Gassan's jewellery store, which has one of the largest collections of diamonds in Amsterdam. The tour round the

diamond factory is free and worth a visit, if only to dream about diamonds, as we did.

Eating out

Amsterdam offers a wide selection of international restaurants catering for all tastes and budgets, everything from Indonesian, Mediterranean, Japanese and tapas, to Indian, Spanish and Italian. With so many restaurants to choose from, it was difficult knowing where to eat every night. If you like tapas, then Joselito-Tapas Café, located close to Amsterdam Central Station, is worth a visit. On another night, we dined at Argentinos near Dam Square, where we had steak and chips with a bottle of red wine.

Keukenhof flower garden

The highlight of our trip to Amsterdam was to Keukenhof, one of the most



beautiful flower gardens in the world. It's situated in Lisse, between Amsterdam and The Hague.

For eight weeks of the year, (March 24 to May 16) Keukenhof opens its gates to visitors from around the world who come to see millions of tulips of every colour and description, as well as daffodils, hyacinths and countless other types of flowers in the 80-acre park.

The history of Keukenhof (the name means 'kitchen garden') goes back to the 15th century. Countess Jacqueline of Bavaria gathered fruit and vegetables from the woods and dunes for the kitchen of Teylingen Castle. Keukenhof Castle was built in 1641, and the estate grew to an area of over 200 hectares. In 1949, a group of flower bulb workers and exporters came up with a plan to use the estate for a permanent exhibition of spring flowering bulbs, which heralded the arrival of Keukenhof.

The park opened its gates to the public in 1950 and during the last 66 years, Keukenhof has grown into a world-famous attraction.

The team of 40 Keukenhof gardeners start planting the seven million flower bulbs in mid-September. All the bulbs are planted by hand which takes around three months. New grass is sown before each opening season, which ensures there is a fresh, green backdrop when the park opens. At the end of the opening season, the bulbs are dug up and



destroyed. After the summer, the cycle begins all over again.

The vibrant colours of the blooming bulb fields in the fields opposite Keukenhof are a typical Dutch sight in the spring with a sea of multi-coloured tulips stretching over the flat Dutch landscape as far as the eye can see.

The colours are breath-taking and you can tour the bulb fields by boat, which departs daily from Keukenhof during the park's season.

For more information about Keukenhof, including opening dates, times and prices during 2017, visit: (www.keukenhof.nl). Tickets are €16 (£12.50) for adults and €8 (£6.25) for children aged 4 to 11 years old.

Passport to Amsterdam

Getting there

■ We travelled to Amsterdam in mid-May with SuperBreak, who provide a three-night package for two, for a total of £654. This includes return flights from Gatwick to Amsterdam Schiphol Airport and three nights' accommodation with breakfast at the Die Port van Cleve Hotel in the city centre. For more information, and to book tel: 0800 042 0288 or visit (www.superbreak.com)

■ Our EasyJet flight from London Gatwick took less than 50 minutes to get to Amsterdam Schiphol airport. From there, you get a train to Amsterdam Central Station which takes 18 minutes and cost €5.20 (£4) each way.

We took a shuttle bus from the airport directly to our hotel in Amsterdam. Our return trip on the

Shuttle Bus cost €27 (£21) per person, which we thought was good value, considering the door-to-door service on either side of the holiday. You can book the Shuttle Bus at Schiphol airport on arrival (at the Connexion desk). The bus seats eight passengers and leaves approximately every ten minutes from just outside the airport terminal.

Where to stay

■ Our hotel was the four-star Die Port van Cleve, located in the centre of Amsterdam, behind the Royal Palace on Dam Square. This four-star hotel dates back to 1864 when G.A. Heineken opened his first brewery on this location. The unique frontage has remained unchanged and each of the 122 restyled Delft blue hotel rooms has its own character.

We enjoyed the hotel's buffet-style breakfasts in

Brasserie Maximiliann, and the restaurant also serves lunch and dinner, including Dutch cuisine. Our suite included air conditioning and an ensuite bathroom with jacuzzi and shower cubicle, and a separate lounge area.

Getting around

■ The 'I Amsterdam' city card is a convenient and affordable way to experience Amsterdam. It offers you free and unlimited use of the GVB public transport in Amsterdam (bus, tram and metro). You also get free entry to a number of museums and attractions, a free canal cruise, discounts, special offers and a city map. You can buy a card for 24 hours (€55, £43), 48 hours (€65, £50), 72 hours (€75, £59), or 96 hours (€85, £67). For more information, go to: (iamsterdam.com/citycard).