

In Amsterdam **Sean Sheehan** found a laid-back, beautiful city whose residents are proud of their quaint ways and pleased to be cocking a snook at the ascendancy of four-wheeled vehicles

FLYING into Amsterdam from Ireland on a clear day is a stunning experience. Flat as a pancake, mostly water, low rise, Amsterdam lies out before you like an ancient cartographer's map, with the odd windmill or two standing in for the dragons and pirate flags. Landing at Schipol is not so pleasant an experience but once out of the mess that passes for a major airport the attractions of Amsterdam, a fair to middling-sized metropolis, soon make themselves felt. A free map from the tourist office or your hotel has everything you need to know to start wandering the narrow streets that run alongside the numerous canals that define the city's geography. The placid waters are calming, the humped bridges impossibly cute for northern Europe and the tiny gardens forced almost into the cracks in the paving stones add a kind of village quality to the streets. Cleverly disguised as a charming adornment to the city's scenery are the citizen armies on bicycles that nonchalantly advance on your space from every direction. There are 800,000 bikes in Amsterdam – roughly equivalent to the city's population – and if you can cross a road without having to sidestep half a dozen of them then you're more streetwise than I am. Of course, being Dutch, the cyclists, unhelmeted and rarely with lights at night, are benign and forgiving as they glide languidly and silently around confused pedestrians from countries where traffic flows in the opposite direction. You soon grow accustomed to the constant presence of cyclists and begin to realise that Amsterdammers are proud of their quaint ways – and so pleased at cocking a snook at the ascendancy of four-wheeled

The five concentric circles of the canal district are undeniably enchanting: no heavy vehicles on the roads, no high-rise concrete blocks or sterile shopping malls



vehicles that an ex-Renault car showroom has been transformed into a large and sociable restaurant called Dauphine. It is named after the classic Renault model and one of the vintage cars stands outside in what used to be the garage forecourt. Dauphine is at its high-octane best on Friday nights when live music can be enjoyed but with very affordably priced fuel – wine from £3 a glass and £15 a bottle – it's worth parking here any time. The five concentric circles of the canal district are undeniably enchanting: no heavy vehicles on the roads, no high-rise concrete blocks or sterile shopping malls. The Dutch warm to whimsy so what you get instead are small streets with dinky shops specialising in cheeses, hammocks, children's toys, hand-made shoes and one-off pots, dresses, vintage clothing, anything that is slightly kooky. And tulips of course: on the pavement alongside one canal the Bloemenmarkts (flower market) is dedicated to retailing bulbs of the showy flowers but there is much more here for the green-fingered visitor to think of packing into their luggage.

The city is on a mission to preserve its heritage and so many of the merchants' houses from the 16th to 18th centuries have been restored that the neighbourhood is now a Unesco World Heritage site. Visually, the cityscape is a treat and on a warm spring day it's a pleasure just to stroll along the pavements observing life on the canals and dodging bikes. Looking up at the ancient facades you will notice that the tops of the buildings seem to loom out over the street. This isn't the foundations giving way – the houses were once the homes and workplaces of the city's merchants and goods brought in by canal were hoisted up on cranes, cleverly avoiding bashing into the building as they rose. On lots of the buildings the cranes or their fixtures can still be seen. The museum quarter attracts the biggest crowds in the city and with good reason. The Rijksmuseum is home to some very famous paintings including Rembrandt's Nightwatch, and several beautiful Vermeer works. The second must-see venue is the Van Gogh Museum which tells the story of the artist's sad life alongside an amazing collection of his paintings.

There are many other museums in Amsterdam – including ones devoted to handbags, cats, sex and torture (two different museums, in case you're wondering) – but if you're hooked on



AMERICA'S GOLDEN WEST
SAN FRANCISCO, LOS ANGELES, VEGAS & THE
GRAND CANYON
Departing - 31 August 2015

16 Days from **£1849** pps
.....
5 October 2015 departure also available
from **£1799** pps

Price includes:

- Return scheduled flights from Belfast via London to San Francisco and returning from Los Angeles
- Coach travel and transfers throughout, fully escorted by experienced tour manager in the US
- 14 Nights in good quality touring hotels on room only basis

- Fully touring itinerary as per brochure

Supplements:

- Single Supplement – available on request

Holiday operated by Newmarket Holidays ATOL 2325. Holiday is subject to availability. Please ask for booking terms & conditions.

Tel 028 9073 6529



THE IRISH NEWS
READER HOLIDAYS



■ Bikes and bridges characteristic of Amsterdam



■ Amsterdam at night

delft tiles to Rembrandt etchings, this place is as much museum as restaurant. For a more daring culinary adventure consider Momo restaurant, one of the most stylish and airy eateries in the city, with tasting menus that mix South American with Japanese dishes. Different again is L'invite, a comfortably unpretentious restaurant in the canal district, discreetly tucked away from the tourist crowds, in a building that dates back to 1628. The food is described as French but this is just a coded way of distancing itself from dowdy Dutch cuisine.

Blue Pepper is another gem of a canal-side restaurant – with less than a dozen tables – utterly plain-looking from the outside but dressed within by a turquoise and white colour scheme and a set of three glittering paintings hanging down the wall. The restaurant, like so much of Amsterdam, is full of surprises and has much to offer.

olde-world Amsterdam then check out the D'Vijff Vlieghe restaurant in the canal district. Five ancient warehouses linked by tiny doorways and winding staircases and filled with all manner of antiquity from old



■ The former fishing town of Enkhuizen



■ Cafe on the canal



■ The Rijksmuseum

Factfile

■ Aer Lingus operates daily flights from Dublin to Amsterdam. Fares start from £40 one way including taxes. aerlingus.com. Buses, trains and taxis connect Schiphol airport with the city centre but the sleekest way to arrive at your hotel is in a chauffeured Mercedes for £33 (blacklane.com).

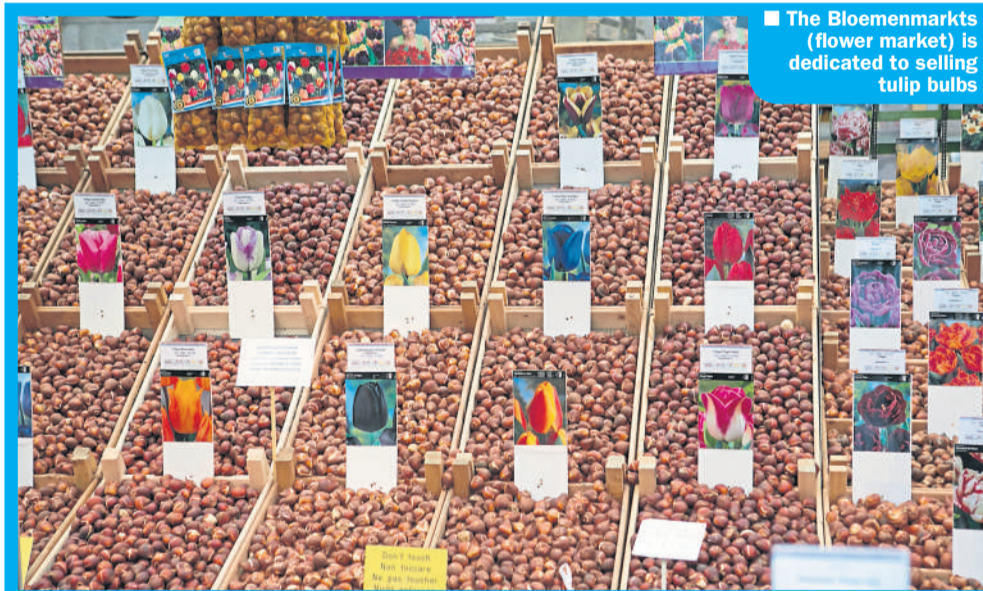
■ Central Amsterdam is compact enough to easily get around on foot or bicycle and there is also a metro and tram network. The 'I amsterdam' card provides access to several museums and galleries, covers public transport within the city plus free canal cruise and offers including a 25 per cent discount at several restaurants, car and bike rental and some shops.

■ **Restaurants:** Dauphine (caferestaurantdauphine.nl); Momo (momo-amsterdam.com); d'Vijff Vlieghe (vijffvlieghe.nl); L'invite (linviterestaurant.nl); Blue Pepper (restaurantbluepepper.com).

■ **Bars:** Café Belgique (cafe-belgique.nl); Café Pollux (cafepollux.com); Tara Bar (thetara.com); Brouwerij 't IJ (brouwerijhetij.nl).

■ There are various day trips easily managed from Amsterdam. The nearby medieval city of Haarlem has a number of attractions (visithaarlem.org) and can be reached directly by train. For a boat ride alongside traditional Dutch architecture, visit Zaanse Schans (dezaanseschans.nl) by bus 391 from Amsterdam Central Station. Buses depart every 15 minutes and journey time is 40 minutes. Enkhuizen, reached by train from Amsterdam, is a former fishing town with a wonderful open-air museum.

■ For more information see holland.com. Lonely Planet's Amsterdam guide provides all the essentials.



■ The Bloemenmarkts (flower market) is dedicated to selling tulip bulbs



JERSEY

Departing - 1, 12 & 19 September 2015*

7 Nights from £539 pps

Other departures on 7, 21, 28 July, 4, 11, 18, 25 August 2015 also available

Price includes:

- Return flights from Belfast International to Jersey
- One piece checked in luggage 20kg per person
- 7 Nights accommodation at the 3* Mayfair or 3* Metropole Hotel
- Breakfast & 3 course evening meals

- Return airport to hotel coach transfers
- Services of a hotel based tour manager

Supplements:

- Single room supplements - available on request

Fly direct from Belfast

Holiday operated by Travel Solutions & is subject to availability/minimum numbers. Please ask for booking terms & conditions. *Lead price shown based on September 2015 departures.

Tel 028 9073 6529



THE IRISH NEWS
READER HOLIDAYS