



## REVIEWS: TRAVEL

BY PHIL TRIPP

### AMSTERDAM

warmed delights ready to be plucked out with the slipping in of a few coins. That's Dutch fast food!

But you might see a small crowd huddled around a pair of barn doors at the front of an ancient building where the aromas of fresh fried potato strips or 'vlaamse frites' are sold hot out of the fat fryer to be topped with tomato sauce, mayonnaise, satay sauce or other condiments. Vleminckx at Voetboogstraat 31-33 has 25 different types of sauces for its hand cut frites and has been packing them in since 1955. And they are right behind one of my favourite places in the Dam.

The aroma of deep fat fryers is common but more so the exhalations of hashish and marijuana which are legal here in the number of licensed coffeehouses which serve their wares from a stall within and do not serve alcohol. Dampkring at Prins Hendrikkade 10-11, [www.dampkring.nl](http://www.dampkring.nl), is one of the more elegant hash houses which is coolly dark, comfy and clean, with great music and a selection of coffees, teas and other beverages as well as space cakes, hash brownies and cannabis chocolate. You'll be hanging for those frites after a time here. Makes my eyes red just thinking about it.

Equally classy is Greenhouse Centrum Oudezijds Voorburgwal 191, also safe and gorgeous. And not full of those noisy Brits or Germans that pervade the Dam's lower rent hash houses. Both of these are wildly exotic in design and décor.

Dope even has its own festival, The High Times Cannabis Cup, [www.cannabiscup.com](http://www.cannabiscup.com), in late November, the world's greatest competition for the best green vegetable matter where you can become one of the official judges sampling hundreds of types for a fee.

But normal venues and restaurants do not allow smoking of anything other than tobacco products and there is a vast array of music venues. Because Holland is home to house music, many of them are nightclubs like AIR ([air.nl](http://air.nl)), a 1300 capacity dance music haven with five bars is the city's hot club of the moment.

Amsterdam Dance Event (ADE), [amsterdam-dance-event.nl](http://amsterdam-dance-event.nl), in October is the SXSW of the limber limbed dance enthusiasts and biz. Combining massive free events, packed clubs and a conference, it makes Amsterdam the Austin of Europe.

Amsterdam does not have a central spot like 6th Street for live music venues though the Leidseplein area is probably the closest. It's

home to The Melkweg ([melkweg.nl](http://melkweg.nl)), a cultural centre founded in 1970 for five artistic disciplines under one roof of an old factory - concerts, dance events, theatrical and dance production, films, media art and photo exhibitions are in five halls and smaller rooms. It's the go-to place for what's hip and happening.

Its closest competitor is Paradiso ([paradiso.nl](http://paradiso.nl)), an old church that started with daytime dances in 1968 and evolved into a nightclub and then the live music side took over the 1500 capacity Main Hall where top US and UK acts have made it home on their swings through town. Combined with its non-musical programming, over 900 events are staged each year from exhibits to films to lectures in this cultural hub.

Three other venues cap the live scene. Bimhuis ([bimhuis.com](http://bimhuis.com)) hosts Dutch and international jazz for 300 shows a year in a converted furniture showroom. World and jazz is catered for in an intimate space, Badcuyp ([badcuyp.org](http://badcuyp.org)) while blues and roots is covered at Bourbon Street ([bourbonstreet.nl](http://bourbonstreet.nl)) seven nights a week.

Make sure to check out the major venues for concerts. Muziekgebouw ([muziekgebouw.nl](http://muziekgebouw.nl)) is one of the most innovative musical complexes in Europe ranging from classical to cutting edge jazz and world. Concertgebouw ([concertgebouw.nl](http://concertgebouw.nl)) is the acoustically perfect grand hall and a more tight recital hall for chamber orchestras coupled with beautiful architecture. Heineken Music Hall ([heinekenmusichall.nl](http://heinekenmusichall.nl)) is a remarkably intimate arena due to its design and an acoustical dream palace.

Speaking of dreams... The hippest hotel in town is one of its largest and oldest. The Hotel Pulitzer ([pulitzeramsterdam.com](http://pulitzeramsterdam.com)) is an entire block in the town centre comprising 25 fully restored 17th and 18th century canal houses converted into a luxe hotel with each of the 238 rooms or suites having their own character. They have their own hotel boat for personal canal tours and a Concierge tour for city walks. The hotel's grill restaurant, Keizersgracht 238, is sublime and one of the town's prettiest set of gardens occupies the centre of the blocks of houses.

Midlevel but also a spread of charming canal houses, Estheria ([estheria.nl](http://estheria.nl)) has been run by the same family for decades with understated, simple luxury with a guest library and bar.

Though there are a lot of B&Bs, hostels and small hotels, a unique lower budget option is the Boat Hotel ([amstelhotel.nl](http://amstelhotel.nl)) parked in the harbour. Great views of the city but fairly basic accom.

Dutch food can be stodgy at best - meat and three, bean soups with ham hocks, organ meats and heavy on the cheese. But I love Haesje Claes ([haesjeclaes.nl](http://haesjeclaes.nl)) for the ultimate Dutch Dinner. In the centre near Dam Square, it's six epic buildings in which architectural features such as little stairways, tight corridors and narrow hallways have been incorporated. The century old interconnected chambers can be romantic at night and surprisingly light and airy for lunch.

The local street press is in Dutch but the Anglo guide to use for events and gigs is *Time Out* ([timeout.com/Amsterdam](http://timeout.com/Amsterdam)).

On Koningsdag (King's Day), April 27, more than a million people flock into this one day celebration of the monarchy which is just short of Mardi Gras for intensity as the city is throbbing with revelry, markets, performances and street lunacy. And for boppers, the North Sea Jazz is a three-day, 180 plus act smorgasbord of all types of jazz at the Ahoy complex in neighbouring Rotterdam.

The big summer event in the splendid Vondelpark from early June to mid-August is a series of concerts on the massive open-air stage called Openluchtheater, [www.vondelpark.nl](http://www.vondelpark.nl). Amsterdam Roots Festival, [www.amsterdamroots.nl](http://www.amsterdamroots.nl), in mid-July, features a vast array of world music artists in a series of open-air concerts in the lush Oosterpark. **R**



BIMHUIS ©GOVERT DRIESSEN



HOTEL PULITZER



HEINEKEN MUSIC HALL



THE MELKWEI

Amsterdam is hard to forget, but it's easy not to remember some of the times you've had there depending on how deeply you immerse yourself in its hedonistic pleasures. Dutch tolerance and liberalism mean it's an open city, steeped in gin and high proof fruit liqueurs, crimson coloured in its red light district and hazily green in a fog of cannabis smoke. But it contrasts with immense beauty and class.

An ancient city with magnificent architecture, yet the suburbs around it are as fresh and modern as any in the world. A young city where youth are everywhere, usually zooming by you on their bicycles, and the elderly seem to be hidden away. And though the official language is Dutch - more a guttural condition than a tongue - English is the most commonly spoken lingua franca.

It's an easy city to get around with public transport clean and ubiquitous from the street trams and trains to busses and spotless cabs. Very few people drive cars in the city opting instead for the easy ride of old school cycles rather than racers or mountain bikes. It's a joy to stroll along the streets and canals and you can use canal boats like aquabusses to commute between a wealth of museums, music venues, cultural palaces and city squares. It exudes charm, history and grace.

From narrow laneways filled with unusual shops, olden bars with walls stained brown from centuries of tobacco smoke and slim, tall, ancient, wide windowed- houses slightly tilted forward so that the pulleys on their extended eaves can haul up heavy loads, Amsterdam is quirky. Cobble streets and sidewalks align the semi-circular canals with ornate bridges that encircle the inner city of the old Dam area.

Markets for flowers, especially tulips, perch on the canals as well as small kiosks that specialise in pickled herring which are held up above the heads of buyers with mouths open and then slipped down the throat with a gulp. Little automats that look like glassed in post office boxes abound with their hot kroketts, sausage rolls, egg rolls and other