



# AMSTERDAM—AND BEYOND

AMSTERDAM, DELFT AND UTRECHT SHOWCASE THE NETHERLANDS’ CULTURAL TREASURES

BY MARY AND CHARLES LOVE

Windmills, tulips, canals, Gouda cheese—and the paintings of Vermeer, Van Gogh and Rembrandt—define the Netherlands for many Americans.

But this small country (“Holland” to some) transcends its most familiar icons. After a 12-day journey that took us from Amsterdam, the capital, to the historic cities of Utrecht and Delft, we decided the country projects a remarkable state of mind exemplified by its people: worldly, sociable, open to

others—and infused with *joie de vivre*. These traits can be traced to nobleman William of Orange (1533 – 1584), known for championing an open, tolerant society, and to the Netherlands’ 17th-century Golden Age of prosperity when the country dominated trading around the world.

If you’re like many Americans who’ve visited the Netherlands, you haven’t traveled beyond Amsterdam. But to know this country well, it’s advisable to

venture beyond the capital. Although we might have rented a car to get around, we decided to do it the easy way—by rail. Holland’s trains, punctual and frequent, whisked us from Amsterdam’s airport terminal straight to our hotel in the heart of Utrecht, less than an hour away. Three days later we took a 20-minute train ride to Delft where we arrived just a short walk away from the city’s main square. Finally, we capped our journey with a few days in

fast-paced Amsterdam.

## UTRECHT

Utrecht, the fourth largest city in the Netherlands (population 335,000), dates to Roman times. Today this lively university city has an air of international sophistication. (Over 200 nationalities are represented here.) Some 70,000 students attend the 380-year-old university, Holland’s largest, which counts 12 Nobel Prize winners among its graduates.

Our hotel, the Apollo, was just steps from the Oudegracht (old canal), a waterway whose water-level cellars stored provisions in medieval times. Today, bars, restaurants and boutiques occupy these atmospheric spaces. Up a flight of wooden steps, at street level, bikers and pedestrians hurry along the tree-lined canal, shopping in trendy stores or ordering a custom-made sandwich at Broodje Ben, a popular food truck.

Utrecht promotes its reputation as the most bike-friendly city in the world. An estimated 100,000 people use their bikes to get around the city daily, and they park them everywhere. In fact, on the iron railings that border the canals, brambles of bikes can stack up three-deep or more.

On bicycles, the Dutch demonstrate an uncanny ability to multitask. Not only do they ride laden with shopping bags and children, they can steer with one hand and hold a phone or umbrella with the other. They blithely sit erect, look confidently ahead and never stop pedaling. No one—not

even babies—wears a helmet. Self-assurance and a willingness to take risks seem to go with the territory. We surmised a Dutch child’s earliest memories must be of seeing the world from a bicycle.

Just off the Oudegracht is the 600-year-old Domtoren, the tallest church tower in the country and the city’s most prominent landmark. Climbing its 465 steps for a panoramic view of the city is obligatory. Nearby is DOMunder, a subterranean exhibition where visitors can view Roman artifacts as well as the foundations of Utrecht’s Gothic cathedral whose nave—never restored—was devastated by a tornado in 1674.

The Rietveld Schröder House

is “must-see”—a highlight of the Netherlands-based De Stijl art movement, which (in reaction to the excesses of art deco) championed simple rectilinear shapes and primary colors. The house, a UNESCO World Heritage site, was designed in 1924 for Truus Schröder-Schräder by the renowned Utrecht furniture designer and architect Gerrit Rietveld. Entering the house—with its geometric forms, sliding panels and color accents—feels like walking into a three-dimensional Mondrian painting.

Not far away is the Centraal Museum, the oldest municipal museum in the Netherlands. The largest collection of Rietveld’s designs in the world are here,

- 1. Utrecht’s Dom Tower.
- 2. Panorama of Amsterdam.
- 3. Hand-painted Delftware.
- 4. View of Delft (1661) by Johannes Vermeer.



Courtesy Royal Delft



Courtesy Delft Tourism





plus paintings by Dutch and contemporary masters. In 2017, the museum celebrates the 100th anniversary of the De Stijl movement with special exhibitions and events.

Looking for great restaurants and nightclubs? Utrecht has them in abundance. Consider Daens, a popular lunch hang-out for students and young professionals in the historic city center. Or Café Olivier, with its

large selection of beers, located inside a former church. In the evening, you can hardly do better than Stadsasteel Oudaen, a stylish restaurant in an elegant 13th-century castle.

One evening we discovered an unusual venue—Het Muzieklokaal (the music workshop). This restaurant and bar adjacent to the Oudegracht features live classical music twice a week. Here we sampled

several seasonally appropriate small plates (among them a sultry sweet potato and coconut soup) and listened to a young Indonesian pianist perform Mozart sonatas and a romantic transcription of George Gershwin's "Embraceable You." The night ended with a leisurely stroll along the city's medieval canals, admiring the permanent installation of colored lights that illuminate towers, bridges,

5. An evening on Utrecht's Old Canal.

6. Delft's Market Square.

7. Iceskating in Delft.

churches and tunnels.

#### DELFT

Delft had been on our wish list of destinations for years, ever since globe-trotting friends told us of its beauty. We weren't

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disappointed. Delft's medieval center is small, precious and well preserved. Its main square is surrounded by a grid of tree-lined canals crowned by tiny white-railed bridges.

From our 12th-floor room at the Hampshire Hotel Delft Centre, a modern accommodation five minutes on foot from the city's main square, we enjoyed a panoramic view of the medieval city. We could see the spires of both the 13th-century Old Church, where painter Johannes Vermeer is buried, and the

14th-century New Church, official resting place for the Dutch royal family.

Vermeer (1632 – 1675), one of the best-known Dutch painters, figures prominently here. He was born and worked his entire life in Delft, the city that inspired his masterpieces. At the Vermeer Center near the city's main square, we learned the details of his life and viewed reproductions of his paintings. A 15-minute trolley ride from here took us to the renowned Mauritshuis, a museum in The Hague, where

we saw original works, including *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* and *View of Delft*. Here also are masterpieces by Rembrandt and other Dutch painters.

Other cultural attractions in Delft worth a visit include the Museum Prinsenhof, site of the former court of William of Orange and of exhibits showcasing centuries of Dutch history. Not to be missed is Royal Delft, the last of Delft's 17th-century earthenware factories. We watched artisans hand paint the world-renowned Delft Blue

8. Utrecht skyline.

9. An Amsterdam bicycle.

10. Steak tartare, VOC Restaurant, Delft.

ceramics and toured the Delftware museum and shop, both showcases for exquisite finished pieces.

Excellent restaurants and convivial bars are plentiful in Delft. Biercafé Doerak, for example, is a rustic watering hole that attracts locals young and

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old. We also enjoyed La Tasca, a family-run restaurant that combines superb service with excellent Mediterranean-influenced cuisine, and VOC, a new restaurant whose young chef serves the most sophisticated and artfully prepared food we’ve had anywhere.

AMSTERDAM

Amsterdam “exists in its own universe,” a Dutchman said to us. Indeed, the capital city is unlike any other destination in the Netherlands in terms of the number and variety of things that entice travelers.

Dubbed the “Venice of the North,” Amsterdam has 165 canals (spanned by 1,280 bridges)—more than Venice. We lingered along the Brouwersgracht (brewers canal), named for its 16th- and 17th-century breweries, and the Reguliersgracht, which takes its name from an order of monks whose monastery was nearby. These are among the most beautiful of the city’s waterways, lined with trees and old homes and navigated by a bewildering variety of boats.

Amsterdam is a city of art. The Rijksmuseum, the largest and most visited in the country, displays some 8,000 works from a collection of 1 million objects, including masterpieces by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Frans Hals and many others. Across a large green space is the Van Gogh Museum, which has the largest collection of Van Gogh masterpieces in the world.

Though lesser known, the Tassenmuseum Hendrikje (Museum of Bags and Purses) displays a fascinating collection of more than 5,000 bags from medieval times to the present, including bags once owned by royalty and celebrities. For

ladies only? Perhaps. But inside the elegant tea room of this 17th-century patrician house, men can relax while their wives or girlfriends indulge in the exhibits and museum store.

What else is there to do in Amsterdam? The list is endless: walk in beautiful, 120-acre Vondelpark; enjoy a drink at Café Hoppe, a traditional 17th-century “brown café” (with wood paneled, smoke-stained walls); browse boutiques in the recently gentrified Jordaan area; listen to late-night jazz at Jazz Café Alto in the Leidseplein neighborhood; and enjoy drinks and unsurpassed views of the city from the terrace of the Doubletree’s SkyLounge.

Spring, of course, is when tourists go to see the Netherlands’ world-famous tulips and other flowers. At Keukenhof Gardens, for example, there are millions of them covering some 80 acres—a feast for the senses.

As you might expect, Amsterdam, long an international port, features cuisine from around the world. In our hotel, the Hampshire Hotel Rembrandt Square, the French brasserie Flo proved exceptional with its fine wines and meticulously prepared entrées. Just a block away in Rembrandt Square, we savored an Indonesian *rijsttafel* (Dutch for rice table), comprised of some two dozen small, spicy dishes served with an abundance of rice.

Amsterdam is a “must.” But, when you go, make time to venture outside the capital to Utrecht, Delft and elsewhere to discover the rest of this wonderful country. Along the way, you’ll find the Dutch people’s graciousness and joie de vivre inspiring. ☘

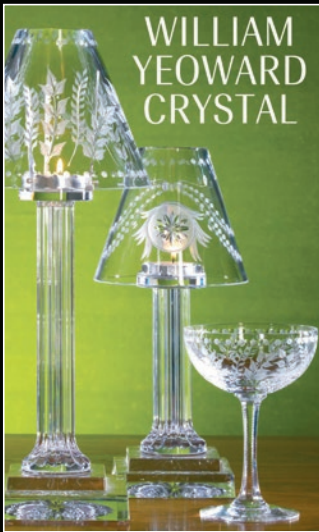


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