

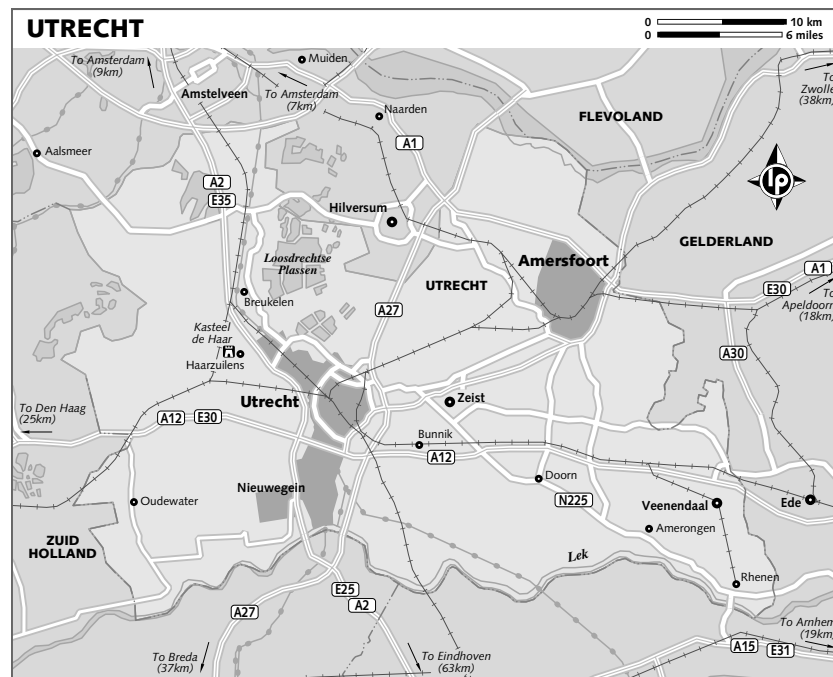
Utrecht



On the surface, there's not much to the tiny, petite province of Utrecht, save for charming Utrecht City itself – its tree-lined canals and medieval quarter hog the limelight, making the province virtually a city-state. Yet, like Doctor Who's Tardis, there's more to discover if you care to poke around. The splendid Kasteel de Haar on the city's doorstep is one of the country's most beautiful castles. Amersfoort, a really pretty walled town in the northeast corner, oozes medieval character. Then there's Oudewater in the southwest, synonymous with witchcraft (Monty Python fans will dig it). Utrecht is also home to palatial mansions to the southeast in Doorn, where a defeated German Kaiser went into exile, and in Amerongen, seat of well-to-do aristocrats since the 13th century.

If you like boating and swimming, what's stopping you from visiting the province's many shallow lakes? For pedal pushers, the countryside is laced with bike paths that can be taken at a relaxed clip.

Yes, Utrecht has come some way since James Boswell whinged in 1763, 'I groaned with the idea of living all winter in so shocking a place'.



UTRECHT CITY

☎ 030 / pop 282,000

Utrecht is one of the Netherlands' oldest cities (for an outline of its history, see p24) – not that you'd know it when you step off the train and find yourself lost in the maze that is the Hoog Catharijne shopping centre. The Hoog is huge...and it's attached to the station...and it seemingly goes on forever...and ever. Never fear: it's going to be destroyed soon. But fight your way through and you'll emerge starry-eyed into a beautiful, vibrant, old-world city centre, ringed by striking 13th-century canal wharves. The wharves, well below street level, are unique to Utrecht, and the streets alongside brim with shops, restaurants and cafés.

In summer, Utrecht is Festival City, hosting various jazz events (you'll see musicians on every corner) and the Netherlands Film Festival in September. Added to that, the city's student community of 40,000 is the largest in the country, making it one very infectious place.

Orientation

Two canals bisect Utrecht, the Oudegracht and the Nieuwegracht, the old and new canals

from the 11th and 14th centuries. A third canal called the Singel surrounds the old core. Most of the interesting bits lie within 500m of the Domtoren (Cathedral Tower), although the museum quarter is a pleasant 500m stroll south.

The historic quarters are to the east of the city centre, but reaching the streets from the train station means traversing the Hoog Catharijne; follow the signs marked 'Centrum', then gasp for air when you finally get outside.

Information

Municipal library (☎ 286 18 00; Oudegracht 167; internet per hr €3; 🕒 10am-9pm Mon, 11am-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat)

Post office (Neude 11)

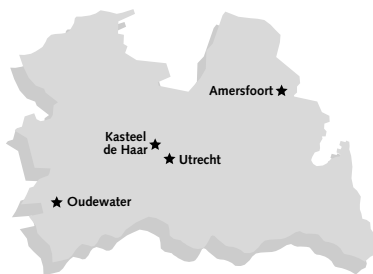
Tourist office (☎ 09001288732; www.utrecht-city.com; Vinkenburgstraat 19; 🕒 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Wed & Fri, to 9pm Thu, to 5pm Sat) Get a free map with street index.

Sights

Almost all sights within Utrecht's old town are within 10 minutes' walking distance of each other. In two to three hours you can easily cover the cathedral area and the main canals and have time left over for a museum visit.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Look out towards Amsterdam, 50km away, from the top of Utrecht's **Domtoren** (p180)
- Make friends with Miffy at Utrecht's **Dick Bruna Huis** (p180)
- Feel the weight of history at the imposing **Kasteel de Haar** (p185)
- Discover the underrated medieval centre at **Amersfoort** (p186)
- Find out if a witch weighs the same as gravy at **Oudewater** (p188)



DOMTOREN & AROUND

The **Domtoren** (Cathedral Tower; ☎ 233 30 36; www.domtoren.nl; Domplein; adult/child €7.50/4; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) is 112m high, with 465 steps and 50 bells. It's a tough haul to the top but well worth the exertion, given that the tower gives unbeatable city views; on a clear day you can see Amsterdam. The guided tour, in Dutch and English, is detailed and gives privileged insight into this beautiful structure.

Finished in the 14th century, the cathedral and its tower are the most striking medieval landmarks in a city that once had 40 cathedrals. Appreciate the craft: it took almost 300 years to complete. In 1674 the North Sea winds reached hurricane force and blew down the cathedral's nave, leaving the tower and transept behind.

Back on terra firma, find the row of paving stones that mark the extents of the nave – across this extent is the **Domkerk** (Cathedral; 231 04 03; www.domkerk.nl; Achter de Dom 1; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat May-Sep, 10am-4pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr, 11am-3.30pm Sat, 2-4pm Sun), the surviving chancel of the cathedral, with a few tombs within.

Behind the church is the most charming component of this ecclesiastical troika: the **Kloostergang**, a monastic garden and a peaceful refuge. A million pigeons and quite a few dope smokers can't be wrong.

The 19th-century buildings on the western side of Domplein are the **ceremonial buildings** of Utrecht University, surrounding the old church chapterhouse where the treaty of Utrecht was signed in 1579. The Treaty formed a military alliance of the northern provinces.

Walk down Voetiusstraat from behind the cathedral to **Pieterskerk**, built in 1048 and the oldest Romanesque church in the Netherlands. Much damage was caused during the storm in 1674 and again during a dodgy 1965 restoration. Opening hours are sporadic, but try visiting on Friday or Saturday.

DICK BRUNA HUIS

One of Utrecht's favourite sons, Dick Bruna, is honoured at the **Dick Bruna Huis** (☎ 236 23 61; www.dickbrunahuis.nl; Agnietenstraat 2; adult/child under 17yr €8/5; 🕒 Tue-Sun 11am-5pm). Bruna is the creator of beloved cartoon rabbit Miffy, and she naturally takes pride of place, along with an extensive overview of Bruna's career: from the book covers he designed for the family publishing company to multimedia demonstrations of his technique and philosophy.

Obviously children will get a huge kick out of it all, but so will adults who appreciate superlative graphic design.

CANALS

Scene of many a wedding photo, the photogenic bend in the Oudegracht is illuminated by lamplight in the evening; hundreds sit outside cafés here by day. South of this point is where the canal is at its most evocative, and the streets are quieter, stretching 1km to the southern tip of the old town.

A section of the Singel called the Stadsbuitengracht has its own turn as a lovely canal on the eastern side of the old quarter, where it follows many parks built on the site of the old fortifications. Stroll down beside this canal and back north through Nieuwegracht, a peaceful stretch of plush canal houses and towering, grand old elms.

MUSEUM QUARTER

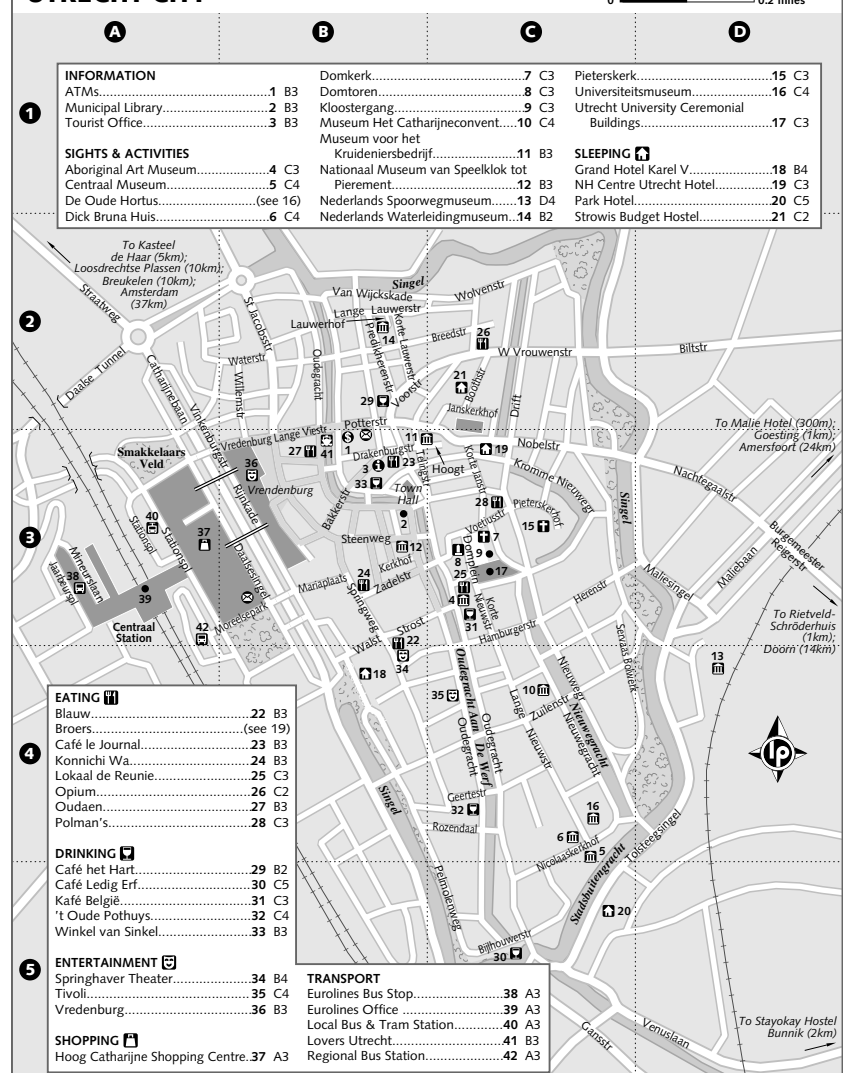
Utrecht likes its museums, with 14 of them, some quirkier than a bag of racoons – such as the one devoted to sewerage.

The pick of the litter by far is the **Museum het Catharijneconvent** (☎ 231 38 35; www.catharijneconvent.nl; Lange Nieuwstraat 38; adult/child under 17yr €8.50/5.75; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun), with the finest collection of medieval religious art in the Netherlands – virtually the history of Christianity, in fact – housed in a Gothic former convent and an 18th-century canal-side house. All but the most jaded art-lover will marvel at the many beautiful illuminated manuscripts, carvings and robes. Allow about 1½ hours here to digest it all. Bus 2 from Centraal Station (CS) passes the front entrance.

The **Centraal Museum** (☎ 236 23 62; www.centraalmuseum.nl; Nicolaaskerkhof 10; adult/child under 17yr €8/5; 🕒 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) has a wide-ranging collection. It displays applied arts dating back to the 17th century, as well as paintings by some of the Utrecht School artists and a bit of De Stijl to boot – including the world's most extensive Gerrit Rietveld collection, a wet dream for all minimalists. There's even a 12th-century Viking longboat that was dug out of the local mud, plus a sumptuous 17th-century dollhouse.

The **Universiteitsmuseum** (☎ 253 80 08; www.museum.uu.nl; Lange Nieuwstraat 106; adult/child €4/2; 🕒 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a mixed bag – and that's the 'toef!' There's a re-created late-19th-century classroom, historic dentistry tools ('Is it safe?') and way too many models of

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medical maladies. You can find refuge out the back in **De Oude Hortus**, the old botanical garden, along with all the other dentophobes, who'll be quivering amid venerable trees and plants collected by the Dutch during their world exploits. The garden is an oasis of calm, sheltering numerous rare flowers and plants like the ancient *Ginkgo biloba* tree.

The **Nederlands Spoorwegmuseum** (Dutch Railway Museum; ☎ 230 62 06; www.spoorwegmuseum.nl; Maliebaanstation; adult/child €12.50/9.50; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) features historic locomotives in an old station building; a high-speed minitrain takes kids around the grounds. To get there, take bus 3 from CS to Maliebaan and walk east for about five minutes.

MIFFY & DICK

The illustrator Dick Bruna was born in Utrecht in 1927 and has lived there all his life. His most famous creation is of course Miffy, or Nijntje as she's known in the Netherlands, an adorable cartoon rabbit with dots for eyes and a cross for a mouth that's a clear inspiration for Japan's famous Hello Kitty character. In fact, Utrecht is sometimes besieged by Japanese groupies, eager to catch a glimpse of their 78-year-old Dutch hero.

As an indication of how popular Miffy is, consider the facts: the 120 children's books she stars in have been translated into 40 languages and have sold more than 85 million copies worldwide. Miffy merchandise has generated hundreds of millions of euros worth of sales.

But there's much more to Dick Bruna than Miffy (wonderful as she is). Our man from Utrecht has written and illustrated more than 100 picture books and designed more than 2000 book covers, as well as hundreds of posters, postcards and prints. Today Bruna still rises to go to work early every day at his Utrecht studio and is still every bit as obsessive in his search for perfect design. As he says, 'I'll never do 3-D illustration. I haven't simplified 2-D enough'.

Bruna says he makes pictograms rather than illustrations; that is, pictures with a clear, instant and universal message. He's a master of light and shade, manipulating blocks of colour for maximum impact, but always with a sense of fun and play – even when designing book covers for Susan Sontag or Eldridge Cleaver, hardly the lightest writers around.

From early on in his career, Bruna imposed strict discipline on his art, working with what he calls a 'minimum of means': a specific thickness of lines, a strict division of typographical areas on the page, and a very specific colour palette. Today, any publisher that reproduces Miffy books must adhere to Bruna's colour ideology or else suffer his wrath. It's unsurprising, then, that Bruna says Piet Mondrian influenced him. There's even a Miffy book, *Miffy at the Gallery*, where the little rabbit takes in work by Mondrian and Matisse (another Bruna influence).

These days, a swelling body of opinion is beginning to see beyond the stigma of pop culture and 'children's work' that's applied to Miffy, and see her for what she really is: the ultimate statement of intent by an artist who's clearly Mondrian's equal.

You can learn all of this and more at the Dick Bruna Huis, a worthy shrine to the man and his art.

SMALL MUSEUMS

A bit of a surprise in Utrecht, the **Aboriginal Art Museum** (☎ 238 01 00; www.aamu.nl; Oudegracht 176; adult/child €8/5; ☎ Tue-Fri 10am-5pm, Sat & Sun 11am-5pm), devoted to contemporary Australian Aboriginal art, is sure to delight those bored with Rembrandt and Van Gogh.

The **Museum voor het Kruideniersbedrijf** (Grocery Museum; ☎ 231 66 28; Hoogt 6; admission free; ☎ 12.30-4.30pm Tue-Sat), a charming replica of an old grocery store, isn't a museum per se. It's more like a sweetshop, but what the hey, you'll love it anyway. Upstairs are original cans and packages of yesteryear (the 'museum' bit); downstairs are lovely ladies in old-time aprons selling sweets and tea in decorative containers. As far as souvenirs go, it'll beat your umpteenth clog. Pick up a block of white liquorice candy to add to hot milk – an old Dutch tradition.

The **Nationaal Museum van Speelklok tot Piement** (National Museum from Musical Clock to Street Organ; ☎ 231 27 89; www.museumspeelklok.nl; Steenweg 6; adult/child €6/4; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun)

has a colourful collection of musical machines from the 18th century onwards. These are demonstrated with gusto during hourly tours. Most impressive are the street and fairground organs from around Europe, including gargantuan burping contraptions fashioned by the Belgian master organ-builder, Mortier.

Spread throughout the various levels of an old water tower, the **Nederlands Waterleidingmuseum** (Sewer Museum; ☎ 248 72 11; www.waterleidingmuseum.nl; Lauwerhof 29; adult/child €2/1; ☎ 1.30-5pm Tue-Fri & Sun, 11am-4pm Sat) takes a good, hard look at what happens to water before and after humans use it. There's even a big, blown-up photo of a sexy babe bathing (well, it is water-related). The tower itself is ancient and fascinating and provides good views.

RIETVELD-SCHRÖDERHUIS

Just out of the city, the **Rietveld-Schröderhuis** (☎ 236 23 10; www.rietveldschroederhuis.nl; Prins Hendriklaan 50; adult/child €16/8) is a Unesco-protected landmark built in 1924 by Utrecht architect Gerrit

Rietveld. Inside and out, the entire structure conforms to the principles of De Stijl architecture (see p58) – this is the only house in the world that can make this claim. Only six colours are used: red, blue, yellow, white, grey and black. The 'form follows function' concept has been faithfully adhered to, as even the interior walls can be moved to alter the floor plan.

A second building, a **model apartment** (Erasmuslaan 9) from 1931, is also open to the public behind the main house. It's included in the admission to Rietveld-Schröderhuis, and tours of both properties take 90 minutes, starting on the hour. A shuttle bus leaves the Centraal Museum for the house at 11.45am, 12.45pm, 1.45pm and 2.45pm.

Activities

Lovers Utrecht (☎ 272 01 11; adult €7; ☎ 11am-6pm) offers one-hour canal trips that trace a circular route through the old town. The landing is on Oudegracht just south of Lange Viestraat. You can also rent **canal bikes** (paddleboats; per person per hr €6) from in front of the municipal library.

Festivals & Events

Holland Festival Oude Muziek (Holland Festival of Ancient Music; www.oudmuziek.nl) Held in late August, this festival celebrates music from long ago.

Nederlands Film Festival (NFF; www.filmfestival.nl) The Dutch film industry may be tiny, but its output is generally of good quality. Find out for yourself at the NFF each year in late September, culminating in the awarding of the coveted Golden Calf.

Sleeping BUDGET

Strowis Budget Hostel (☎ 238 02 80; Boothstraat 8; www.strowis.nl; dm from €14, s/d €55; ☎) Run by a cluey group of ex-squatters, this 17th-century building near the city centre has been lovingly restored and converted into a hostel. It's open 24 hours a day and has a cosy bar. It sure beats the antiseptic hospital feel of some hostels.

Stayokay Hostel Bunnik (☎ 656 12 77; www.stayokay.com; Rhijnauwenselaan 14; dm from €23) This charming old mansion overlooks a canal on the fringes of a nature reserve, 5km east of the city centre in Bunnik. There are three dining halls, a traditional bar and a lovely terrace. Take bus 40, 41 or 43 from CS.

MIDRANGE

NH Centre Utrecht Hotel (☎ 231 31 69; www.nh-hotels.com; Janskerkhof 10; s/d €120; ☎) This gorgeous

hotel is housed in an atmospheric old building built in 1870. The rooms are very comfortable, with all the conveniences a business traveller would expect, and the views of the old church square are delectable. The suitably elegant Broers restaurant downstairs is an added bonus.

Malie Hotel (☎ 231 64 24; www.maliehotel.nl; Maliestraat 2; s/d from €105/125) Tucked away in a beautiful tree-lined avenue, this elegant and comfortable 19th-century house offers large rooms and old-world charm. There's a nice garden out the back, and all of it away from the city centre for a bit of peace and quiet.

Park Hotel (☎ 251 67 12; Tolsteegsingel 34; s/d €52/65) You'll sleep right in this comfy eight-room guesthouse occupying a canal house. It's not far from Utrecht's buzzing nightlife, and breakfast can be taken in the pretty garden out the back.

TOP END

Grand Hotel Karel V (☎ 233 75 55; Geertebolwerk 1; www.karelv.nl; s/d from €205/225; ☎ ☎ ☎) The lushest accommodation in Utrecht can be found in this former knights' gathering hall from the 14th century. The service and décor are understated but flawless, and the restaurant is excellent. Note that room prices plummet on the weekend.

Eating

Do as the discerning locals do: avoid the cluster of wharf-side restaurants on the Oudegracht in the dead centre of the old town near the town hall. It's a pretty spot better known for its views than culinary delights. Utrecht's best restaurants lie elsewhere.

RESTAURANTS

Opium (☎ 231 55 15; www.restaurant-opium.nl; Voorstraat 80; mains €15-30; ☎ dinner) This is a hot new place that will rock your socks off. Its Asian fusion cooking matches the gorgeous minimalist interior; think fans, clean angles and plays of light. Tempura of softshell crab in sweet chilli sauce with spring onion and paprika gives you some idea of what's on offer.

Blauw (☎ 234 24 63; Springweg 64; set menu from €19; ☎ dinner) Blauw has worked hard to make Indonesian food trendy in Utrecht – or at least popular. Quality's the key, and the rice table, comprising 14 dishes, is a winner. The décor, a mix of nostalgia, and überhip minimalism packs 'em in, too.

Goesting (☎ 273 33 46; www.restaurantgoesting.nl; Veerartsenijpad 150; mains €22-35; ☎ dinner) Celebrities and wannabes flock to Goesting to eat fancies such as spit roast, Dutch asparagus, poached tournedos and 'tame duck' in a crypto-minimalist, high-society atmosphere.

Oudaen (☎ 231 18 64; www.oudaen.nl; Oudegracht 99; mains €11-22; ☎ lunch & dinner) The best choice on this popular stretch of the canal. Set in a restored 14th-century banquet hall, it has a varied menu of salads, steaks and succulent seafood such as redfish, grilled tuna and sea bass. Best of all, it brews its own beer, guaranteeing high times under the high ceilings.

our pick Polman's (☎ 231 33 68; www.polmanshuis.nl; cnr Jansdam & Keistraat; mains €18-25; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Diners are welcomed in an elegant former ballroom with ceiling frescoes, a hangover from its days as an elite gentlemen's club. The French and Italian menus are honed for the discriminating palate.

Konnichi Wa (☎ 241 63 88; www.konnichiwa.nl; Mariaplaats 9; sushi pieces from €2; ☎ lunch Tue-Sat, dinner) Expect great sushi, *teppanyaki* and tempura. It also serves takeaway.

CAFÉS

Broers (☎ 234 34 06; www.stadscafe-broers.nl; Janskerkhof 9; mains €14-23; ☎ lunch & dinner) This place is a stylish, modern version of a brown café, with good views. It serves basic dishes such as pasta and steak, and there's live music some nights.

Café le Journal (☎ 236 48 39; Neude 32-34; mains €11-22; ☎ lunch & dinner) This classy grand café sits on a very busy square. Unsurprisingly, then, it's a hive of activity in summer.

Lokaal de Reunie (☎ 231 01 00; www.lokaaldereunie.nl; t Wed 3A; mains €12-30; ☎ lunch & dinner) One of many atmospheric cafés near the cathedral tower, De Reunie is distinguished by its attractive, airy interior.

Drinking

Café het Hart (☎ 231 97 18; www.hethart.com; Voorstraat 10) This is the apex of the A-list of the Utrecht bar scene, with bleeding-edge beats plus stacks of magazines and board games. Try *Trivial Pursuit* with questions in Dutch after a few 9% Belgian beers.

Winkel van Sinkel (☎ 230 30 30; www.dewinkelvanwinkel.nl; Oudegracht 158) This early-19th-century building houses a grand café, a nightclub and a restaurant in a divine interior. It was once the Netherlands' first department store, inspiring this popular Dutch ditty (accord-

ing to a *Guardian* reader): 'At the big shop of Sinkel's, all things can be bought/Sweeties and shandies, undies for dandies/Needles for knitting, and tablets for shitting'.

Kafé België (☎ 231 26 66; Oudegracht 196) This lively bar is an absolute must for beer-lovers. It stocks examples of most of Benelux's brewers and has a revolving guest-beer policy. It also keeps a large inflatable shark suspended from the ceiling to keep watch over its patrons.

Café Ledig Erf (☎ 231 75 77; Tolsteegbrug 3) This classy pub overlooks a confluence of canals at the southern tip of town. Patrons gather on tables around the oversized chessboards on the terrace, and the place is always packed in warm weather. Inside, the beer list and the bar snacks keep everything groovy. It's a cosy and intimate winner.

t Oude Pothuys (☎ 231 89 70; www.pothuys.nl; Oudegracht 279) Small and dark, this basement pub has nightly music – usually jam sessions with locals trying their hand at rock and jazz, but touring pro bands also feature. The sound system is tops.

Entertainment

Tivoli (☎ 231 14 91; www.tivoli.nl; Oudegracht 245) This former monastery, now a cavernous dance hall with medieval chandeliers, remains highly popular and a fixture on Utrecht's student-oriented music scene, whether it's for old rockers like REM, DJs or big-band jazz.

Vredenburg (☎ 231 45 44; Vredenburgpassage 77) The main performing arts complex, with superb acoustics. A quick flip through its diverse monthly calendar might reveal flamenco, marionette theatre, Ellington or Weber.

Springhaver Theater (☎ 231 37 89; www.springhaver.nl; Springweg 50-52) This Art Deco complex houses intimate cinemas that screen art-house and independent films.

Getting There & Away

Utrecht is a travel hub: train lines and motorways converge on the city from all directions.

BUS

See p301 for details information about international bus services.

TRAIN

Lockers are by platform 4 on the main concourse. Utrecht is the national hub for Dutch rail services, so you'll probably change trains here at some point.

Sample fares and schedules:

Destination	Price (€)	Duration (min)	Frequency (per hr)
Amsterdam	6.30	35	4
Den Helder	16.80	110	2
Groningen	24.50	120	2
Maastricht	23.10	120	2
Rotterdam	8.60	35	2

Getting Around

Local buses and trams leave from underneath the passage linking CS to Hoog Catharijne. Regional buses leave from the adjoining area to the south.

AROUND UTRECHT CITY Loosdrechtse Plassen

The town of Breukelen is 10km northwest of Utrecht. Although the town in itself is unremarkable, it was actually the inspiration for the New York district of Brooklyn. Breukelen is also the gateway to the **Loosdrechtse Plassen**, a large series of lakes formed from the flooded digs of peat harvesters.

There are all manner of bike paths around the waters and quite a bit of interesting scenery. Parts of the lakes are desolate, while others are surrounded by lovely homes on small islands joined to the road by little bridges.

The best way to visit is by bike from Utrecht. Follow the signs to Breukelen. Otherwise, it's just a short run by train to Breukelen from Utrecht CS (€2.60, 11 minutes, three per hour).

Kasteel de Haar

Feast your senses on one of the most imposing castles in the country, **Kasteel de Haar** (☎ 030-677 85 15; www.kasteeldehaar.nl; Kasteellaan 1; adult/child €8/5; ☎ 10am-5pm), which was restored in a fit of nostalgia little more than a century ago, long after its Gothic turrets ceased to have any defensive purpose. But architect PJ Cuypers (of Rijksmuseum fame) misjudged the weight on the centuries-old foundations; big cracks can be seen above moat level.

What you see now is a spiffed-up version of the fortress as it was believed to look around 1500, but (understandably) equipped with all the creature comforts available in the late 19th century, such as electric lighting and running water. The project was so extensive that the church and the nearby hamlet of **Haarzuilens** be-

came involved. The castle owner, Baron Etienne van Zuylen, spared little expense and had the entire village moved so there'd be adequate space for the park and hunting grounds.

The castle is surrounded by a large English landscaped garden with broad paths, canal-like stretches of pond and statues throughout. The French baroque garden near the entrance bears the stamp of Hélène de Rothschild, the baron's wife and heir of the renowned Rothschild banking family – it was her fortune that paid for the 19th-century restoration.

To get here from Utrecht, take the A2 north to exit 6 (Maarssen) and drive 2km east to Haarzuilens. Alternatively, take bus 127 from Utrecht CS towards Breukelen and get off at Brink, from where it's a 15-minute walk.

AMERSFOORT

☎ 033 / pop 134,904

Beer, wool and tobacco made Amersfoort an exceedingly rich town from the 16th century onwards. Well heeled with a touch of the provincial, the town has many striking merchants' homes that have been lovingly restored. And the egg-shaped old town offers quiet, wonderfully evocative strolls along canals and narrow alleys that still ooze medieval atmosphere.

Many tourists pass Amersfoort by, but drop in if you possibly can. It's a seriously charming place.

Information

Post office (Utrechtseweg 8)

Telstar Telecom (71 Kamp; internet per hr €4.50)

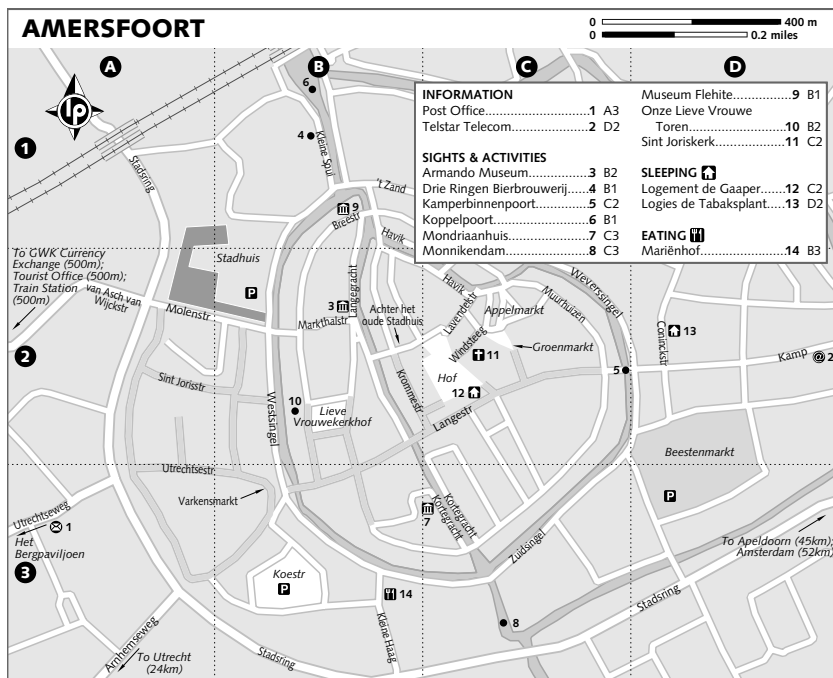
Tourist office (☎ 09001122364; www.amersfoortyourway.nl; Stationsplein 9-11; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat)

Sights & Activities

Much of Amersfoort's appeal comes from wandering the old centre, which has a couple of attractive little canals and more than 300 pre-18th-century buildings.

MUSEUMS

Mondriaanhuis (☎ 462 01 80; Kortegracht 11; www.mondriaanhuis.nl; admission €3.75; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 1-5pm Sat & Sun) The famous De Stijl artist Piet Mondrian was born in Amersfoort. This small but absorbing museum, in the house where he was born, honours his life and work with a detailed retrospective of prints, reproductions and some originals, as well as music CDs inspired by his art.



Armando Museum (☎ 461 40 88; www.armando-museum.nl; Langegracht 36; admission €3.50; 🕒 11am–5pm Tue–Fri, Sat noon–5pm) The painter, writer, violinist, and documentary filmmaker Armando was one of the major artists to emerge from the postwar era in the Netherlands. His work is strongly antiwar, derived from his experiences growing up in Amersfoort during WWII. At this evocative museum, housed in a former church, you can see examples from his paintings, drawings, sculptures, writings and films.

OLD TOWN

Zuidsingel is a fine place to start: the inner ring on the north side of town along **Muurhuizen** is quaint and good for walks. **Langestraat** is the main shopping strip.

Onze Lieve Vrouwe Toren (Lieve Vrouwekerkhof; adult/child €5/4; 🕒 10am–5pm Tue–Sat Jul & Aug) is the surviving 15th-century Gothic tower of the church that used to stand on this spot. Like so many of the Netherlands' churches, it was destroyed by tragedy – in this case a gunpowder explosion in 1787. The square in front, **Lieve Vrouwekerkhof**, is

Amersfoort's most charming spot. A flower market is held here on Friday morning.

Amersfoort's surviving old church is the **Sint Joriskerk** (Hof 1; admission €1; 🕒 2–4.30pm Mon–Fri Jul & Aug). It was rebuilt in a sort of Gothic-aircraft-hangar style in the 16th century after the original Romanesque church burnt down (obviously, insuring Dutch churches has never been a lucrative proposition).

The collections at the **Museum Flehite** (☎ 461 99 87; Westsingel 50; adult/child €5/3; 🕒 11am–6pm Tue–Fri, 11am–5pm Sat & Sun) cover local geology, history and decorative arts. The building is attractively set at a junction of canals, and you enter the museum courtyard over a bridge.

The town has three surviving gateways, either to the city roads or over the canals. The **Koppelpoort** guards the north and was built in the 15th century, the **Kamperbinnenpoort** is at the eastern side and dates from the 13th century, while the picturesque **Monnikendam** to the southeast was built in 1430.

Possibly the most fun you will have in Amersfoort is touring **Drie Ringen Bierbrouwerij** (☎ 465 65 75; Kleine Spui 18; 🕒 1–7pm Thu–Sat). You

can wander enjoyably around this much-heralded microbrewery and try one of the five beers on tap.

Sleeping

Logies de Tabaksplant (☎ 472 97 97; www.tabaksplant.nl; Coninckstraat 15; s/d from €47/69) This small hotel is just beyond the old town gate of Kamperbinnenpoort. The rooms are very smart, cheery, full of good vibes and so clean you could eat off the floor. The owner of a tobacco plantation built this heritage-listed building.

Logement de Gaaper (☎ 453 17 95; www.degaaper.nl; Hof 39; s/d from €66/81) It's not at all bad, this one. Home to a pharmacy in the 19th century, this smartly renovated hotel occupies a prime spot on the main square, and all 11 front rooms have great views of Sint Joriskerk. Some of the original structure is visible inside the hotel, but the emphasis is on modern comfort.

Eating

Mariënhof (☎ 463 29 79; www.marienhof.nl; Kleine Haag 2; mains €19–36; 🕒 lunch & dinner Tue–Sat) Enjoy *haute cuisine* and classy service in one of the region's best restaurants. The charismatic dining hall is in an atmospheric former monastery with lavish interiors, courtyard gardens and even a little culinary museum.

Het Bergpaviljoen (☎ 461 50 00; www.bergpaviljoen.nl; Utrechtseweg 180; mains €12–26; 🕒 lunch Mon–Fri, dinner Mon–Sat) When you see the expansive terrace and retro futuristic interior (minimalist and

nostalgic all at once), you know you're backing a winner. The classy international menu will have you enthralled, especially the quail and water cherry with mango chutney, as will the large TV in the dining room that allows you to watch the chefs at work.

Getting There & Around

Sample train fares and schedules:

Destination	Price (€)	Duration (min)	Frequency (per hr)
Amsterdam	7.10	40	4
Apeldoorn	6.80	25	2
Utrecht	3.90	15	4

There's a bicycle shop at the train station.

DOORN

☎ 0343 / pop 10,399

Around 20km southeast of Utrecht lies Doorn, a wealthy little burg with a claim to an oddism in 20th-century Dutch history: **Huis Doorn** (☎ 42 10 20; www.huisdoorn.nl; Langbroekerweg 10; adult/child €5.50/1; 🕒 10am–5pm Tue–Sat, 1–5pm Sun 15 Mar–31 Oct, 1–5pm Tue–Sun 1 Nov–14 Mar), a 14th-century castle that was turned into a sort of indefensible mansion during the 1700s. It had numerous owners during its time, but none of them was more infamous than Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, who inhabited Huis Doorn in exile from 1920 until his death in 1941.

WITCHERY

During the horrific witch-hunts of the 16th century, close to a million women all over Europe were executed on suspicion of being witches – burnt, drowned or otherwise tortured to death. Weighing was one of the more common methods of determining witchery, as popular belief held that any woman who was too light for the size of her frame was obviously a witch (because hags like that have no soul). A woman who weighed the 'proper' amount was too heavy to ride a broom and thus was not a witch. (Fans of the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* will be familiar with the procedure.) Women who passed the weight test were given a certificate, good for life, proclaiming them to be human.

Women under suspicion were also required to walk over burning coals (if their feet didn't blister, they were witches) or were dropped into the lake – if you sank you were human, if you floated you were a witch. Needless to say, all of this was grossly unfair – if you managed to make it over the coals, your feet would be charred to the stumps. If you sank, you drowned. You win, you lose.

Oudewater emerges with some honour here. No-one was ever proved to be a witch in the town and this is held up as a symbol of the honesty of the locals, as they refused to take bribes to rig the weights. It's also seen as the first stirrings of people power and a turn against the church, which was behind the witch hunts.

There's a fine collection of German art that it seems the Kaiser brought with him from various German palaces. Afterwards, stroll the grounds and ponder the fate of the Kaiser, who had been allowed into exile by the Dutch as long as he remained under 'house arrest' (some house, eh?). Events throughout the year recall his highness: at Christmas you can drop by for gluhwein (mulled wine) and lebkuchen (spiced biscuits).

Bus 50 from Utrecht CS makes the 20km journey to Doorn (50 minutes) every 30 minutes. The castle is right near the bus stop.

AMERONGEN

☎ 0343 / pop 5169

The countryside around the small town of Amerongen on the Nederrijn river is dotted with old wooden tobacco-drying sheds. It's also home to **Kasteel Amerongen** (☎ 454212; www.kasteel-amerongen.nl; Drostestraat 20; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 1-5pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct), a fortified castle built in the 13th century that took on its present twee appearance in the late 1600s; it was originally owned by Europe's old aristocracy.

OUDEWATER

☎ 0348 / pop 9948

There's only one real reason to visit the sweet little town of Oudewater in the province's southwest: witchcraft. Until the 17th century the **Heksenwaag** (Witches' Weigh-House; ☎ 563400; www.hekenswag.nl; Leeuweringerstraat 2; adult/child €1.50/0.75; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) in the town centre was thought to have the most accurate scales in the land; women came from all over the land to be weighed here, on suspicion of being witches (see the boxed text, p187).

The house has a modest display of witchcraft history in the loft upstairs, and at the end of your visit you'll be invited to step onto the old scale. If you feel light on your feet it's because your *certificaet van weginghe* (weight certificate) makes your weight shrink – an old Dutch pound is 10% heavier than today's unit.

Oudewater is on the route of bus 180, which runs in either direction between Gouda (22 minutes) and Utrecht CS (40 minutes) every 30 minutes.