

The Netherlands

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Amsterdam** One of Europe's most beautiful cities – plus hash, hedonism and more (p819)
- **Rotterdam** Cutting-edge architecture and unique nightlife (p829)
- **Maastricht** Heady, cosmopolitan and stylish (p835)
- **Best Journey** Anywhere – the Netherlands is a small country, and it's all good
- **Off-the-beaten track** Texel (p834) and the Frisian islands (p833) are always enjoyable – windswept and isolated, but fun

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 41,526 sq km
- **ATMs** Widespread
- **Budget** €40 to €70 per day
- **Capital** Amsterdam
- **Money** euro (€); A\$1 = €0.60; CA\$1 = €0.68; ¥100 = €0.66; NZ\$1 = €0.51; UK£1 = €1.47; US\$1 = €0.78
- **Famous for** extraordinary paintings, volatile footballers, cheese, liberal attitudes
- **Head of State** Queen Beatrix; Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende
- **Languages** Dutch, Frisian
- **Population** 16.4 million
- **Phrases** *hallo* (hello), *dag* (goodbye), *bedankt* (thanks), *sorry/excuses* (sorry)
- **Telephone Code** country code ☎ 31
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1
- **Visas** none required for passport holders of Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, USA and most of Europe



TRAVEL HINTS

Eighty-thousand bicycles are stolen here annually – always lock up. See p819 for heavily discounted train travel. And stay away from canal edges if you've had a few.

ROAMING THE NETHERLANDS

Try the Randstad belt – including Amsterdam, Den Haag (The Hague), Delft and Rotterdam – for a diverse slice of Dutch life.

Everyone thinks they've got the Netherlands sussed, but it's not all about Amsterdam – is it? Sure, the Dutch capital is among the most distinctive of all European cities; it's certainly one of the most beautiful. It may very well be the most eccentric. But it's not the Netherlands' only claim to fame. Not by a long shot. Den Haag (The Hague), Leiden, Haarlem and Delft are sumptuous historical cities. Maastricht is a hybrid of European influences. Edgy Rotterdam rivals Amsterdam for the title of the Netherlands' 'first city'. In the north, Fryslân boasts a unique language and lifestyle.

The Netherlands isn't the most budget-conscious option, but there's still an immense concentration of sidewalk cafés and pubs everywhere, where you can nurse a coffee or beer



(which is cheap and bountiful) and watch the world. Best of all, transport is efficient and well priced (this country is a day-tripper's paradise), the nightlife is pumping and the Dutch are most hospitable.

HISTORY

Early Dutch history was bound with Belgium and Luxembourg – the three were known as the Low Countries until the 16th century.

The Netherlands' Golden Age lasted from about 1580 to 1740. The era's wealth was generated by the Dutch East India Company, which travelled to the Far East for spices and other exotic goods, colonised the Cape of Good Hope and Indonesia, and established trading posts throughout Asia.

In 1795 the French invaded. When the occupation ended in 1815, the UK of the

Netherlands – incorporating Belgium and Luxembourg – was the result. Earlier that year prostitution had been legalised in the Netherlands by Napoleon, who wanted to control STDs.

In 1830 the Belgians rebelled and became independent, and Luxembourg followed nine years later.

The Netherlands stayed neutral in WWI and tried to repeat the feat in WWII, only to be invaded by the Germans. The country was devastated and most of the country's Jews were murdered.

In 1953 a high spring tide and severe storm breached Zeeland's dikes, drowning 1835 people. A massive engineering project was built to prevent the tragedy from ever happening again.

In the '60s Amsterdam became Europe's radical heart, giving rise to the squatter's movement and the promiscuity that lingers still.

Cannabis was decriminalised in 1976, and in 2003 the Netherlands became the first country to legalise prescriptions of medicinal cannabis.

In 1992 members of the European community assembled in Maastricht to sign the treaty that created the EU.

A year later, the Netherlands regulated doctor-assisted euthanasia, and in 2000 it was legalised under stringent guidelines – again, the first country to do so. That year the Netherlands also became the first nation to legalise same-sex marriages.

In 2002 right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn was shot dead a few days before the Dutch general election.

Incredibly, in 2004 there was another high-profile assassination. On November 2, in Amsterdam, filmmaker and columnist Theo van Gogh, known for his controversial statements about Muslims, was shot repeatedly before being stabbed several times. The murderer was an Islamic Moroccan; when he died, van Gogh was finishing off a film about Pim Fortuyn.

Ethnic tensions have been simmering in Amsterdam ever since, with a series of arson and bomb attacks from both sides targeting Islamic schools and Christian churches.

In October 2005, 11 detainees died in a fire at an Amsterdam centre housing illegal immigrants and soon-to-be-deported drug runners.

THE CULTURE

Nine-tenths of the population are of Dutch stock. Around 400,000 people in the northern Fryslân province speak their own language. People from the former colonies of Indonesia, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles, along with recent arrivals from Turkey and Morocco, account for about 6% of the population.

ARTS

The Netherlands has spawned a realm of celebrated painters, including Bosch, Rembrandt, Vermeer and Van Gogh. The Dutch

READING UP

Diary of Anne Frank by Anne Frank is a moving account of a Jewish girl's thoughts while hiding from the occupying Germans. The classic 1972 novel *The Happy Hooker* by Xaviera Hollander is an unapologetic, upbeat look at the world of a Dutch sex worker. *Amsterdam: A Traveller's Literary Companion*, edited by Manfred Wolf, contains 20 stories arranged by neighbourhood from contemporary Amsterdam writers. *Brilliant Orange*, by David Winner, uses the lens of Johan Cruyff and the Dutch national football team to focus on liberal Dutch attitudes as an overarching social phenomena.

are world leaders in modern dance and the Netherlands is home to many orchestras. The Dutch have won four Best Foreign Language Film Academy Awards – the third-best tally in Oscar history.

ENVIRONMENT

The Netherlands' land mass now encompasses 41,526 sq km; half of it lies at or below sea level in the form of polders (stretches of land reclaimed from the sea). The danger of floods is most acute in Zeeland.

The Netherlands' highest point – just 321m – is the Vaalserberg, in the province of Limburg.

Billions spent on sewage treatment means that Amsterdam's canals are now fairly clean, and agriculture and industry have been forced to reduce run-off and pollution.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Schiphol Airport (code AMS; ☎ 0900-0141; www.schiphol.nl) is the Netherlands' main airport.

Rotterdam Airport (code RTM; ☎ 010-446 34 44; www.rotterdam-airport.nl) is much smaller.

The following airlines have offices in Amsterdam:

Air France (code AF; ☎ 020 654 57 20; www.airfrance.nl)

British Airways (code BA; ☎ 020 346 95 59;

www.britishairways.com)

British Midland (code BD; ☎ +44 (0)1332 64 8181;

www.flybmi.com)

Cathay Pacific (code CX; ☎ 020 653 20 10; www.cathay.pacific.com)

easyJet (code U2; ☎ 023-568 48 80; www.easyjet.com)

KLM (code KL; ☎ 020 474 77 47; www.klm.nl)

Lufthansa (code LH; ☎ 020 582 94 56; www.lufthansa.com)

Northwest Airlines (code WH; ☎ 020 474 77 47; www.nwa.com)

Qantas (code QF; ☎ 020 569 82 83; www.qantas.com.au)

Ryanair (code FR; ☎ 0900-202 21 84; www.ryanair.com)

Transavia (code HV; ☎ 020 406 04 06; www.transavia.nl)

United Airlines (code UA; ☎ 020 201 37 08; www.unitedairlines.nl)

Boat

The ferry company **Stenaline** (☎ 08705-70 70; www.stenaline.com) sails between the UK and the Netherlands. Train-boat-train combos are cheaper, but take two to three hours longer. There are return fares from London to Amsterdam, and train links go via Harwich in the UK and Hoek van Holland (eight hours).

Bus

International **Eurolines** (☎ in UK 020-560 87 88; www.eurolines.com) offers a range of passes with prices that vary by time of year.

Busabout (☎ in UK 020-7950 1661; www.busabout.com) is a UK-based budget alternative to Eurolines. It runs coaches on circuits in Continental Europe, including one through Amsterdam. Services to/from Amsterdam run from April to October.

Gullivers Reisen (☎ in Berlin 030-31 10 21 10; www.gullivers.de, in German) links Berlin to Amsterdam.

Car & Motorcycle

You'll need the vehicle's registration papers, third-party insurance and an International Driving Permit (IDP; if you're from outside the EU) in addition to your domestic driving licence. The **ANWB** (Royal Dutch Touring Association; ☎ 070-314 71 47; www.anwb.nl, in Dutch; Wassenaarseweg 220, Den Haag) provides a wide range of information and services, show them a letter of introduction from your automobile association.

Train

The Netherlands has good train links to Germany, Belgium and France. All Eurail, Inter-Rail, Europass and Flexipass tickets are valid on the Dutch national train service, **Nederlandse Spoorwegen** (Netherlands Railway, NS; ☎ international inquiries 0900-9296; www.ns.nl).

Major Dutch train stations have international ticket offices, and in peak periods it's wise to reserve seats in advance.

GETTING AROUND Bicycle

The Netherlands has 20,000km of cycling paths and the **ANWB** (Royal Dutch Touring Association; ☎ 070-314 71 47; www.anwb.nl, in Dutch; Wassenaarseweg 220, Den Haag) publishes cycling maps for each province. Tourist offices have numerous routes and suggestions.

More than 100 train stations throughout the country offer bicycle hire, protected parking, repair and sales. Show your passport and/or leave an imprint of your credit card or a deposit. Private operators charge €6 to €8 per day, and €30 to €35 per week. Train station hire shops may be slightly cheaper.

Boat

Ferries connect the mainland with the Frisian Islands and Texel. Other ferries span the Westerschelde in the south of Zeeland, providing links to Belgium and the small region of the Netherlands south of Westerschelde. These are popular with people using the Zeebrugge ferry terminal and run frequently year-round. There is also a frequent ferry service on the IJsselmeer linking Enkhuizen with Stavoren and Urk. You'll also find a few small river ferries providing crossings for remote stretches of the IJssel and other rivers.

Bus

Buses and trams operate in most cities, and Amsterdam and Rotterdam also have metro networks. Purchase a *strippenkaart* (strip card; €6.70), valid throughout the country, and stamp off strips depending on how many zones you plan to cross. In the central areas of cities and towns, you usually will only need to stamp two strips – the minimum fee. Note that plans are afoot to phase out the *strippenkaart* by the end of 2007, to be replaced by chip cards. At the time of research information was thin on the ground, but the cards will work like debit cards; money can be loaded onto them, and then used to validate travel on buses, trams and metro. Consult a tourist

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Police, fire, ambulance (☎ 112)

office or train station ticketing office for more information.

Car & Motorcycle

Petrol and car hire tends to be expensive. Contact the **ANWB** (Royal Dutch Touring Association; ☎ 070-314 71 47; www.anwb.nl, in Dutch; Wassenaarseweg 220, Den Haag). You'll need to show a valid driving licence when hiring a car in the Netherlands. Visitors from outside the EU should also consider an International Driving Permit. Car-hire firms will rarely ask for one but the police might if they pull you up.

Train

Trains are frequent and serve domestic destinations at regular intervals. Contact **Nederlandse Spoorwegen** (Netherlands Railways, NS; ☎ nationalinquiries 0900-9296; www.ns.nl). Tickets can be bought at the window or from ticketing machines. Buying a ticket on board means you'll pay almost double the normal fare, and there's an additional charge when buying tickets at windows: €0.50 for one ticket, €1 for two or more.

Consider the Voordeel-Urenkaart pass (€55), valid for one year, which gives 40% discount on train travel Monday to Friday after 9am, on weekends, holidays, and in July and August. The discount applies for up to three people travelling with you on the same trip, as well as around 65% cheaper evening returns from 6pm (except Friday).

AMSTERDAM

☎ 020 / pop 743,000

Amsterdam's always been a liberal place, ever since the Golden Age, when it led European art and trade. Centuries later, in the 1960s, it again led the pack – this time in the principles of tolerance, with broad-minded views on drugs and same-sex relationships taking centre stage. Today the cannabis coffee shops and the Red Light district are still the city's top drawcards, even if that can sometimes wear thin for the locals. Quite simply, Amsterdam's more than just an X-rated theme park for Weekend Warriors and Hooray Henrys – it's also one of Europe's most breathtakingly scenic cities, with beautiful, heritage-protected 17th-century housing and some of the continent's best museums and galleries. It has enough sensory delights to keep the shortest

GETTING INTO TOWN

Trains to Amsterdam Centraal Station leave Schiphol airport every 15 minutes, taking 15 to 20 minutes and costing €3.10/5.60 per single/return. A taxi takes around 45 minutes and costs about €40.

attention spans occupied, and it's compact and user-friendly, too. Walk or ride a bike around the canal grid, or down the historic lanes of the Jordaan district, and bask in the many worlds-within-worlds that make the 'Dam so thoroughly addictive.

ORIENTATION

From Centraal Station the streets radiate outward across the network of canals. Dam Sq is the heart, a 10-minute walk from Centraal Station. Leidseplein is the centre of (mainstream) Amsterdam nightlife, and Nieuwmarkt is a vast cobblestone square with open-air markets and popular pubs. The Red Light District is bound by Zeedijk, Nieuwmarkt and Kloveniersburgwal in the east; Damstraat, Oude Doelenstraat and Oude Hoogstraat in the south; and Warmoesstraat in the west.

INFORMATION Discount Cards

I amsterdam Card (per 24/36/72hr €33/43/53)

Available at VVV offices and some hotels. Admission to most museums, canal boat trips, and discounts and freebies at shops, attractions and restaurants. Also includes a GVB (Amsterdam Transport Authority) transit pass.

Internet Access

Centrale Bibliotheek (Main Library; ☎ 523 09 00; Prinsengracht 587; ☎ 1-9pm Mon, 10am-9pm Tue-Thu, 10am-5pm Fri & Sat, 1-5pm Sun) Free internet.

Internet City (☎ 620 12 92; Nieuwendijk 76; per hr €3; ☎ 10am-midnight)

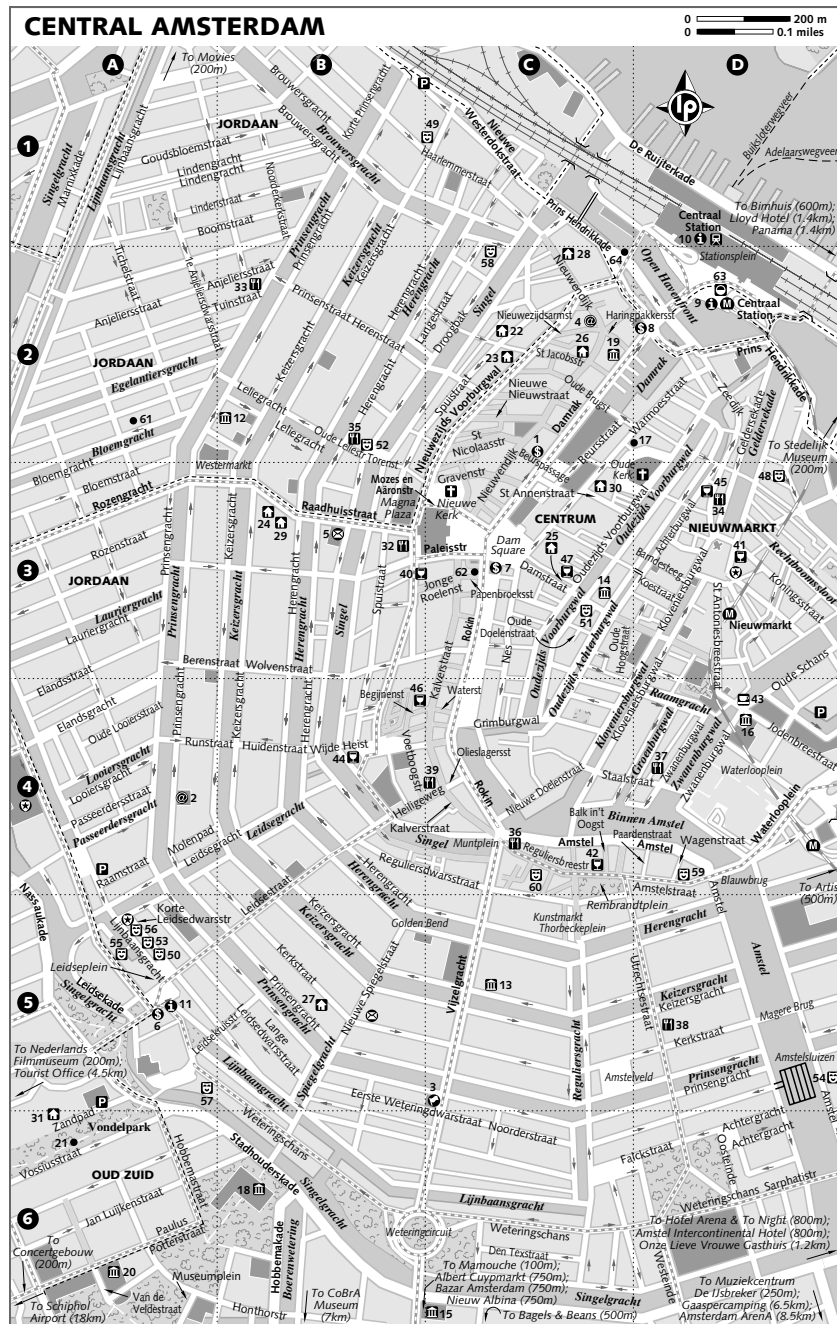
Medical Services

Centrale Dokersdienst (Central Doctors' Service; ☎ 592 33 33; ☎ 24hr) Doctor, dentist or pharmacy referrals.

Onze Lieve Vrouwe Gasthuis (☎ 599 91 11; Oosterpark 9; ☎ 24hr) Public hospital.

Money

Amex (☎ 504 87 77; Damrak 66; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat)



GWK (☎ 0900-0566; Centraal Station; ☽ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-10pm Sun) Converts travellers cheques and books hotel reservations; also at Schiphol.

Thomas Cook Dam (☎ 625 09 22; Dam 23-25; ☽ 9am-7pm); Damrak (☎ 620 32 36; Damrak 1-5; ☽ 8am-8pm) opposite Centraal Station; Leidseplein (☎ 626 70 00; Leidseplein 31A; ☽ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-7.30pm Sun)

Post

Main post office (☎ 330 0555; Singel 250; ☽ 9am-6pm Mon-Wed & Fri, 9am-8pm Thu, 10am-1.30pm Sat)

Tourist Information

Tourist Office (VVV; ☎ 0900-400 40 40; www.vvv.amsterdam.nl; Stationsplein 10 (☽ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri; Centraal Track 2 (Centraal Station); ☽ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun); Leidseplein 1 (☽ 9.15am-5pm Sun-Thu, 9.15am-7pm Fri & Sat)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The **Rijksmuseum** (☎ 674 70 47; www.rijksmuseum.nl; Stadhouderskade 42; adult/under 19yr €9/free; ☽ 10am-5pm) boasts a collection valued in the billions, but until renovations finish in 2009 there'll only be 200 masterpieces displayed, including Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* (1650), which will at any time be 20 deep with flashbulb popping, focus-beam-directing rubberneckers. There's also a small, but very interesting – and free – Rijksmuseum display at Schiphol airport.

The outstanding **Van Gogh Museum** (☎ 570 52 00; www.vangoghmuseum.nl; Paulus Potterstraat 7; adult/12-

21yr/child €10/2.50/free; ☽ 10am-6pm Sun-Thu, 10am-10pm Fri) houses the world's largest Van Gogh collection. Trace the artist's life from his tentative start though to his Japanese phase, and on to depression and the black cloud that descended over the him and his work.

FOAM (Fotografie Museum Amsterdam; ☎ 551 65 00; www.foam.nl; Keizersgracht 609; adult/student & senior/child under 12yr €6/5/free; ☽ 10am-5pm Sat-Wed, 10am-9pm Thu & Fri) is an impressive museum devoted to painting with light. Two storeys of changing exhibitions feature world-renowned photographers, such as Sir Cecil Beaton, Annie Leibovitz and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

The **Red Light District** (see p822) retains the power to bewilder, even if near-naked prostitutes propositioning passers-by from black-lit windows is the oldest Amsterdam cliché. If you feel a prick of desire, it's around €50 for 20 minutes.

The **Prostitution Information Centre** (☎ 4207328; www.pic-amsterdam.com; Enge Kerksteeg 3; ☽ noon-7pm Tue, Wed, Fri & Sat) organises evening Red Light walks and sells a handy map of the district.

Randy Roy's Red Light Tours (www.randyroysredlighttours.com) does exactly what it says on the tin. Over 90 minutes, visit Quentin Tarantino and Iron Mike Tyson's favourite Amsterdam haunts, and learn about the business of sex, Amsterdam style. Tours (€12.50, including one free drink) depart from the Victoria

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THE RED LIGHT DISTRICT

You're not fooling anyone; you know you'll end up here. Everyone does at some stage, even if they think they're too hip, too prudish, too old...the curiosity value is too strong. But it's not just rubberneckers and pleasure seekers who flock to the Red Light District. Amsterdam's approach to prostitution has generated reams of socio-economic analysis, along with a raft of facts and figures – and some contradictions.

Prostitution was legalised in the Netherlands in 1815 (although brothels were only legalised in 2000). Unsurprisingly, fewer than 5% of Dutch prostitutes work illegally in the Netherlands. Dutch 'working girls' pay taxes and they have their own union. Pimping is against the law, but the girls are not on their own: their quarters are fitted with panic buttons in case of trouble. Should they press the button, it won't be the cops who come running.

An estimated 5% of Amsterdam prostitutes are born in the Netherlands, and there's around 1000 to 1200 working approximately 380 windows daily, in day, evening and night shifts. The girls must rent their window at a cost of €40 to €100 per day, depending on location. Do the maths: the typical base cost for 'oral favours' or a 'quickie' is €30; the average base cost for both is €50. 'Encounters' typically last 15 minutes.

Dutch customers are most likely to visit on a Monday morning – that's when many businesses and most shops are closed. Of the international clientele, almost half are British – we don't dare speculate why.

What about the men? A few years back three chaps installed themselves behind windows as prostitutes, a sociological experiment that generated feverish media coverage. In the end the guys were warned not to give up their day job: no women took the bait. Rubbing salt into the wound, one of the female prostitutes even dismissed the whole incident as 'filthy'.

Now, that's harsh.

Hotel, across from Centraal Station, at 8pm Sunday to Thursday, and 8pm and 10pm Friday and Saturday.

Vondelpark (www.vondelpark.nl, in Dutch), an English-style park, has free concerts, ponds, lawns, thickets, winding footpaths and three outdoor cafés. It's popular with joggers, skaters, buskers and lovers.

The wonderfully restored **Museum Het Rembrandthuis** (Rembrandt House Museum; ☎ 520 04 00; www.rembrandthuis.nl; Jodenbreestraat 4; adult/student/child 6-15yr/under 6yr €7.50/6/1.50/free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 11-5pm Sun) is where Rembrandt van Rijn ran the Netherlands' largest painting studio, only to lose the lot when bankruptcy came knocking. The museum has almost every etching he made and holds daily etching demonstrations.

The **Stedelijk Museum** (☎ 573 29 11; www.stedelijk.nl; 2nd & 3rd fl, Post CS Bldg, Oosterdokskade 5; adult/child 7-16yr & senior/under 7yr €9/5/free; ☎ 10am-6pm) features around 100,000 pieces, including impressionist works from Monet, Picasso and Chagall; sculptures from Rodin; De Stijl landmarks by Mondrian; and pop art from Warhol.

The **Anne Frank Huis** (Anne Frank House; ☎ 556 71 00; www.annefrank.org; Prinsengracht 267; adult/child/

under 10yr €7.50/3.50/free; ☎ 9am-9pm Apr-Aug, 9am-7pm Sep-Mar), where Anne wrote her famous diary, lures almost a million visitors annually with its secret annexe, reconstruction of Anne's melancholy bedroom and her actual diary, with its sunnily optimistic writing tempered by quiet despair. Consider going in the early morning or evening when crowds are lightest.

There are some mildly interesting artefacts at the **Sexmuseum Amsterdam** (☎ 622 83 76; Damrak 18; admission €2.50; ☎ 10am-11.30pm) – 14th-century Viennese erotica, for example. But with sensor-fitted plastic derrieres farting at passers-by and an animatronic flasher accosting all-comers, it's more like a tribute to Benny Hill. A sign warns, 'You could be shocked'. Pull the other one.

More options:

Hash, Marihuana & Hemp Museum (☎ 623 59 61; www.hashmuseum.com; Oudezijds Achterburgwal 130; admission €5.70; ☎ 11am-10pm) Queen Victoria used marijuana for menstrual cramps, it says here.

Heineken Experience (☎ 523 94 36; www.heinekenexperience.com; Stadhouderskade 78; admission €10; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) Peer inside malt silos and at Heineken memorabilia. Admission includes three glasses of the brew.

SLEEPING

Accommodation should be booked ahead anywhere in the Netherlands, especially during the high season; note that many visitors stay in Amsterdam even if travelling elsewhere. The tourist offices and Amsterdam Centraal Station's GWK exchange office have hotel-booking services. All rates include breakfast unless stated.

Camping

Gaaspercamping (☎ 696 73 26; www.gaaspercamping.nl; Loosdrechtreef 7, Gaasperdam; camp sites per adult/child under 12yr/car/caravan €4.75/2.25/4.25/6.25; ☎ mid-Mar-Dec) A large camping ground/recreation area with a café, restaurant, bar, barbecues, a supermarket, lake and a beach. Take metro 53 from Centraal to Gaasperplas.

Hostels

Flying Pig Downtown Hostel (www.flyingpig.nl; dm from €13; ☎) City Centre (☎ 420 68 22; Nieuwendijk 100); Vondelpark (☎ 400 41 87; Vossiusstraat) Multitudinous dope-smoking youngsters flock to this throbbing backpacker haven. It's got grungy charm, a pulsating lobby bar with pool table, cheap booze, DJs and a cushion-lined basement dubbed the 'Happy Room'.

Hans Brinker Budget Hotel (☎ 622 06 87; www.hans-brinker.com; Kerkstraat 136; dm from €21; ☎) There's a jacked-up 'Animal House' feel to the Brinker, with its bouncy bar and disco. Its website takes the art of self-mockery to uniquely Dutch extremes, offering Brinker Wallpaper: 'Your home will soon have the unmistakable feeling of the Hans Brinker Budget Hotel,' it says, 'without the tangy smell, strange gargling noises, and the moaning'.

Aivengo Youth Hostel (☎ 620 11 55; Spuistraat 6; dm from €18, d/tr €80/100; ☎) With friendly management, an inviting, respectful vibe and a funky, Middle Eastern-style décor, Aivengo is a winner. Party animals take very careful note: there's a 4am curfew.

Also recommended:

Bulldog Hotel (☎ 620 38 22; www.bulldog.nl; Oudezijds Voorburgwal 220; dm from €22; ☎) An offshoot of the Bulldog chain of cannabis coffee shops. Smoke a blunt if all else fails.

Bob's Youth Hostel (☎ 623 00 63; www.bobsyouthhostel.nl; Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal; dm from €20; ☎) A long-standing favourite with up-for-it backpackers. Right near Centraal station.

Stayokay Vondelpark (☎ 589 89 96; www.stayokay.com/vondelpark; Zandpad 5; dm/d from €24/67; ☎)

Insanely popular, with 75,000 guests a year – you won't get any sleep but you're bound to get laid.

Hotels

Budget Hotel Clemens (☎ 624 60 89; www.clemenshotel.com; Raadhuisstraat 39; s €55, d €70-110, tr €125-150; ☎) The Clemens is a friendly place, with eight warm, cosy rooms, some done up in creams and yellows, some in gold and red. Deluxe rooms have antique furniture and marble fireplaces, and all have minifridges. Rooms at the front, though on a noisy street, make up for it with balconies that overlook the Westermarkt. The stairway is so steep your nose will bleed.

Hotel Winston (☎ 623 13 80; www.winston.nl; Warmerstraat 129; dm/s/d from €22/45/56) Local artists have themed the rooms with motifs, including Arabian typography, jigsaw puzzles and, fittingly for the Red Light location, bizarre sex. There's a jolly 24-hour bar and the Winston's own club (p825) next door. The staff will probably have casual disdain for the whole customer service thing – don't take it personally.

Also recommended:

Hotel Pax (☎ 624 97 35; Raadhuisstraat 37; s €30-50, d €45-95) Run by a pair of chilled-out brothers. Brightly decorated rooms; the larger ones face the busy street and noisy trams. No breakfast.

Hotel Groenendaal (☎ 624 48 22; www.hotelgroenendaal.com; Nieuwendijk 15; s/d/tr with shared bathroom €35/50/75) A bargain, although as bare bones as they come. Central location, friendly owners.

EATING Restaurants

Mamouche (☎ 673 63 61; Quellijnstraat 104; mains €14.50-22; ☎ dinner Tue-Sun) 'Sexy' is a word that tends to get bandied about when people talk about Mamouche, with its seriously good modern Moroccan food (couscous, lamb, fish) and seriously minimalist décor, all exposed flooring, mottled walls and beamed ceilings. Reservations are essential.

De Bolhoed (☎ 626 18 03; Prinsengracht 60-62; mains €6-14; ☎ lunch & dinner) Amsterdam's best-known vegetarian restaurant, with a prime canal-side location. The food is fresh, organic, and often Mexican- and Italian-inspired. Dip into pancakes, salads, burritos, homemade breads, biodynamic wines, organic beers and cakes.

Bazar Amsterdam (☎ 675 05 44; www.bazaramsterdam.nl; Albert Cuyppstraat 182; mains €8-14; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Like its Rotterdam counterpart,

Bazar Amsterdam is a genuine high flyer. In a glorious former Dutch Reformed church, the light-filled, Middle Eastern-style décor and tangy, tantalising North African cuisine – mixed grills, kebabs, falafels, pittas, tabouli, Turkish pizza – sees to that.

Also recommended:

Tempo Doeloe (☎ 625 67 18; Utrechtsestraat 75; mains €18-22; ☎ dinner) Quality Indonesian. Reservations essential.

Nieuw Albina (☎ 379 02 23; Albert Cuyppstraat 49; mains €4.50-11.50; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) Bold and brassy Surinamese food.

Quick Eats

Eat Mode (☎ 330 08 06; www.eatmode.nl; Zeedijk 107; mains €4.50-12; ☎ lunch & dinner) Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese and Japanese with casual ambience. Good vegetarian selection and wi-fi.

Puccini (☎ 626 54 74; www.puccini.nl, in Dutch; Staalstraat 21; mains €5.30-12.50; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Italian panini rolls and salads with sun-dried ingredients; its handmade chocolate and cake shop next door induces rapture.

Foodism (☎ 427 51 03; www.foodism.nl; Oude Leliestraat 8; mains €6-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) All-day breakfasts, healthy filled sandwiches and salads, wild and wicked pasta dishes.

Ralph's Asian Wonderfood (☎ 670 90 07; Eerste van der Helststraat 37; dishes €6-7; ☎ lunch & dinner) Excellent, fresh Asian-fusion menu. Also at Haarlemmerstraat 32.

Bagels & Beans (www.bagelsbeans.nl; Ferdinand Bolstraat 70; bagels from €2.95) Tasty bagels, good coffee, wi-fi access. Also at Keizersgracht 504, Haarlemmerdijk 122, Van Baerlestraat 40, Kinkerstraat 110, Koningsplein 20, Waterlooplein 2, Raadhuisstraat 18 and Zeilstraat 64.

Maoz (☎ 420 74 35; www.maozveg.com; Muntplein 1; felafoel €3.50) Falafel pitta-bread sandwiches with 'bottomless' salad toppings and sauces. It's common for impetuous Dutch students to linger here for hours on end (possibly days, weeks, months), refilling their pitta bread with salad and hummus. Also at Centraal station, Leidsestraat 85, Ferdinand Bolstraat 67, 1e Van De Helststraat 43 and Aude Brug steeg.

Vlaams Friteshuis (Voetboogstraat 31; fries €2.50) Amsterdam's best-loved fries joint. Remember the words of Vincent Vega, from *Pulp Fiction*: 'You know what they put on French Fries in Holland? Mayonnaise. And I don't mean a little bit on the side – they fucken drown 'em in it'.

SPLURGE

Hotel Arena (☎ 850 24 00; www.hotelarena.nl; 's Gravesandestraat 51; d/tr from €100/165; ☎) The Arena, bordering lush Oosterpark, was once a chapel, an orphanage and a backpackers hostel. Now it's a chic 121-room hotel with a stylish restaurant, café and a well-regarded nightclub, the Winston International (opposite). Rooms are an ode to minimalism, while the large, split-level doubles are sun drenched – assuming there's sun about, a bit of a stretch at the best of times. Tip: sections A, B, E and F tend to be quieter.

Self-Catering

Albert Heijn (Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal 226) Supermarket chain, with branches at Koningsplein 6 and Museumplein.

DRINKING

Café Cuba (☎ 627 4919; Nieuwmarkt 3) This place maintains fidelity to Fidel, Che and '50s Cuba, with low lighting, indoor palms, faux faded elegance, rum posters, and cane chairs and tables. Try Papa Hemingway's favourite cocktail, *La Caprinha*, and the ubiquitous *Mojito*. The outdoor seating is perched right on Nieuwmarkt.

Lime (☎ 639 30 20; Zeedijk 104) Cool and hip but friendly and laid-back; you won't get the stink-eye in here. The décor comes on like a Stereolab album cover – all dots and loops and browns and oranges – and the cocktails are superb.

Absinthe (☎ 320 6780; www.absinthe.nl; Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal 171) Devoted to the brain-lesioning liquor reputed to be the cause of Van Gogh's self-mutilation. There's multiethnic décor with rather awkward seating arrangements, and the staff can teach you all about their signature drink. You'll leave with ears intact – it's not as potent as the old days.

Proflokaal Wijnand Fockinck (☎ 639 26 95; www.wynand-fockinck.nl, in Dutch; Pijlsteeg 31) This fantastic little tasting house, dating from 1679, serves scores of *jenever*s (Dutch gin) and liqueurs made on site. There's an appealing courtyard for lunch and snacks.

De Sluyswacht (☎ 625 76 11; Jodenbreestraat 1) Stoners beware: this tiny black building, one of Amsterdam's prettiest drinking spots, is built on foundations that lean dramatically, with secluded tables overlooking a broad canal. It

was once a lock-keeper's house on the Oude Schans.

Also recommended:

Hoppe (☎ 420 44 20; Spuistraat 18) This gritty brown café is 300 years old.

Café De Kroon (☎ 625 20 11; www.dekroon.nl, in Dutch; Rembrandtplein 17) High ceilings, velvet chairs, Art Deco staircase.

Pilsener Club (☎ 623 17 77; Begijnensteeg 4) Also known as the 'English Arse', with tatty beers.

ENTERTAINMENT Cinemas

Find out what's on in Thursday's newspapers or Wednesday's *Amsterdam Weekly*.

Movies (☎ 638 60 16; www.themovies.nl; Haarlemmerdijk 161) Arty films and big studio releases in a beautiful Art Deco cinema.

Tuschinskitheater (☎ 623 15 00; www.pathe.nl/tuschinski; Reguliersbreestraat 26) Mainstream blockbusters in a sumptuous Art Deco/Amsterdam school interior.

Filmmuseum (☎ 589 14 00; www.filmmuseum.nl; Vondelpark 3) Cult flicks, shock-horror, cutting-edge foreign films, docs, Bollywood.

Clubbing

Jimmy Woo (☎ 626 3150; www.jimmywoo.nl; Korte Leidsedwarstraat 18) With its überstylish, black-lacquered, Oriental décor, Jimmy Woo is as hip as the bony projection of a femur. Plus it has a big focus on hip-hop and extracting cash from hip pockets. It's exclusive (no hippies allowed), so good luck getting in; try going with some Dutchies for best results.

Sinners In Heaven (☎ 620 1375; www.sinners.nl; Wagenstraat 3-7) Along with Jimmy Woo, jet-set, celebrity-riddled Sinners heads the A-list of Amsterdam clubs. It serves hip-hop, funk, beats and breaks, and it's possibly harder than Jimmy Woo to get into: there's always a 'guest list', and by all accounts the door bitch has quite the acid tongue. Try sleeping with a famous footballer for best results.

Also recommended:

Winston International (☎ 623 13 80; www.winston.nl; Warmoesstraat 125) Everything from electronica to spoken word to punk to graffiti art.

Arena (☎ 850 24 20; www.hotelarena.nl; Hotel Arena, 's-Gravesandestraat 51) Everything from '80s classics to salsa to funk.

Live Music

Paradiso (☎ 626 45 21; www.paradiso.nl; Weteringschans 6) The Paradiso has hosted the likes of Sonic Youth, David Bowie and the Rolling Stones.

Melkweg (Milky Way; ☎ 624 17 77; www.melkweg.nl; Lijnbaansgracht 234A) An all-in-one entertainment complex with an art gallery, nightclub, café, multimedia centre and top live music most nights.

Smoking

'Café' means 'pub' in the Netherlands; 'coffee shops' are where one procures cannabis. Smoking restrictions are being introduced in the Netherlands by the end of 2008 – yes, even in coffee shops. If the establishment has a bar or restaurant licence (which most do), they'll have to create a non-smoking area. Go figure.

Siberië (☎ 623 59 09; Brouwersgracht 111) With its loungeoom feel, canal views and ultracausal atmosphere, this is an addictive place that draws smokers of all ages for the friendly staff, the wicked weed and the chance to play stoner chess with total strangers. 'Queen takes Bish... that castle thing. Ah, forget it. I resign.'

Barney's (☎ 625 97 61; www.barneys.biz; Haarlemmerstraat 98 & 102) The very popular Barney's, with its trippy biomechanical décor, has belated all-day breakfasts as well as quality smoke (100% organic).

Also recommended:

Grey Area (☎ 420 43 01; www.greyarea.nl; Oude Leliestraat 2) One of the originals.

Greenhouse (☎ 627 17 39; Oudezijds Voorburgwal 191) Psychedelic decor.

Sport

Four-times European champion Ajax plays in the **Amsterdam Arena** (☎ 311 13 33; www.amsterdamarena.nl; Arena Blvd 11, Bijlmermeer), usually on Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons from August to May. Stadium tours are available.

Theatre

Amsterdams Marionetten Theater (☎ 620 80 27; www.marionet.demon.nl; Nieuwe Jonkerstraat 8; adult/child from €12/6) In a former blacksmith's shop, this charming, intimate theatre features marionettes performing elaborate productions such as *The Magic Flute*. Behold the skill of the puppeteers. Call or check the website for show times.

Nachttheater Sugar Factory (☎ 626 5006; www.sugarfactory.nl; Lijnbaansgracht 238) This 'night theatre' showcases theatre, spoken word, exhibitions, poetry readings and live music, after which the space clears and it becomes a bangin' nightclub.

Also recommended:

Koninklijk Theater Carré (☎ 0900-252 52 55; www.theatercarré.nl, in Dutch; Amstel 115-125) Largest theatre in Amsterdam. Backstage tours available.

Boom Chicago (☎ 423 01 01; www.boomchicago.nl; Leidseplein 12) English-language stand-up and improv.

GETTING AROUND

Bicycle

For bike hire you'll need a passport/ID and a credit-card imprint or cash deposit.

Bike City (☎ 626 37 21; www.bikecity.nl; Bloemgracht 68-70; per day/week €8.50/41)

Mike's Bike Tours (☎ 622 79 70; www.mikesbiketours.com; Kerkstraat 134; per half/full/additional day €5/7/5)

Boat

FERRIES

There are free ferries from behind Centraal Station to destinations around the IJ, notably Amsterdam Noord. Ferries to the Eastern Docklands cost €1.

CANAL BOAT, BUS & BIKE

Canal Bus (☎ 623 98 86; www.canalbus.nl; day pass per adult/child under 13yr €17/11) Does several circuits between Centraal Station and the Rijksmuseum between 9.50am and 8pm. The day pass is valid until noon the next day. The same company hires canal bikes (pedal boats) for €9 per person per hour (€7 if more than two people per canal bike).

Lovers Museum Boat (☎ 622 21 81; www.lovers.nl; day pass from €8.50) Leaves every 30 or 45 minutes from the Lovers boat terminal in front of Centraal Station. Discounts after 1pm.

St Nicolaas Boat Club (☎ 423 01 01; www.petermoskos.com/boat; Boom Chicago, Leidseplein 12) This not-for-profit venture takes small, old barges out onto the canals. Patrons are allowed to smoke dope and drink beer on board, while the captains amuse with stories about alternative Amsterdam. Departure times are according to demand and payment is by donation.

Public Transport

The **GVB** (Amsterdam Transport Authority; ☎ 460 59 59; www.gvb.nl; Stationsplein; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-9pm Sat & Sun) runs the network, and there's an information office in front of Centraal Station. The best ticketing deal is the *strippenkaart* (€6.70), a multifare 'strip ticket' valid on all buses, trams and metros. The GVB also sells a one-week pass valid in all zones for €17. If you board without a ticket, the driver sells

one-/two-/three-zone tickets. Ticketing is based on zones.

Night buses take over shortly after midnight when the trams and regular buses stop running. Drivers sell single tickets for €3.20. Day passes are valid on night buses, but the surcharge still applies.

Taxi

Amsterdam taxis are ultraexpensive. Try **Taxi-centrale Amsterdam** (☎ 677 77 77).

THE RANDSTAD

The Randstad (literally 'Rim City') is the Netherlands' most densely populated region (and among the world's densest), containing almost half the country's population. It stretches from Amsterdam to Rotterdam and includes Den Haag, Utrecht, Haarlem, Leiden, Delft, Gouda and Dordrecht.

LEIDEN

☎ 071 / pop 118,500

Lovely Leiden is a refreshing, vibrant town, patterned with canals and attractive old buildings. It also has a few claims to fame: it's Rembrandt's birthplace, and it's home to the Netherlands' oldest university (and 20,000 students), the alma mater of René Descartes.

Get online at **Ortes Telecom** (per hr €3). The **tourist office** (☎ 0900-222 23 33; www.leidenpromotie.nl; Stationsweg 2D; ☎ 11am-5.30pm Mon, 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4.30pm Sat) will help you.

Sights & Activities

The 17th-century **Lakenhal** (Cloth Hall; ☎ 516 53 60; www.lakenhal.nl; Oude Singel 28-32; adult/under 18yr €4/ free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) houses the Municipal Museum, with an assortment of works by old masters, as well as period rooms and temporary exhibits.

The **Rijksmuseum van Oudheden** (National Museum of Antiquities; ☎ 516 31 63; www.rmo.nl; Rapenburg 28; adult/child under 18yr €7.50/5.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, noon-5pm Sat & Sun) has a classy collection of hieroglyphs and 94 mummies.

The windmill called **De Valk** (Falcon; ☎ 516 53 53; http://home.wanadoo.nl/molemuseum; 2e Binnenvestgracht 1; adult/under 15yr €3/1.70; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1-5pm Sun) has been carefully restored; its construction and operation laid bare highlights the wonders of preindustrial engineering. The upper levels afford a cracking view of the old town.

Hire a canoe from **Botenverhuur 't Galgewater** (☎ 514 97 90; www.galgewater.nl; per hr €5; ☎ 11am-6pm Oct-May, 11am-10pm Jun-Sep) and explore the canals.

Sleeping

De Noordduinen (☎ 402 52 95; www.tours.nl/noordduinen; Campingweg 1; camp sites from €16.50; ☎ Apr-Oct; ☎ bus 31 or 41) The closest camping ground, 8km to the west of town.

Stayokay Noordwijk (☎ 0252-37 29 20; www.stayokay.com/noordwijk; Langevelderlaan 45; dm from €20) The hostel is 45 minutes away, next to a popular beach. Take bus 57 or 90 (last bus at 11pm) to Sancta Maria hospital and walk for 10 minutes.

Pension Witte Singel (☎ 512 45 92; www.pension-ws.demon.nl; Witte Singel 80; d €76, s/d with shared bathroom €41/62) Fresh, spacious rooms with large windows overlooking most agreeable scenery: the perfectly peaceful Singel canal in the front and a typically Dutch garden out the back.

Eating

Verboden Toegang (☎ 514 33 88; www.verbodentoeegang.nl, in Dutch; Kaiserstraat 7; mains €13-20; ☎ dinner) This casual, elegant, wood-panelled restaurant doesn't take itself too seriously (the name means 'access forbidden'). The grub's top-notch, with an emphasis on seafood, as the butterfish in white wine attests.

In Den Doofpot (☎ 512 24 34; www.indendoofpot.nl, in Dutch; Turfmarkt 9; mains €12-45; ☎ dinner) There's little chance you're going to walk away hungry from this elegant place. It serves twists on Dutch home-style cooking with elaborate French brushes and other less bulky options.

Also recommended:

Oloroso (☎ 514 66 33; Breestraat 49; tapas from €3;

☎ lunch & dinner) Good tapas, salads and soups.

Maaz (www.maazveg.com; Haarlemmerstraat 61; falafel €3.50) Falafel pitta-bread sandwiches that can be refilled with salad toppings and sauces as many times as you like.

Drinking

North End (☎ 512 1541; www.north-end.nl; Noordeinde 55) This superb English-style pub is full of warmth, cosy nooks and character. It comes complete with its very own 'bourbon alley' (not very English, granted, but a welcome selection of booze all the same) and patented 'beer strippenkaart'.

Jazzcafé The Duke (☎ 566 15 85; www.jazzcaféthe-duke.nl; Oude Singel 2) No windows, but loads of

yellowing, vintage jazz posters on the walls. Its motto is, 'If we don't have it, you don't need it'. It's true: you don't need windows to enjoy this atmospheric den, with its fine live jazz nightly and appreciative crowds.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€7.50, 34 minutes, six hourly) and Den Haag (€2.80, 10 minutes, six hourly). Regional and local buses leave from the bus station directly in front of Centraal Station.

DEN HAAG (THE HAGUE)

☎ 070 / pop 472, 100

Den Haag, officially known as 's-Gravenhage (the Count's Hedge), is the Dutch seat of government (although Amsterdam's the capital). Home to the royal family, it's a stately, regal place filled with palatial embassies and mansions, green boulevards and parks, prestigious art galleries, a mouth-watering culinary scene, a clutch of tasty museums and some throbbing nightlife.

Surf the web at **Kado Internet** (Spui 165; per hr €2.75). Ask the **tourist office** (☎ 0900-340 35 05; www.denhaag.com; Hofweg 1; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, noon-5pm Sun) for advice.

Sights

The **Mauritshuis** (☎ 302 34 56; www.mauritshuis.nl; Korte Vijverberg 8; adult/under 18yr €11.50/free incl audiotour; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) houses Dutch and Flemish works (and Andy Warhol's *Queen Beatrix*). Highlights include Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and Rembrandt self-portraits at age 20 and 63. Even if you're just passing Den Haag on the train, it's well worth hopping off to visit.

Escher in Het Paleis Museum (☎ 338 11 20; www.escherinhethetpaleis.nl; Lange Voorhout; adult/under 15yr €7.50/5; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a permanent exhibition devoted to Dutch graphic artist MC Escher, from his early realism to later phantasmagoria. Imaginative displays include a virtual reality reconstruction of Escher's impossible buildings and 4D spatial dynamics.

The **Panorama Mesdag** (☎ 364 45 44; www.panorama-mesdag.nl; Zeestraat 65; adult/child under 13yr €5/2.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun & public holidays) contains the *Panorama* (1881), a gigantic, 360-degree painting of Scheveningen, painted by Hendrik Willem Mesdag. The artist's command of perspective and minute detail was masterful: viewed from a constructed dune,

with real sand and beach chairs scattered about and beachy sounds piped through, the panorama is a fully immersive experience.

Madurodam (☎ 355 39 00; www.madurodam.nl; George Maduroplein 1; adult/child under 11yr €12.50/9; ☎ 9am-8pm), 3km out of town, is a miniaturised Netherlands, complete with 1:25 scale versions of Schiphol, Amsterdam, windmills, tulips, Rotterdam harbour, the Delta dikes and so on. It's cheesy, and just a little bit tacky, but the Dutch seem to like that sort of thing. To get there by public transport, take tram 9 or bus 22 from Centraal Station, or tram 9 from Hollands Spoor Station.

The long beach at **Scheveningen** (www.scheveningen.nl) attracts nine million visitors per year. Crowds can get up close and personal when the weather gets warm and the shopping strip gets crassly commercial, but the attraction of sea and sand keeps the peace. A palpable frisson of frivolity sweetens the air.

Walk northwest along the beach and you'll come across a series of WWII bunkers, part of the Nazi Atlantic Wall defence system and an eerie reminder of the Netherlands' place in European history.

Sleeping

Duinhorst (☎ 324 22 70; www.duinhorst.nl; Buurtweg 135; camp sites per person/tent €3.75/2.75; ☎ Apr-Sep) Camping grounds set among the dunes east of Scheveningen. Take bus 28 from Hollands Spoor station or bus 29 from Centraal Station to the end of the line, from where it's about 1km west.

Stayokay Den Haag (☎ 315 78 88; www.stayokay.com/denhaag; Scheepmakerstraat 27; dm from €21) This branch of the Stayokay hostel chain has all the usual facilities, including a bar, restaurant, internet access and games. It's around 15 minutes' walk from Hollands Spoor station.

Strandhotel (☎ 354 01 93; www.strandhotel.demon.nl; cnr Zeekant 111 & Gevers Deynootweg 1344, Scheveningen; s/d from €40/65) It's on the beach, and the rooms have an unreconstructed 1950s motif. Book ahead and keep an eye on the weather – prices soar in summer. Service can be perfunctory.

Eating & Drinking

It Rains Fishes (☎ 365 25 98; www.itrainfishes.nl, in Dutch; Noordeinde 123; mains €13-24; ☎ lunch & dinner) It's the 'restaurant on the sunny side of the street', a multiaward-winning seafood concern serving grilled, fried and poached fish, mussels and scallops.

Topkapi Sense Restaurant (☎ 358 53 50; www.topkapi-scheveningen.nl; Gevers Deynootplein 36, Scheveningen; mains €11-22; ☎ lunch & dinner) An 'Ottoman' restaurant with cuisine from Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Morocco... The couscous with sea bass is a winner, as is the baked, stuffed zucchini. Ruby-red drapes and beads combine with low lighting to create a suitable atmosphere, although the guy in the corner playing cheesy tunes on his synthetic organ tempers it.

Boterwaag (☎ 365 96 86; www.september.nl, in Dutch; Grote Markt 8a; ☎ lunch & dinner) This old weigh-house serves as a café/restaurant and provides a distinctive drinking and eating experience, with its high ceilings, large windows, candle fetish, nooks and crannies to hide out in, and great beer list. When we were here, a kooky Dutch kid was riding around inside on a unicycle and no one batted an eyelid.

Fiddler (☎ 365 19 55; www.fiddler.nl; Rivierismarkt 1) This large, split-level, wood-panelled English microbrewery always has a decent crowd snacking on the OK pub food and the Fiddler's own beers: an ale, a pale ale and a stout. In the end, it's probably a bit too cavernous – intimacy's hard to come by. Good location: in the eye of the Grote Kerk.

Clubbing

Paard van Troje (☎ 750 34 34; www.paard.nl; Prinsegracht 12) This emporium has club nights and live music, as well as a café. The programming's eclectic: everything from booty-shaking drum 'n' bass DJs to bowel-destroying sonic terrorists The Hafler Trio.

Getting There & Around

Den Haag has two main train stations: Centraal and Hollands Spoor. Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€9.50, 50 minutes), Leiden (€2.80, 13 minutes), Rotterdam (€4.10, 22 minutes) and Utrecht (€9.10, 40 minutes); all have four departures per hour. Trams 1, 8 and 9 link Scheveningen with Den Haag; the fare is three strips. The last tram at night runs in either direction at about 1.30am. There's a tram to Delft.

DELFT

☎ 015 / pop 96,000

Ah, lovely Delft: compact, charming, relaxed. Founded around 1100, it's a very popular tourist destination. Daytrippers – and lovers of beauty and refinement – clamour to stroll its narrow, canal-lined streets, gazing at the

remarkable old buildings and meditating on the life and career of Golden Age painter Jan Vermeer, who was born and lived here (*View of Delft*, one of Vermeer's best-loved works, is an enigmatic, nonrealist vision of the town). Delft is also famous for its 'delftware', the distinctive blue-and-white pottery originally duplicated from Chinese porcelain by 17th-century artisans.

The **tourist office** (☎ 0900-515 15 55; www.delft.nl; Hippolytusbuurt 4; ☎ 11am-4pm Mon, 10am-4pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) has free internet access.

Sights & Activities

The 14th-century **Nieuwe Kerk** (☎ 212 30 25; www.nieuwekerk-delft.nl; Markt; admission adult/child €3/1.50; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct, 11am-4pm Mon-Sat Nov-Apr) houses the crypt of the Dutch royal family and the mausoleum of Willem the Silent. The fee includes entrance to the **Oude Kerk** (☎ 212 30 15; www.oudekerk-delft.nl; Heilige Geestkerkhof; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct, 11am-4pm Mon-Sat Nov-Mar) – and vice versa. The latter, 800 years old, is a surreal sight: its tower leans 2m from the vertical. Among the tombs inside is Vermeer's.

Municipal Museum Het Prinsenhof (☎ 260 23 58; www.prinsenhof-delft.nl, in Dutch; St Agathaplein 1; adult/child under 16yr €5/4; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1-5pm Sun), a former convent, is where Willem the Silent was assassinated in 1584 (the bullet hole in the wall is covered in Perspex to protect against inquisitive visitors). The museum displays various objects telling the story of the 80-year war with Spain, as well as 17th-century paintings.

The **Vermeercentrum** (☎ 213 85 88; www.vermeer-delft.nl; Voldersgracht 21; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) offers 'a voyage of discovery through the life and work of Johannes Vermeer. Experience life in 17th-century Delft,' they say, 'experience his studio, and get to know his work'.

See Delft on a **canal boat tour** (☎ 212 63 85; adult/child under 12yr €5.50/3; ☎ 9.30am-6pm mid-Mar-Oct) departing from Koornmarkt 113.

Sleeping

Hotel de Plataan (☎ 212 60 46; www.hoteldeplataan.nl; Doelenplein 10; s/d €88/99) Standard rooms are small but elegant. Then there are the wonderfully opulent theme rooms, which come on like a Japanese love hotel: there's the 'Garden of Eden'; the 'Amber', based on Eastern stylings;

or the jaw-dropping 'Tamarinde', themed after a desert island.

Also recommended:

Delftse Hout (☎ 213 00 40; Korftlaan 5; camp sites incl 2 people, car, tent, caravan or motorhome from €20) This camping ground is just northeast of town. Take bus 64 from the station.

Pension Van Domburg (☎ 212 30 29; Voldersgracht 24; s/d with shared bathroom €35/40) No frills, but centrally located.

Eating & Drinking

Stads Koffyhuys (☎ 212 46 25; www.stads-koffyhuys.nl; Oude Delft 133; pancakes €7-10) Lovely place with a terrace barge moored out the front, where you can take your coffee and eat your delicious sandwiches and pancakes while admiring the Oude Kerk, just ahead at the end of the canal.

Eetcafé De Ruif (☎ 214 22 06; www.ruif.nl, in Dutch; Kerkstraat 22; mains €12-16; ☎ lunch & dinner) Wonderfully rustic, with a low ceiling, canal views and yummo lunches, like goat-cheese salads and Stellendam shrimps (seafood that's apparently very highly prized round these here parts). At night it's busier, morphing into an exceedingly popular carousing option.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Den Haag (€2.20, eight minutes), Rotterdam (€2.90, 13 minutes) and Amsterdam (€10.80, 50 minutes). Tram 1 makes the run to Den Haag.

ROTTERDAM

☎ 010 / pop 605,000

Rotterdam, Europe's largest port and second-largest Dutch city, was bombed flat during WWII and spent the following decades rebuilding the harbour and the city centre. The result is an architectural aesthetic that's unique in Europe. Rotterdam has a crackling energy, with superb nightlife, a diverse, multiethnic community, an intensely interesting maritime tradition and a wealth of top-class museums. It also has a long-standing rivalry with Amsterdam, reflected in most aspects of culture. When local football team, Feyenoord, meets Ajax of Amsterdam, the fur always flies. And when Rotterdam unleashed its extreme form of techno, gabber, on the world in the early '90s, one of its most enduring targets was Amsterdam: an early gabber single was memorably titled 'Amsterdam, Waar Lech Dat Dan?' ('Amsterdam, Where the Fuck is That?').

Information

The Rotterdam Card offers discounts in hotels and restaurants; it's €22.46/43.11 for 24/72 hours. The card is even available as a watch. Buy it from the tourist office.

EasyInternetCafé (www.easyeverything.com/map/rot; Stadhuisplein 16-18; per hr €3; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm Sun)

Tourist office (☎ 271 01 28; www.rotterdam.info; Coolsingel 5; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) Offers free internet.

Use-It (☎ 240 91 58; www.use-it.nl; Schaatsbaan 41-45; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun mid-May–mid-Sep, 9am-5pm Tue-Sat mid-Sep–mid-May) Aimed at young travellers; books accommodation with substantial discounts.

Sights

Museum Boijmans van Beuningen (☎ 441 94 00; www.boijmans.nl; Museumpark 18-20; adult/child under 18yr €8/free; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) is among Europe's very finest museums, with a permanent collection of Dutch and European art (Bosch, Van Eyck, Rembrandt, Tintoretto, Titian). There's an absorbing Surrealist wing featuring ephemera, paraphernalia, and famous works from Dali, Duchamp, Magritte, Man Ray and more. Free admission on Wednesday.

The **Nederlands Architectuur Instituut** (NAI; ☎ 440 12 00; www.nai.nl; Museumpark 25; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun & holidays) offers a thorough overview of Dutch architecture. Exhibitions are revelatory, and a recent multimedia presentation devoted to the utopian genius Hendrik Wijdeveld was quite honestly mind expanding. The NAI is a worthy monument in a city that celebrates built space like no other.

At 185m, a shimmy up the **Euromast** (☎ 436 48 11; www.euromast.com; Parkhaven 20; adult/child under 11yr €8/5.20; ☎ 9.30am-11pm Apr-Sep, 10am-11pm Oct-Mar) is a must. It offers unparalleled 360-degree views of Rotterdam, with its rotating glass-walled 'Euroscope' contraption ascending to near the summit, from where you'll fully appreciate just how mighty the harbour is. There's a luxury accommodation suite and the Panorama restaurant near the top. Book an abseiling session (€39.50).

The **Overblaak development** (1978–84), designed by Piet Blom, is near Blaak metro station. Marked by its pencil-shaped tower and upended, cube-shaped apartments, it seems plucked straight from the novels of JG Ballard. One apartment, the **Show Cube** (☎ 4142285; www.cubehouse.nl; adult/child under 12yr €2/1.50; ☎ 11am-5pm, closed Mon-Thu Jan & Feb), is open to the public.

Sleeping

The tourist office and Use-It (left) make reservations for a small fee.

Pickup Hotel Bazar (☎ 206 51 51; www.hotelbazar.nl; Witte de Withstraat 16; s/d from €60/75) The Hotel Bazar is deservedly popular for its Middle Eastern, African and South American-themed rooms: lush, brocaded curtains, exotically tiled bathrooms, comfy beds and copies of *Tales from the Arabian Nights* scattered about. The breakfast is spectacular: Turkish breads, international cheeses, yogurt, fruit, cold cuts and coffee. An exceptional place to wind down, particularly as its ground-floor bar and restaurant (below) is among the city's best.

Hotel Amar (☎ 425 57 95; www.amarhotel.nl; Matnesserlaan 316; s/d €30/50; ☎) This friendly, small hotel is in a leafy neighbourhood close to the Museumplein and to good shopping and nightlife. Rooms are simple but comfy, and the ones at the back overlook a large and peaceful garden.

Also recommended:
City Camping of Rotterdam (☎ 415 34 40; Kanaalweg 84; camp sites per adult/tent €4.70/3.70, 2-adult cabins €27.70) A 20-minute walk northwest from Centraal Station, or take bus 33.

Sleep-in De Mafkees (☎ 240 91 58; www.sleep-in.nl; Schaatsbaan 41-45; dm €10) A friendly winner; you'll need your own sleeping bag.

Hotel Boat De Clipper (☎ 331 42 44; Scheepmakerhaven; B&B from €30; ☎) A 'hotel' docked in Rotterdam's old harbour; rooms are a little cramped.

Stayokay Rotterdam (☎ 436 57 63; www.stayokay.com/rotterdam; Rochussenstraat 107-109; dm from €20.25; ☎ reception until 1am; ☎) A typically well-run link in the Stayokay chain.

Eating

Bazar (☎ 206 51 51; www.hotelbazar.nl; Witte de Withstraat 16; mains €8-13.90; ☎ lunch & dinner) On the ground floor of the inventive Hotel Bazar (above), this eatery comes up trumps, with stylised Middle Eastern décor and matching menu: dolmades, falafel, mussels, sardines, couscous and kebabs served in tangy, attention-grabbing combinations.

Look (☎ 436 70 00; www.restaurantlook.nl; 's Gravenrijkwijk; mains €13-20; ☎ dinner Wed-Sun) Recommended for single people, Buffy and Francophiles... Look specialises in garlic-based dishes: steamed garlic, fried garlic, garlic soup, garlic vegetables – even garlic dessert on occasion.

Also recommended:

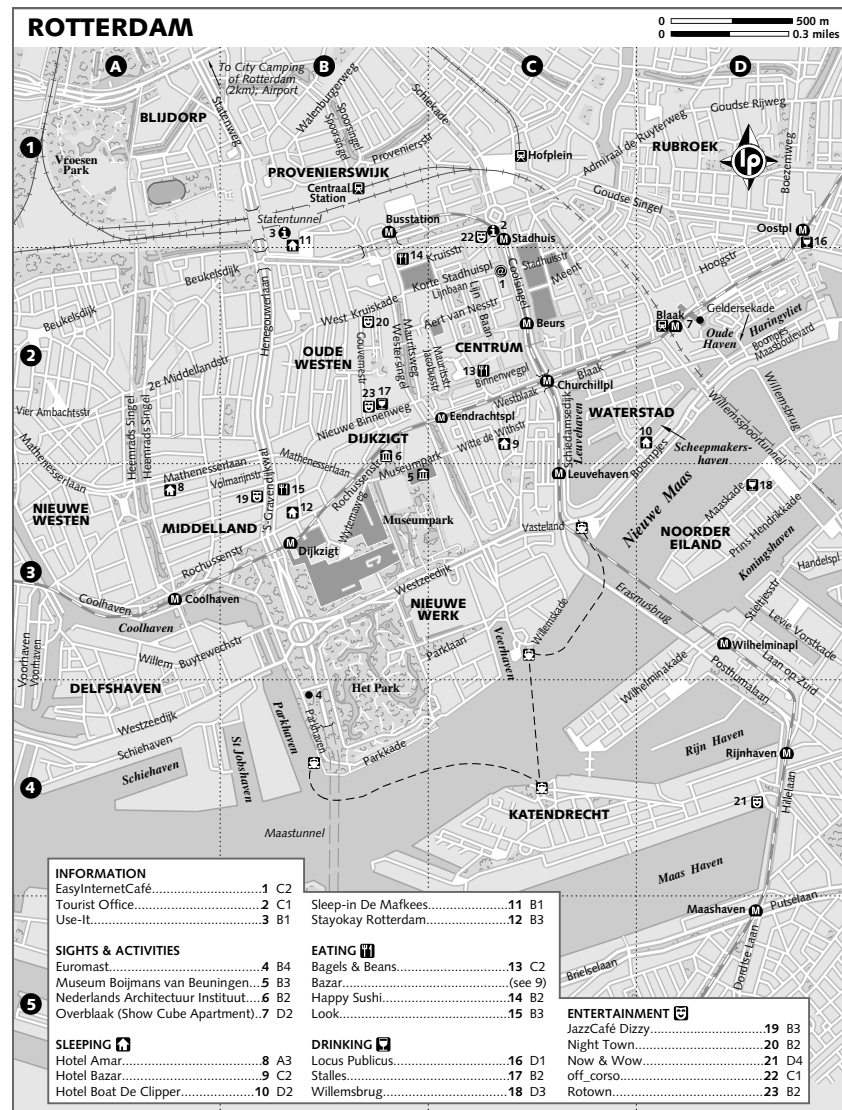
Happy Sushi (☎ 433 47 30; Kruisplein 42; sushi from €1.60; ☎ lunch & dinner) Sushi on a conveyor belt.

Bagels & Beans (www.bagelsbeans.nl; Lijnbaan 150; Bagels from €2.95) Tasty bagels, good coffee, wi-fi access.

Maaz (www.maazveg.com; Coolsingel 87; falafel €3.50) Falafel pitta-bread sandwiches that can be refilled with salad toppings and sauces as often as you like.

Drinking

Willemsbrug (☎ 413 58 68; Maaskade 95) This old-time, maritime-themed pub attracts salty sea-dog types. It's not for those with weak lungs – the air's always blue with cigarette, cigar and pipe smoke (and probably blue with salty language if you understand Dutch well enough). But the staff and clientele are very



friendly, and a bit of a laugh – they're liable to turn the cheesy music up full bore and indulge in a woefully off-key singalong at any given moment.

Also recommended:

Stalles (☎ 436 16 55; Nieuwe Binnenweg 11a) On a great stretch of road near plenty of good shops, cafés and bars.

Locus Publicus (☎ 433 17 61; www.locus-publicus.com, in Dutch; Oostzeedijk 364) Serves more than 200 beers.

Clubbing

Now & Wow (☎ 477 10 74; www.now-wow.com; Maashaven 1) Many believe this to be Rotto's best club. It's a relaxed place, divided into two: Now for mainstream house, and Wow for funky beats. Theme nights with titles like Superbimbo say it all.

Jazzcafé Dizzy (☎ 477 30 14; www.dizzy.nl, in Dutch; 's-Gravendijkwal 129) Live music on Tuesday nights and Sunday afternoons. The evening performances are scorching: everything from hot jazz to fast and funky Brazilian and salsa, with a very lively, sweaty crowd jumping out of their skins.

Also recommended:

Rotown (☎ 436 26 69; www.rotown.nl, in Dutch; Nieuwe Binnenweg 19) A dependable rock venue, with new local talent, international acts and crossover experiments.

off_corso (☎ 411 38 97; www.off-corso.nl, in Dutch; Kruiskade 22) Bleeding-edge local and international DJs.

Night Town (☎ 436 12 10; www.nighttown.nl; West Kruiskade 26-28) Fun-kung-fu-sion mash-up: jazz, Latin & house.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€12.60, 62 minutes, four hourly), Den Haag (€4.10, 15 minutes, four hourly) and Utrecht (€8.60, 40 minutes, two hourly).

UTRECHT CITY

☎ 030 / pop 282,000

Utrecht is one of the Netherlands' oldest cities – 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. 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 chic shops, restaurants and cafés. The city's student community of 40,000 is the largest in the country – this is one very infectious place.

Information

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

Post office (Neude 11)

Tourist office (☎ 0900-128 87 32; www.utrecht-city.com; Vinkenburgstraat 19; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Wed & Fri, 9.30am-9pm Thu, 9.30am-5pm Sat)

Sights & Activities

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; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun). 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: everything from the book covers he designed for the family publishing company to multimedia demonstration of his technique and philosophy. Obviously children will get a huge kick out of it all, but so will adults who simply appreciate superlative graphic design.

The **Centraal Museum** (☎ 236 23 62; www.centraalmuseum.nl; Nicolaaskerkhof 10; adult/child under 17yr €8/5; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has a wide-ranging collection: applied arts dating back to the 17th century as well as paintings by some of the Utrecht School artists. There's even a 12th-century boat that was dug out of the local mud.

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

The tourist office can help with canal-boat hire and tours.

Sleeping

B&B Utrecht (☎ 06-50434884; www.hotelinfo.nl; Egelantierstraat 25; dm/s/d from €12/45/50; ☎) This friendly place is comprised of several buildings in a quiet neighbourhood northwest of the centre, with rooms in all flavours and sizes (except vanilla). It's a 15-minute ride on frequent

bus 3 from CS to Watertoren, then walk two blocks west.

Strowis Budget Hostel (☎ 238 02 80; www.strowis.nl; Boothstraat 8; dm from €14, s/d €55; ☎ 24hr; ☎) 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 also has a cosy bar.

Stayokay Bunnik (☎ 656 12 77; Rijnauwenselaan 14; dm from €21) A beautiful 1830's building in the forest on the banks of the Kromme Rijn. From Utrecht station, take bus 40 or 41 in the direction of Wijk bij Duurstede and get off at the Rijnauwen stop.

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.

Eating

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: young and old alike flock to scoff it down. The décor, a mix of nostalgia and uberhip minimalism, packs 'em in, too.

Goesting (☎ 273 33 46; www.restaurantgoesting.nl; Veertsenjijpad 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.

Drinking

Café Ledig Erf (☎ 231 75 77; Tolsteegbrug 3) This classy pub overlooks a confluence of canals at the southern tip of town. Patrons gather at tables around the oversized chessboards on the terrace, and it's always packed in warm weather.

Also recommended:

Café Springhaver (☎ 231 37 89; www.springhaver.nl, in Dutch; Springweg 50-52) Popular with the locals.

't Oude Pothuys (☎ 231 89 70; www.pothuys.nl, in Dutch; Oudegracht 279) Basement pub with nightly music.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€6.30, 35 minutes, four daily), Maastricht (€26, two hours, twice daily) and Rotterdam (€8.60, 40 minutes).

THE NORTH & EAST

This region includes the independently minded Fryslân, which used to incorporate regions of the Netherlands, northern Germany and Denmark until it became part of the united Netherlands. Although the Frisian language is similar to Dutch, pronunciation is entirely different. Apparently it's the closest language to English, although English speakers won't understand it. As Frisians like to say, 'As milk is to cheese, are English and Frise.'

GRONINGEN CITY

☎ 050 / pop 177,300

It may be a long way from Amsterdam, but Groningen's a vibrant, youthful city, boasting all you'd expect of a progressive Dutch metropolis – it's 20,000-strong student population (which has been around since 1614 when the university opened) sees to that. There's also the requisite art museums, theatre and classical concerts, as well as gabled houses reflected in silent canals.

See the **tourist office** (☎ 0900-202 30 50; www.vvgroningen.nl; Grote Markt 25; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat year-round, 11am-3pm Sun Jul & Aug) for more information. The **library** (☎ 368 36 83; Oude Boteringestraat 18; per hr €2; ☎ 1-8pm Mon, 10am-6pm Wed & Fri, 10am-8pm Thu, 11am-4pm Sat, 1-4pm Sun) has internet access.

Sights & Activities

The colourful, oddly shaped **Groninger Museum** (☎ 366 65 55; www.groninger-museum.nl; Museumeiland 1; adult/child €8/4; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun year-round, noon-5pm Mon Jul-Aug), occupying three islands in the middle of the canal in front of the train station, hosts contemporary design and photography exhibitions alongside classic Golden Age Dutch paintings.

When the tide retreats across the mud flats off the north coast of Groningen, locals and visitors alike attack it with abandon, marching, and inevitably sinking, into the sloppy mess, a pastime known as *wadlopen* (mud-walking).

The centre for *wadlopen* is the tiny village of **Pieterburen**, 22km north of Groningen, where several groups of trained guides are based; try **Wadloopcentrum** (☎ 0595-52 83 00; www.wadloop.org, in Dutch; Hoofdstraat 105) and **Dijkstra's Wadlooptochten** (☎ 0595-52 83 45; www.wadloop-dijkstra.nl, in Dutch; Hoofdstraat 118).

Sleeping

City Hotel (☎ 588 65 65; www.edenhotelgroup.com; Gedempte Kattendiep 25; r from €75; ☒ ☑) These standard business rooms are a good bet for those requiring a few more creature comforts. There's a rooftop deck, free coffee and tea on every floor, free internet and a fine location.

Hotel Garni Friesland (☎ 312 13 07; www.hotel.friesland.nl, in Dutch; Kleine Pelsterstraat; s/d €35/50) The rooms are just about as sparse as they come, but the price can't be beat and the location is central.

Also recommended:

Stadspark Camping (☎ 525 16 24; www.stads.campings.nl; Campinglaan 4; camp sites per 2 adults & tent €15; ☒ mid-Mar–mid-Oct) From the train station, take bus 4 about 3km west to the Stadspark stop.

Simplon Jongerenhotel (☎ 313 52 21; www.simplonjongerenhotel.nl; Boterdiep 72-3; dm from €12) Take bus 1 or 11 from the train station to the Boteringestraat stop.

Eating

Goudkantoor (Gold Office; ☎ 589 18 88; Waagplein 1; mains €12-20; ☒ lunch & dinner) The architecture of this recently restored historical haunt is amazing. Dating from 1635, the 'Gold Office' features a gold-tinted exterior and graceful interior, complete with striking paintings. Oh, by the way, the food is quite good, too.

De 7e Hemel (7th Heaven; ☎ 314 51 41; Zuiderkerkstraat 7; mains €15-18; ☒ dinner Tue-Sat) This place is quality: it even imports Scottish mineral water direct from the Glens because of its purity. The ever-changing menu, a medley of vegan, vegetarian, fish and meat dishes, is a delight, and the cherubs, chandeliers and calming yellow shades all help to create a cosy, romantic air.

Also recommended:

Bagels & Beans (www.bagelsbeans.nl; Zwanestraat 30; bagels from €2.95) Tasty bagels, good coffee, wi-fi access.

Maosz (www.maoszveg.com; Zuiderdiep 23; falafel €3.50) Falafel pitta-bread sandwiches that can be refilled with salad toppings and sauces as often as you like.

Entertainment

Vera (☎ 313 46 81; www.vera-groningen.nl; Oosterstraat 44) Witness the future at this rock venue: Vera hosted a precorporate U2 before a crowd of 30-odd people in the early 1980s, while Nirvana played to a Vera audience of around 60 in the days before heroin chic. Who will be next to be used up and spat out by 'the business'? Concerts are held Thursday to Saturday.

Jazz Café De Spiegel (☎ 312 63 00; Peperstraat 11) This one's a perennial favourite, with regular live jazz, a smooth sultry atmosphere and a great bar.

Getting There & Away

Sample train schedules (all depart twice hourly): Amsterdam (€26.70, 140 minutes), Leeuwarden (€8.30, 50 minutes), Rotterdam (€29.60, three hours) and Utrecht (€24.50, two hours).

TEXEL

☎ 0222 / pop 13,500

Texel (tes-sel) is about 3km north off the coast of Noord Holland. It's remarkably diverse, with broad white beaches, lush nature reserves, forests and picture-book villages. The island makes a superb getaway from the mainland rush, with beauty and isolation in abundance – except in mid-June, when spectators line the beaches for the largest catamaran race in the world, the **Zwitserven Round Texel Race** (www.roundtexel.com).

Get online at the **library** (Drijverstraat 7, Den Burg; per hr €3; ☒ 2-5pm Tue-Fri, 10.30am-12.30pm Sat & Mon) and for free at the **tourist office** (☎ 31 47 41; www.texel.net; Emmalaan 66, Den Burg; ☒ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat).

Sights & Activities

Ecomare (☎ 31 77 41; www.ecomare.nl; Ruyslaan 92, De Koog; adult/child €7.75/4.75; ☒ 9am-5pm) is chiefly a refuge for sick seals retrieved from the Waddenzee; rescued birds are the other main tenants. At the aquariums you can sidle up to sharks and even pat a sea skate, and there are seal feedings at 11am and 3pm.

Duinen van Texel National Park is a patchwork of varied dunescape running along the entire western coast of the island. Salt fens and heath alternate with velvety, grass-covered dunes. Much of the area is bird sanctuary and accessible only on foot.

Just near the windswept beach is **De Dennen**, a dark and leafy forest. Originally planted as a source of lumber, today it has an enchanting network of walking and biking paths.

There are six museums on the island, covered by the **Texel Museum Combination Card** (adult/child €15/8.50) available from the tourist office.

Texel's wonderful **beaches** are pristinely white and clean, and include two nudist areas.

Contact the tourist office for information on cycle routes, hiking trails, boat trips, catamaran hire, pleasure flights and more.

Sleeping

The tourist office has a list of B&Bs from around €25 per person per night. Texel's 11 main camping grounds teem in summer; the tourist office in Den Burg can tell you which ones have vacancies. Many farms also offer rooms and camp sites.

Bij Jef (☎ 31 96 23; www.bijjef.nl; Herenstraat 34, Den Hoorn; s/d €72.50/90; mains around €20; ☒ lunch & dinner) Bij Jef is first and foremost known for its sumptuous French-influenced cuisine, but it also offers accommodation upstairs. Its simple yet stylish red rooms come with a bath tub, well-stocked mini bar, views of the countryside, and a balcony.

't Anker (☎ 31 62 74; t-anker@texel.com; Kikkertstraat 24, De Cocksdorp; d €45) This small, family-run hotel in quiet De Cocksdorp is full of charm and cheer, and has basic yet comfy rooms. Its lush garden is just an appetiser for the Roggesloot nature reserve close by.

Stayokay Hostel Panorama (☎ 31 54 41; www.stayokay.com; Hafelderweg 28, Den Burg; dm/d €25/65; ☒) Texel's HI hostel was in the process of moving to the edge of Den Burg at the time of research.

Getting There & Away

Trains from Amsterdam to Den Helder (€10.90, one hour) are met by a bus that connects with the **car ferry** (☎ 36 96 00; ☒ 6.35am-9.35pm), which then makes the crossing in 20 minutes (adult/child/car return €42/3/38).

The ferry **De Vriendschap** (☎ 31 64 51; www.waddenvaar.nl, in Dutch; De Cocksdorp) makes the half-hour crossing from De Cocksdorp to car-free Vlieland (adult/child return €20/13.50), the nearest of the Wadden Islands.

THE SOUTHEAST

MAASTRICHT

☎ 043 / pop 122,000

Make no bones about it: Maastricht is utterly beautiful. A stunner. The Crown Jewel of the south – of maybe the entire country. About as far from windmills, clogs and tulips as you'd want. Much of the Netherlands has a 'samey' feel to it, but here there are Spanish and Roman ruins, cosmopolitan food,

French and Belgian twists in the architecture, a shrugging off of the shackles of Dutch restraint. Even the landscape's different: there are actually hilly streets and what passes for mountains ringing the centre.

Information

Centre Ceramique Library (☎ 350 56 00; Ave Céramique 50; ☒ 10.30am-8.30pm Tue & Thu, 10.30am-5pm Wed & Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 1-5pm Sun) Free internet.

Grand Net Internet Café (81 Boschstraat; per hr €3)

Tourist office (☎ 325 21 21; www.vvmmaastricht.nl; Kleine Straat 1; ☒ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat, 11am-3pm Sun)

Sights & Activities

The **Bonnefantenmuseum** (☎ 329 01 90; www.bonnefantenmuseum.nl; Ave Céramique 250; adult/child under 12yr €7/3.50; ☒ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) features a 28m tower that houses various exhibits, always fun and provocative. Old Masters and medieval sculpture are on one floor, contemporary art by Limburg artists are on the next and temporary exhibitions are revelatory, such as the recent 'Travelling' Light' focus on Dada lineages.

Much of Maastricht is riddled with defensive tunnels dug into the soft sandstone over the centuries. The best place to see the tunnels is **Sint Pietersberg**, a Roman fort 2km south of Helpoort. The Romans built tunnels throughout the hills over a period of 2000 years; at one stage they extended under the Netherlands-Belgium border. The tourist office leads spooky, thrilling and highly educational **cave tours** (☎ 321 78 78), departing at 3.30pm daily July through August and school holidays. Although the tours (€7) are supposed to be in Dutch, ask for Kitty, an extremely knowledgeable, English-speaking guide.

The tourist office can arrange all manner of walking tours, cycling expeditions, and boat cruises on the Maas.

Sleeping

Kruisherenhotel Maastricht (☎ 329 20 20; www.chateauhotels.nl; Kruisherengang 19-23; s/d from €85/145; ☒) Housed inside the former Crutched Friar monastery complex dating from 1483. Any modern touches, like moulded furniture and padded walls, actually accent the historical surrounds. The rooms feature flat-screen TVs and wall-length paintings. Sumptuous.

Botel Maastricht (☎ 321 90 23; Maasboulevard 95; s/d €37/58; ☒) Two barges lashed together make up the Botel, the smaller vessel acting as an exem-

plary beer drinking deck when the sun's out. Inside, rooms are narrow and portholed for that sea-dog feel, but comfy enough (assuming you like to suck on your knees at night). There's a beautiful little shipshape bar inside.

Stayokay Maastricht (☎ 346 67 77; www.stayokay.com/maastricht; Dousbergweg 4; dm from €24; 📶) On the perimeter of a nature reserve, a 40-minute walk from the town centre. Take bus 11 (Monday to Friday) or bus 8 or 18 (Saturday and Sunday) from Maastricht station to the Dousberg stop.

Also recommended:

Matuchi (☎ 354 06 92; Kleine Gracht 34; s/d €50/65) Elegant, minimal and stylish rooms above the hip bar of the same name (below).

Eating

Ginger (☎ 326 00 22; Tongersestraat 7; mains €10-20; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Super-smooth and healthy Asian noodle soups come to Maastricht. And Ginger's the place to get them. Fabulous fresh ingredients in a serene and wonderful contemporary setting.

Also recommended:

Mestizo (☎ 327 08 74; www.mestizo.nl; Bredestraat 18; mains €12-19; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Inspired Spanish and Mexican food.

Take Five (☎ 321 09 71; Bredestraat 14; lunch €6, dinner from €12; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Fusion cooking.

Drinking

Take One (☎ 321 64 23; www.takeonebiercafé.nl, in Dutch; Rechtstraat 28) Cramped and narrow from the outside, inside there's well over 100 beers from the most obscure parts of the Benelux. It's run by a husband-and-wife team, who organise beer tastings and refer to their customers as 'victims'.

Matuchi (☎ 354 06 92; Kleine Gracht 34) Billed as an 'Orient Style Lab', there's a dash of *Clockwork Orange* in the interior design, mixed with de rigueur Arabian themes. All in all, a hot joint in which to have a cool drink.

Also recommended:

John Mullins (☎ 350 01 41; www.johnmullins.nl; Wycker Brugstraat 50) Super-friendly Irish pub.

Zondag (Sunday; ☎ 321 93 00; www.cafezondag.nl, in Dutch; Wyckerbrugstraat 42) Very hip bar.

Getting There & Away

Sample train fares: Amsterdam (€26.70, 155 minutes, one hourly), Rotterdam (€25.70, 140 minutes, two hourly) and Utrecht (€23.10, two hours, one hourly).

THE NETHERLANDS DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Always book accommodation in advance, especially during the high season; please note that many visitors choose to stay in Amsterdam even if they are travelling elsewhere. The tourist offices operate booking services, however when you're booking for two people, make sure you make it clear whether you want two single (twin) beds or a double bed.

In cities expect to pay under €50 for a double room in a budget hotel, up to €125 in a midrange hotel and from €125 for the top end. Prices are higher in Amsterdam.

Many Dutch hotels have steep stairs but no lifts, although most top-end and some midrange hotels are exceptions.

B&Bs are mostly found in the country – local tourist offices keep a list on file.

Breakfast is generally included in rates, unless specified otherwise.

Lists of camp sites are available from the tourist offices. Expect to pay roughly €8 to €20 for two people and a tent for one night, plus and additional €3 to €6 for a car. The camping grounds have plenty of caravan hook-ups.

Stayokay (☎ 020-501 31 33; www.stayokay.com) is the name of the Dutch hostelling association. A youth hostel card costs €15 at the hostels; nonmembers pay an extra €2.50 per night and after six nights you automatically become a member. The usual HI discounts apply.

ACTIVITIES

Cycling, ice-skating, windsurfing, sailing, boating and hanging out at the beach are popular Dutch pastimes. Check the tourist offices for further information.

BUSINESS HOURS

Usual business hours in the Netherlands:

Banks 🕒 9am-4pm or 5pm Mon-Fri

Bars 🕒 11am-midnight or 2am

Nightclubs 🕒 9pm or 10pm-3am or 4am

Museums 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1-5pm Sun

Restaurants 🕒 11am-2.30pm or 3pm & 5.30-10pm or 11pm

Post offices 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat

Shops 🕒 noon-5.30pm Mon, 9am-5.30pm or 6pm Tue-Wed & Fri, 9am-9pm Thu, 9am-5pm Sat; some open at 8.30am. In Amsterdam and tourist centres you will find many shops open on Sunday. Supermarkets often have extended trading hours.

DISCOUNT CARDS

Available from the museums themselves, a Museumkaart gives access to 400 museums across the country for €30 (€17 for under 25s).

The **Cultureel Jongeren Paspoort** (Cultural Youth Passport, CP; www.cjp.nl), available from tourist offices (€12.50), gives people aged under 27 discounts to museums and cultural events around the country.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Embassies & Consulates in The Netherlands

In Amsterdam:

France (☎ 020-530 69 69; Vijzelgracht 2)

Germany (☎ 020-574 77 00; Honthorststraat 36-8)

Italy (☎ 020-550 20 50; Vijzelstraat 79)

Spain (☎ 020-620 38 11; Frederiksplein 34)

UK (☎ 020-676 43 43; Koningslaan 44)

USA (☎ 020-575 53 09; Museumplein 19)

In Den Haag:

Australia (☎ 070-310 82 00; Carnegiealaan 4)

Canada (☎ 070-311 16 00; Sophialaan 7)

Denmark (☎ 070-302 59 59; Koninginnegracht 30)

India (☎ 070-346 97 71; Buitenrustweg 2)

Ireland (☎ 070-363 09 93; Dr Kuypersstraat 9)

Israel (☎ 070-376 05 00; Buitenhof 47)

Japan (☎ 070-346 95 44; Tobias Asserlaan 2)

New Zealand (☎ 070-346 93 24; Carnegiealaan 10-IV)

Norway (☎ 070-311 76 11; Lange Vijverberg 11)

Dutch Embassies & Consulates

Australia (☎ 02-6220 9400; www.netherlands.org.au/index.html; 120 Empire Circuit, Canberra, ACT 2600)

Belgium (☎ 02-679 17 11; www.nederlands.eambassade.be, in Dutch & French; ave Herrmann-Debroux 48, Brussels, 1160)

Canada (☎ 613-237 50 30; www.netherlandsembassy.ca; Ste 2020, 350 Albert St, Ottawa, Ont K1R 1A4)

Germany (☎ 030-20 95 60; www.dutchembassy.de, in Dutch & German; Friedrichstrasse 95, Berlin, 10117)

New Zealand (☎ 04-471 6390; www.netherlands.embassy.co.nz; Investment House, cnr Ballance & Featherston Sts, Wellington)

UK (☎ 020-7590 3200; www.netherlands-embassy.org.uk; 38 Hyde Park Gate, London, SW7 5DP)

USA (☎ 202-244 5300; www.netherlands-embassy.org; 4200 Linnean Ave NW, Washington, DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS February/March

Carnival Weekend before Shrove Tuesday. Celebrated with greater vigour in Maastricht than anywhere else in Europe, save Venice (Italy) and Sitges (Spain). The orgy of partying begins on the Friday and finishes when the last person collapses some time on Wednesday.

March

TEFAF Maastricht Art & Antiques Show (www.tefaf.com) Held annually in March.

April

Koninginnedag (Queen's Day) 30 April. Celebrated countrywide, but especially so in Amsterdam, which becomes awash in orange costumes and fake afros, beer, balloon animals, beer, dope, Red Bull, beer, leather boys, skater dykes, temporary rollercoasters, clogs, clothes horses, fashion victims, grannies and granddads...

Amsterdam Fantastic Film Festival (www.afff.nl) European and international fantasy, horror and science fiction movies held in late April.

May

Herdenkingsdag & Bevrijdingsdag (Remembrance Day & Liberation Day) 4 & 5 May

Nationale Molendag (National Windmill Day) On the second Saturday in May nearly every working windmill in the country open its doors to visitors.

June

Holland Festival (www.hollandfestival.nl) For all of June the country's biggest music, drama and dance extravaganza centres on Amsterdam. Highbrow and pretentious meet lowbrow and silly.

July

North Sea Jazz Festival (www.northseajazz.nl) World's largest jazz festival, now held in Rotterdam in mid-July.

August

Gay Pride Canal Parade First Saturday

FFWD Heineken Dance Parade (www.ffwdheineken.danceparade.nl, in Dutch) In mid-August Rotterdam goes sick, mate, inna urban funky techno style.

Uitmarkt (www.uitmarkt.nl, in Dutch) The reopening of Amsterdam's cultural season for three days in late August.

November

Sinterklaas Intocht In mid-November the Dutch Santa Claus arrives 'from Spain' with his staff.

December

Sinterklaas On 5 December families exchange small gifts ahead of Christmas religious celebrations.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Amsterdam is Europe's gay capital – enough said. The further one gets from the capital, though, the more hidden are gay and lesbian bars, except in Rotterdam and the university towns.

The best source for information is the **Gay & Lesbian Switchboard** (☎ 020 623 65 65; www.switchboard.nl), and **COC** (☎ 020 626 30 87; www.coc.nl), the national gay and lesbian organisation with branches throughout the country.

HOLIDAYS

Public Holidays

Nieuwjaarsdag New Year's Day

Goede Vrijdag Good Friday

Eerste Paasdag Easter Sunday

Tweede Paasdag Easter Monday

Koninginnedag (Queen's Day) 30 April

Bevrijdingsdag (Liberation Day) 5 May

Hemelvaartsdag Ascension Day

Eerste Pinksterdag Whit Sunday (Pentecost)

Tweede Pinksterdag Whit Monday

Eerste Kerstdag (Christmas Day) 25 December

Tweede Kerstdag (Boxing Day) 26 December

School Holidays

Spring Holiday Two weeks in mid-February.

May Holiday First week of the month.

Summer Holiday July, August and sometimes the first few days of September.

Autumn Holiday Second half of October.

Christmas Holiday Two weeks through the first full week of January.

MONEY

Credit Cards

Credit cards such as Visa and MasterCard/Eurocard are widely accepted, as well as cash cards that access the Cirrus network. Report lost or stolen cards to the following 24-hour numbers:

Amex (☎ 020-504 80 00, 504 86 66)

Diners Club (☎ 020-654 55 11)

Eurocard and MasterCard (☎ 030-283 55 55)

Visa (☎ 020-660 06 11)

Moneychangers

Avoid the private exchange booths dotted around tourist areas. Banks and the Postbank (at post offices) stick to official exchange rates and charge a sensible commission, as does the **GWK** (Grenswisselkantoor; ☎ 0900-0566; www.gwk.nl).

Travellers Cheques

Banks charge a commission to cash travellers cheques (with ID such as a passport). Amex and Thomas Cook don't charge commission on their own cheques, but their rates might be less favourable. Shops, restaurants and hotels always prefer cash; a few might accept travellers cheques but their rates will be anybody's guess.

POST

Poste restante is best handled in Amsterdam.

TELEPHONE

Most public phones accept credit cards as well as various phonecards. Ensure you purchase KPN phone cards from department stores, supermarkets and post offices; other cards will likely be incompatible with the Dutch system.

Official KPN-Telecom public phone boxes charge €0.30 per minute for all national calls. The minimum charge from a public phone is €0.20. Calling from private phones is considerably cheaper.

For mobile phones, the Netherlands uses GSM 900/1800, compatible with Europe and Australia but not the North American GSM 1900.

To ring abroad, dial ☎ 00 followed by the country code for your target country, the area code (drop the leading 0) and the subscriber number. The Netherlands country code is ☎ 31.

Numbers beginning with ☎ 06 are mobile or pager numbers.

VISAS

Travellers who are citizens of Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, the USA and many other countries need only a valid passport (no visa) for a stay in the Netherlands of up to three months.

EU nationals can enter for three months with just their national identity card or a passport expired for no more than five years.

Nationals of most other countries need a so-called Schengen visa, valid for 90 days within a six-month period. Visa extensions are handled by the **Immigratie en Naturalisatiedienst** (Immigration & Naturalisation Service; ☎ 0900-123 45 61; www.ind.nl; Postbus 30125, 2500 GC Den Haag).

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