AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

Amsterdam is one of The Netherlands’ two capitals. The governmental capital is Den Haag (The Hague), where the European Court of Justice also resides. Amsterdam is a multi-ethnic city full of beautiful canals, architecture, museums, and bicycles. The Dutch in this part of The Netherlands speak English quite well, but it is always nice to pick up a few of words of the local language.

Working Hours

The Dutch are not early morning people. The workday begins for most people between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m., and ends roughly eight and a half hours later. There is very little chitchat at the office; working hours are for work. The Dutch work to live, and they think Americans live to work.

Most shops and businesses are open from 9 a.m. or 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesday through Friday. Thursdays are the late nights, with some shops remaining open until 8 p.m. Many shops are closed on Mondays or open at 1 p.m. Saturdays, except in the tourist streets, shops close by mid-afternoon. On Sundays, neighborhood shops are closed. The major shopping streets in Amsterdam (P.C. Hoofstraat, Kalverstraat, Leidsestraat, Damrak) are open on Sunday. Businesses and government offices are closed on the weekends.

Professional Etiquette

Dress is quite formal here. Men wear suits with ties to the office. Women get by with more casual attire, but there are markedly fewer professional women in Amsterdam (throughout The Netherlands) than in the U.S. Fridays tend to be more casual (at least in my office).

Everyone you cross paths with in the office in the morning is greeted with “goede morgen” (good morning… who-da mor-ha). When stepping off the elevator, “dag” (day… dakh) or “doie” (‘bye … dewy) are the appropriate remarks. The response is the same: “dag” or “doie”. Likewise, as you’re leaving the office, no one is passed without a “fijn avond” (fine evening … fine ah-vond).

Lunch

Lunch is eaten en masse in the company canteen. Be prepared to choose quickly from a less than appealing selection. Lunch is only ½ hour, so you have to eat quickly, too. There will be a hot selection with meat (often fried), potatoes (also fried), and vegetables (over-cooked). If the hot item does not suit you, there will be at least one soup, fried croquettes, and perhaps a meat patty smothered in peanut sauce to round out the warm food selections. Most Dutch eat a series of
sandwiches for lunch: one slice of bread with one slice of packaged meat or (never “and”) cheese on top, eaten with a knife and fork. (Americans will notice that the knife and fork are used in conjunction for eating: knife in right hand, fork – tines down – in left.)

Fresh, whole fruit is a given. (Apples, pears, and the like, are not eaten off the core but in slices from the core.) Milk is the drink of choice for the Dutch. Do not expect to find carbonated beverages in the canteen. In fact, you may have to search for the fris (pop) machine in the building; the Dutch do not seem to drink it much. Silverware and napkins are usually located after the cashier.

Before diving in, you will hear your colleagues say “eet smakelijk” (bon appetite … ate smok-ul-luck). This is an appropriate expression for lunch or casual dining but not appropriate for eating in someone’s home or in a nice restaurant.

Dining Out

You should not expect to be invited to dinner by your Dutch colleagues. The Dutch value their family time, and after work hours are devoted to the family. You will also most likely not be invited to a Dutch person’s home.

The Dutch are not known for their fine cuisine, though the cheese is really great. As a large city, Amsterdam has myriad uiteten (eating out … out ate-eh) options, but the quality and service are not on par with what you might expect. Dinner will easily take three hours for a three to four-course meal. Service is painfully slow, and the restaurants never seem to have adequate staff. Because the concept of turning tables has not yet arrived here, reservations are generally recommended. You will have to ask for the check; it will not come unless you do. Tipping is not essential. A small – less than 10% – tip is adequate, and €1-2 per person is common. Unless you are a real connoisseur, go for the house wine by the glass. It is generally drinkable and cheaper than buying a carafe or bottle.

My favorite restaurant is De Bolhoed. Not only is the location great (on the Prinsengracht), but also the food is fresh, plentiful, and tasty. If you are a carnivore, go elsewhere; it’s a vegetarian (not vegan) restaurant. Reservations suggested.

De Bolhoed
Prinsengracht 60
Tel. 020 626 1803

For a really special dinner, eat at De Kas. It is quite expensive (€65 per person, roughly), but probably one of the best restaurants in Amsterdam. It is situated in an old greenhouse. They grow most of their herbs on site and have another plot outside the city for vegetables. Meats and fishes and other produce are purchased fresh from local merchants and growers. The menu is a set five-course chef’s choice. After hearing the menu of the day, tell the waitress if there is
something you really do not like or cannot eat; the kitchen will accommodate you. Reservations essential.

De Kas
Kamerlingh Onneslaan 3
Tel. 020 462 4562

The colonial history of the Dutch is evident in the number of Indonesian restaurants that dot the city. One of the most popular is Kantijl en de Tijger on the Spui. Order a *rijs tafel* (rice table … *rice ta-fel*), an enormous amount of food, but fun way to sample a number of different dishes. Walk-in possible.

Kantijl en de Tijger
Spuistraat 291/293
Tel. 020 620 0994

For good Thai, you have two options: Sjaalman on the Prinsengracht or Bangkok just behind the beautiful Tuschinski Theater (movie) off the Rembrandtplein. Both are quite good. Sjaalman is smaller and more local, but they have an English menu. Bangkok is larger and popular. Reservations are suggested for both, especially at Bangkok.

Sjaalman
Prinsengracht 178
Tel. 020 620 2440

Bangkok
Reguliersdwarsstraat 117
Tel. 020 627 3030

For Dutch home-cooking, D’ Vijf Vlieghen (Five Flies) is the place to go. I have not been there, but it is in all the guidebooks.

D’ Vijf Vlieghen
Spuistraat 294/302
Tel. 202 530 4060

Dutch pancakes (*pannekoeken*) are a must. The Pancake Bakery on the Prinsengracht, just up the *gracht* (canal … *khraht*) from the Anne Frank House, is quite good and has an extensive menu of sweet and savory pancakes to choose from. It opens at noon, so plan accordingly. Walk-in is all right, but you might find a line.

Pancake Bakery
Prinsengracht 191
Tel. 020 625 1333
If you just want to wander and find a restaurant that suits your mood and fancy, I recommend the Utrechtsestraat. Vooges is quite good and is a fairly typical Dutch restaurant, though the food is not necessarily Dutch.

Vooges
Utrechtsestraat 51
202 330 5670

Don’t be shy about asking for an English menu or asking the waitress to translate the Dutch menu for you.

**Hotels**

In mid-2003, I moved to Amsterdam after never having been a business or tourist traveler here. Thus, I have never stayed in an Amsterdam hotel. I polled several travelers and got good recommendations.

Of course, all of the American chain hotels have a presence in Amsterdam. In fact, all of my hotel recommendations belong to global chains, though their names might not suggest so.

Hotel Pulitzer is on the Prinsengracht, a great central location. The hotel is converted 17th and 18th century canal houses. Request a canal view.

Hotel Pulitzer
Prinsengracht 315-331
1016 GZ Amsterdam
Phone +31 20 523 5235
Fax +31 20 627 6753
www.starwood.com

For Beatles buffs, there’s the Amsterdam Hilton, where John and Yoko spent their honeymoon and invited journalists into their room. It’s a bit remote, but quite nice.

Amsterdam Hilton
Apollolaan 138
1077 BG Amsterdam
Phone +31 20 710 6000
www.hilton.com

The Amstel is old and regal on the Amstel River. It is a favorite of the stars and has a good restaurant on site. Request a river view.
The Amstel
Professor Tulpplein 1
1018 GX Amsterdam
Tel: +31 20 622 60 60
Fax: +31 20 622 58 08
E-mail: amstel@interconti.com
http://amsterdam.intercontinental.com/

The American Hotel is on the Leidseplein, quite a lively plaza. Mata Hari stayed in the hotel, and the occupation forces used it during World War II, so it has quite a rich history. Request an interior room, as the trams converge on the Leidseplein.

The American Hotel
Leidsekade 97
1017 PN Amsterdam
Tel: +31 20 556 30 00
Fax: +31 20 556 30 01
E-mail: american@ichotelsgroup.com
http://www.amsterdam-american.crowneplaza.com/

Transportation

Public transportation in Amsterdam is great. Do not bother with an expensive, time-consuming cab ride from the airport. Take the train. In 15 minutes, you’ll be at Centraal Station, for about $3. Trams also are very convenient and will likely get you anywhere you need to be, together with the subway system.

You need a separate ticket for the train to/from Schipol (the airport). The trams, subways, and buses (except night buses) all run on the same strippenkaart (strips card … strip-pen-kart) system throughout The Netherlands. Every ride costs 1 strip, plus 1 strip for the number of zones you are crossing. Most trams are honor system where you punch the strip yourself once on board. You are entitled to unlimited transfers during a set time depending on the number of strips used.

If you insist on taking a taxi, you will have to call for one or walk to a cab stand. Taxis do not roam the streets looking for fares. Cabs are also quite expensive, but, again, tipping is not necessary or expected.

Running

Amsterdam’s uneven sidewalks and cobblestone streets are not very practical for running. Your best bet is to hit the treadmill in the hotel (check first to make sure they have one; many hotels do not have a fitness room). If you must run outdoors, remember that the bike paths (fietspaden)
are for bikes. The cyclists do not take kindly to non-wheeled occupants. The Amsterdamsebos (Amsterdam Forest) is the best place to run. Unfortunately, it is not very convenient to the center, but it is the only practical option for a long run. The Vondelpark is one of the largest parks in Amsterdam and is located near the Leidseplein. It is safe at all hours and has both paved and gravel paths. It is quite small, though; 3.5 km (roughly) is the longest loop. Beware of bikes, which “share” all paths in the park. If you arrive in the summer, be grateful for the backpackers who sleep in the park and whose marijuana smoking keeps the ravenous mosquitoes in check.

Final Thoughts

Beware of bikes and dog poop. Both are everywhere and can be quite hazardous for different reasons.

The Rijksmuseum is closed for renovation until 2008, but the major works remain on display in an annex to the museum. The Van Gogh Museum is just up the street from the Rijksmuseum. Both are not to be missed.

A canal boat tour is obligatory, but my favorite way to experience the canals is on an after dinner stroll. The city is quieter then, and the lights flickering off the water are really beautiful. You’ll find that many Dutch homes do not have curtains on the windows. The reason is a long story, but go ahead and look in. It’s expected.

Have a great trip.

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