

OUR HOLIDAYS: *Amsterdam*

Visit Amsterdam in spring when the tulips are in full bloom, and you'll understand why the Dutch love them so much

Tiptoe through the



Left: hire a bike and explore Amsterdam's popular Vondelpark.
Below: the Inntel at Zaandam

tulips

Amsterdam may have become the 'capital of cool' in recent years, but it's also still a city steeped in tradition. The one closest to its heart is the tulip. Tulips didn't originate in Holland, but found their way there through Dutch explorers back in the late 16th century. They soon became sought-after and highly prized. By the 17th century tulip mania had gripped the Netherlands. It's hard to imagine, but back then just two rare bulbs could buy you a grand canal-side home in central Amsterdam.

In 1637 the tulip market crashed, leaving traders facing the prospect of financial catastrophe. Despite this, the Dutch love of the tulip still endures.

If you are visiting Amsterdam in spring, one place to get your fill of the brightly-coloured blooms is at the wonderful Keukenhof park. Open

Main picture: see the dazzling tulip displays at Keukenhof. Left: take a 'whisper boat' tour of the surrounding fields

for just eight weeks every year from early March to late April, Keukenhof is a veritable kaleidoscope of floral wonder.

Over seven million bulbs of every shade, shape and variety you can imagine are donated by almost a hundred Dutch bulb growers. Meticulously planted by hand in autumn by a dedicated team of 30 gardeners, they bloom to form a feast for the eyes.

Naturally, tulips are the stars but there are spring flowers of all kinds — hyacinths, muscari, daffodils, bluebells and many more, all planted in glorious woodland as well as more structured designs based on traditional English and continental garden styles.

The gardens cover over 80 acres and it takes about an hour and a half to walk around the perimeter at a brisk pace. But you won't do that, you will linger, you will 'ooh' and 'aah', take endless photos and, before you know it, you'll find that four or five hours have vanished and you still haven't seen everything.

Follow a network of flat paths (wheelchair

accessible) to discover the different areas. There are also four large indoor pavilions with displays of cut flowers as well as exhibits relating to the different theme adopted for each year.

To ensure blooming perfection throughout the eight-week season, bulbs are planted using the 'lasagne' technique — two or sometimes three layers deep, so that once the early blooms start to fade, a fresh display will emerge. I visited in the final week of the 2016 season and, although some of the displays were past their best there was still more than enough to see. One of the most

spectacular views of the park is from the Windmill, where you can look out over the surrounding, privately-owned, tulip fields, which stretch for miles and miles. When they are at their peak, it's also worth hiring bikes or taking a 'whisper boat' canal tour of the surrounding fields. This is an optional extra, not included in the park entry cost.

Keukenhof is more than doable as a day trip by air but, having made it to the Netherlands, it would be a shame not to stay longer.

Amsterdam, of course, has endless attractions and world-famous sights to see. The Anne Frank House, Rijksmuseum, Van Gogh Museum and Vondelpark are just a few things not to miss. You can now also get glorious



Left: a statue commemorating Anne Frank. Above: a self-portrait on display at the Van Gogh Museum

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panoramic city views from the A'DAM Toren — there's even a roof swing for those brave enough to fly back and forth over the edge!

But if you've been to Amsterdam before, consider venturing out into the surrounding districts. I stayed at the Inntel at Zaandam. Its striking façade has been built to resemble a stack of the houses traditionally found in the town.

Inside, the rooms are spacious, modern and comfortable and, unlike Amsterdam's canalside buildings, here there are lifts! Double-room rates start from around 125 euros. The station is only a two-minute walk from

the hotel and just two stops and 12 minutes away from Amsterdam Central Station.

Everywhere in Holland is well connected by train and bus. So-called 'Old

Holland' includes the towns of Zaandam, Edam, Volendam and Alkmaar. All are within easy reach of the capital but represent a more traditional, slower pace of life. This is where you find the windmills, farmhouses, and clog- and

cheesemakers so typically associated with Holland.

Haarlem is also a great alternative base — it's much smaller than Amsterdam, but still packed with historical interest, art collections,



Traditional clogs on sale

Clockwise from below: sample some delicious Dutch cheese; De Jopenkerk brewery; Haarlem's Grote Markt



Enjoy Holland's beautiful, unspoilt coastline

fantastic shopping and great restaurants. The famous Grote Markt is the historic central square at the heart of the city, dominated by the imposing 14th-century cathedral.

Other churches have been put to some interesting uses — don't miss the chance for a beer tasting at De Jopenkerk, a former church now transformed into a brewery, grand café and

restaurant. Irreverent perhaps, but very Dutch!

If you're lucky enough to visit Holland when the sun is shining, summer or winter, the coast is within easy reach too. The country has one of the most unspoilt coastlines in northern Europe, with lovely sandy beaches.

In popular coastal resorts such as Zandvoort and Bloemendaal you can find beach clubs offering great facilities and a lively atmosphere, or strike out on your own to enjoy the wild dunes, blissed-out beaches or blustery coastal paths.

Cathy Bartrop

Here we go!

Cathy travelled as a guest of Visit Amsterdam and Keukenhof park. For more information see keukenhof.nl/en and iamsterdam.com

Airlines with direct flights to Amsterdam include the national carrier KLM as well as British Airways, easyJet and Ryanair.

Cathy's tips

- Mid-April is the optimum time to see the tulip fields in all their glory. Visit too early in the season and the flowers may not have opened, too late and they will have been cut and sent to market.
- Keukenhof is easy to get to by car or by bus directly from Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport. The buses leave every 10 minutes, the journey takes around 20 minutes and the bus stops at the entrance. Pick up your free map of the park and you are away.
- To experience a more traditional side of the Netherlands, consider staying in some of the districts outside of Amsterdam. Apart from anything else, an advantage of doing this is that hotels are generally cheaper.