

TRAVEL

Painting the town orange

THE STREETS OF AMSTERDAM FILL UP THIS MONTH FOR THE QUEEN'S DAY NATIONAL HOLIDAY

BY SCOTT SNOWDEN

While a trip to Amsterdam is always a unique experience, time your visit for Queen's Day and you witness a national celebration on the scale of which is seldom seen anywhere else in the world.

The reason (or damned good excuse) for this party is the birthday of the Queen of the Netherlands and it's a tradition which began in 1885 on the birthday of Princess Wilhelmina, who later became Queen Wilhelmina.

The city of Amsterdam spends weeks preparing for the occasion: restaurants everywhere are fully booked, parties are planned and decorations adorn the streets. Come April 29, even the designated territories for each market stall can be seen already marked out in chalk on the pavement. Then, as the last working day before the holiday finally comes to a close, and like a line-up of athletes ready to surge forth at the sound of the starting gun, the celebrations of Queen's Night begin. The evening usually begins with a meal in one of the very busy restaurants. If you're too late to get a booking, console yourself with the fact that many of the restaurants, bars and clubs stay open all night so you won't be short of things to do.

If you're unfamiliar with the geography of Amsterdam, the Jordaan area is a great place to start the evening. Not only is it resplendent in traditional seventeenth and eighteenth century architecture, it's extremely close to the city centre. There are many good bars, cafés and locations of historical interest, all within a very short walk.

Taking to the streets after dinner, you'll witness a city bursting with life – a capital in full carnival mode. Virtually every bar and club you'll pass will have plenty of people inside, but they're seldom so packed you can't still squeeze in. One of many wonderful aspects of Amsterdam is that there is such a choice of venues to visit that they don't all fill up at once.

The following day begins gingerly, but things soon get going again. Queen's Day is probably most famous for its "freemarket" where, all over the country, everybody is allowed to sell absolutely anything in the streets. Owing to a holiday dispensation from the government, the indigenous population don't need to pay taxes on the resulting sales. As a result, outside almost every single residence, laid out on their "patch", is an assortment of just about everything you could possibly imagine – unwanted jumble, old toys, hand-me-downs and knitwear, all available for no more than a Euro or two. It is, in essence, a country-sized car boot sale. →



Depending how much sleep you did or didn't get the night before, the gentle pace of slowly patrolling the freemarket-filled streets perfectly suits anyone still feeling slightly fragile. There's plenty to see and no rush whatsoever.

It's also an opportunity for budding entrepreneurs to sell snacks, home-cooked food, or even offer a comfortable seat and a welcome coffee – as there's a lot of ground to cover. The city centre is completely closed to traffic for this holiday and the streets are instead filled with people slowly sauntering through, browsing at their leisure. Prices are usually negotiable and a little bartering is expected. You can also expect to pay less as the day progresses, should you risk postponing a potential bargain – and bargains can be found. By the end of the day's festivities, much of the unsold merchandise is left on the streets to be picked through until it's hauled off by local municipalities.

These days, the main streets are gradually being taken over by commercial market stalls pushing the amateur flea market traders out towards smaller streets. Nevertheless there are many areas of town where the original traditions are preserved. One

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of these is the De Wallen, a gentrified former working-class neighbourhood. Prices are still low because the market is really just an excuse to have a nice day out and a friendly chat with complete strangers. Sections of the De Wallen can become so full of pedestrians that they become completely gridlocked, despite the absence of cars.



TAKING THE TOUR ON TWO WHEELS

The best way to see Amsterdam is to hire a bicycle. It's one of the most two-wheel friendly cities in the world with flat terrain and without the inconvenience of car congestion. Dedicated bike paths, cycle lanes and bike racks pervade the city. Central Station, Leidseplein and Dam Square are all major rental hubs. Day rates average €8 with some multi-day rates as low as €4. Most companies offer guided tours as well as recommended route maps.

There's fun to be had on the water too: the canals that crisscross the city centre are filled with boats, which in turn are filled with people; almost to the point where they look like they might sink. Yet despite the apparent risk of a maritime mishap, everyone looks like they are having the time of their life.

If you've brought the family, another area to check out is the Vondelpark, which is officially reserved for children. Here you'll find many other attractions and amusements besides the market, including live music, fairground rides and funfair-style side-stalls that offer games testing skill, strength, luck and occasionally aim.

In keeping with true Dutch tradition, everyone wears at least one item that's orange. Others kit themselves out from head to toe. Sometimes called the “orange craze”, or “oranjegekte” in Dutch, this is a reference to the colours of the House of Orange-Nassau – a branch of the European House of Nassau, which has played a central role in the political life of the Netherlands since the sixteenth century. Consequently, it has been adopted as the national colour of Holland, very much like the sea of green found anywhere Irish on St Patrick's Day. It's one more quirk in a city already filled with colour and life. **3**

AMSTERDAM NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

KLM, the Dutch national carrier, fly direct to Amsterdam from both Dubai and Abu Dhabi. www.klm.com. Neither Emirates nor Etihad fly direct to Amsterdam, although Emirates will from May 1. For now, you'll need to fly there via one of the major European international airports, such as London, Paris, Frankfurt or Rome.

STAYING THERE

Like every European capital, there's a wide choice of accommodation on offer, ranging from hostels to hotels. One hotel, with spectacular views of the IJ River is the Mövenpick, located in the Eastern Docklands. It's a little more on the expensive side, but it's extremely easy to get to by road and



every taxi driver knows exactly where it is:

extremely useful when you're stumbling out of a club at five o'clock in the morning. Check out www.movenpick-amsterdam.com for more information.

EAT



Located on Prinsengracht, near the corner with Rozengracht between the Westerkerk and the Anne Frank House is a

restaurant called Werck. The atmosphere here is electric and the food is good. The venue later turns into a nightclub and is extremely popular with the locals.

DRINK



Club culture is big in Amsterdam. One of the newest sensations on the scene is a venue called Trouw, on the Wibautstraat

131, conceived by the creators of a number of Amsterdam's popular nocturnal haunts. It's only been open a few months and is already receiving rave reviews. Admission is €12 and the dance music played here is a healthy mix of all things house.

LANGUAGE

Dutch, English and French

CURRENCY

Euro (currently €1 = approximately Dh5)

WHEN TO GO The Queen's Day festival takes place on April 29 this year.