

AMSTERDAM CITY WALK

From Centraal Station
to Leidseplein (near the
Rijksmuseum)

Length of This Walk: About three miles—allow three hours.

The Walk Begins

❶ Centraal Station

Here, where today's train travelers enter the city, sailors of yore disembarked from seagoing ships. They were met by street musicians, pickpockets, hotel runners, and ladies carrying red lanterns. Centraal Station, built in the late 1800s, sits on reclaimed land at what was once the harbor mouth. With warm red brick and prickly spires, the station is the first of several Neo-Gothic buildings we'll see from the late 19th century, the era of Amsterdam's economic revival. One of the station's towers has a clock dial; the other tower's dial is a weather vane. Watch the hand twitch as the wind gusts in every direction—N, Z, O, and W.

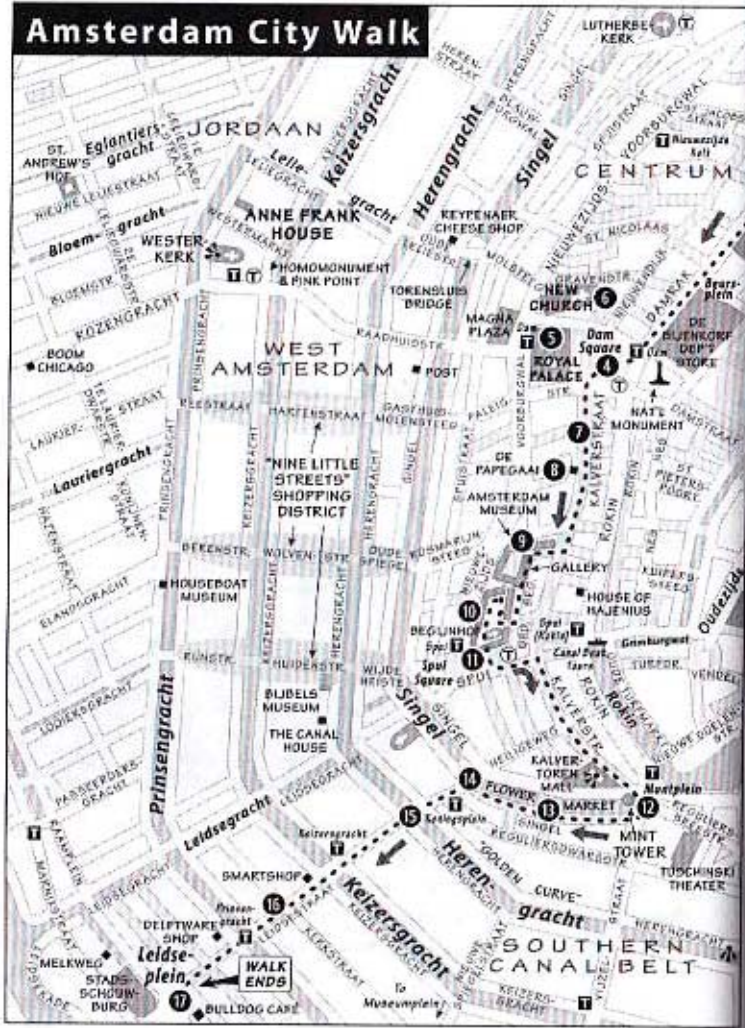


Let's get oriented: *nord, zuid, ost, and vest*. Facing the station, you're facing north. Farther north, on the other side of the station, is the IJ (pronounced "eye"), the body of water that gives Amsterdam access to the open sea.

Now turn your back to the station and face the city, looking south. The city spreads out before you like a fan, in a series of concentric canals. Ahead of you stretches the street called Damrak, which leads—like a red carpet for guests entering Amsterdam—to Dam Square a half-mile away. That's where we're headed.

To the left of Damrak is the city's old (*oude*) town. The crown-topped steeple of the Old Church (Oude Kerk) marks the center of that neighborhood. More recently, that historic quarter has become the Red Light District (see the Red Light District Walk chapter). Closer to you, towering above the old part of town, is the domed St. Nicholas Church. It was built in the 1880s, when

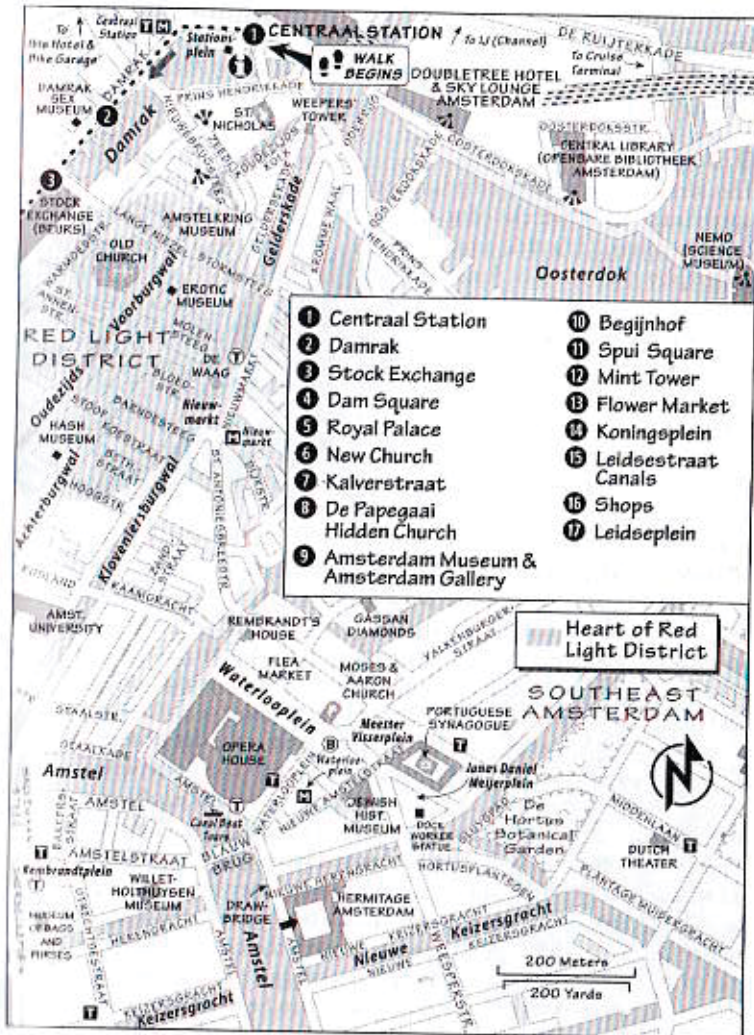
Amsterdam City Walk



Catholics—after about three centuries of oppression—were finally free to worship in public. To your far left is the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel, with its 11th-floor Sky Lounge Amsterdam offering perhaps the city's best viewpoint.

To the right of Damrak is the new (*nieuwe*) part of town, where you'll find the Anne Frank House and the peaceful Jordaan neighborhood.

The train station is the city's transportation center. Many trams and taxis leave from out front. Beneath your feet is a new Metro line. In the "Golden 1990s" when the economy was booming, Amsterdam committed the city to a grand infrastructure expansion



to accommodate the tens of thousands of people living in North Amsterdam, the fast-growing suburb beyond the IJ. Today that investment is paying off, and this plaza, while providing a people-friendly welcome to the city, also works as an efficient transit hub.

On your far right, in front of Ibis Hotel, is a huge, multistory parking garage—for bikes only. Biking in Holland is the way to go—the land is flat, distances are short, and there are designated bike paths everywhere. The bike parking garage is free, courtesy of the government, and intended to encourage this green and ultra-efficient mode of transportation.

• Let's head out. With your back to the station, start walking south into

the city to the head of Damrak. Be aware of trams and bikes as you cross the street. Keep going south straight along the right side of the street, following the crowds on...

📍 Damrak

This street was once a riverbed. It's where the Amstel River flowed north into the IJ, which led to a vast inlet of the North Sea called the Zuiderzee. It's this unique geography that turned Amsterdam into a center of trade. Visualize the physical layout of this man-made city: built on trees, protected by dikes, and laced with canals. Location, location, location. Boats could sail up the Amstel into the interior of Europe, or out to the North Sea, to reach the rest of the world. No wonder that St. Nicholas, protector of water travelers, was the city's patron saint.



As you stroll along Damrak, look left. There's a marina, lined with old brick buildings. Though they aren't terribly historic, the scene still captures a bit of Golden Age Amsterdam. Think of it: Back in the 1600s, this area was the harbor, and those buildings warehoused exotic goods from all over the world.

All along Damrak, you'll pass a veritable gauntlet of touristy shops. These seem to cover every Dutch cliché. You'll see wooden shoes, which the Dutch used to wear to get around easily in the marshy soil, and all manner of tulips; the real ones come from Holland's famed fresh-flower industry. Heineken fridge magnets advertise one of the world's most popular pilsner beers. There are wheels of cheese, marijuana-leaf hats, team jerseys for the Ajax football (soccer) club, and memorabilia with the city's "XXX" logo. You'll likely hear a hand-cranked barrel organ and see windmill-shaped saltshakers. And everything seems to be available in bright orange—because that's the official color of the Dutch royal family.

At the **Damrak Sex Museum** at Damrak 18, you'll find the city's most notorious commodity on display (museum described on page 78). As a port town catering to sailors and businessmen away from home, Amsterdam has always accommodated the sex trade.

Continue up Damrak (noting the **canal boats** on your right—see page 53) for more touristy delectables. You'll pass places selling the popular local fast food: french fries. Here they're called *Vlaamse friets*—Flemish fries—since they were invented in the Low Countries. The stand at Damrak 41 is a favorite, where plenty of locals stop to dip their fries in mayonnaise (not ketchup).

Farther up Damrak, you'll pass many restaurants. It quickly

becomes obvious that, here, international cuisine is almost like going local. Restaurants serving rijsttafel, a sampler of assorted Indonesian dishes, are especially popular, thanks to the days when the Dutch East Indies were a colony. Amsterdammers on the go usually just grab a simple sandwich (*broodje*) or a pita-bread wrap (*shoarma*), from a Middle Eastern take-out joint.

We're walking along what was once the Amstel River. Today, the Amstel is channeled into canals and its former mouth is covered by Centraal Station. But Amsterdam still remains a major seaport. That's because, in the 19th century, the Dutch dug the North Sea Canal to create a shorter route to the open sea. These days, more than 100,000 ships a year dock on the outskirts of Amsterdam, making it Europe's fourth-busiest seaport (giant cruise ships stop here as well). For all of Amsterdam's existence, it's been a trading center.

• *The long brick building with the square clock tower, along the left side of Damrak, is the...*

📍 Stock Exchange (Beurs van Berlage)

This impressive structure, a symbol of the city's long tradition as a trading town, was built with nine million bricks. Like so many buildings in this once-marshy city, it was constructed on a foundation of pilings—some 5,000 tree trunks hammered vertically into the soil. When the Beurs opened in 1903, it was one of the world's first modernist buildings, with a geometric, minimal, no-frills style. Emphasizing function over looks, it helped set the architectural tone for many 20th-century buildings.

Make your way to the end of the long, century-old building. Amsterdammers have gathered in this neighborhood to trade since medieval times.



Back then, "trading stock" meant buying and selling any kind of goods that could be loaded and unloaded onto a boat—goats, chickens, or kegs of beer. Over time, they began exchanging slips of paper, or "futures," rather than actual goods. Traders needed moneychangers, who needed bankers, who made money by lending money. By the 1600s, Amsterdam had become one of the world's first great capitalist cities, loaning money to free-spending kings, dukes, and bishops.

When you reach the end of the building, look (or detour) left into the square called **Beursplein**, which houses the stock exchange. In 1984, the Beurs building was turned into a cultural center, and

the stock exchange moved next door to the Euronext complex—a joint attempt by France, Belgium, and the Netherlands to compete with the power of Britain's stock exchange. See the stock price readout board. How's your Heineken stock doing? Green means it's going up, and red means it's losing value. Amsterdam still thrives as the center of Dutch business and, besides Heineken, is home to Shell Oil, Philips Electronics, and ING Bank.

Directly opposite Beursplein on Damrak is a fancy, faux Art

Nouveau shopping passageway. You'll see chandeliers and Tiffany lanterns, a marble floor and mosaic ceiling, and fun Amsterdam imagery.

• *Continue south up Damrak until it opens into Dam Square. Make your way—carefully—across the street to the cobblestone pavement. Now, stand in the middle of the square and take it all in.*

4 Dam Square

This is the historic heart of Amsterdam. The city got its start right here in about the year 1250, when fishermen in this marshy delta settled along the built-up banks of the Amstel River. They built a *damme*, blocking the Amstel River, and creating a small village called "Amstel-damme." To the north was the *damrak* (meaning "outer harbor"), a waterway that eventually led to the sea. That's the street we just walked. To the south was the *rokin* ("inner harbor"), for river traffic—



and nowadays also a main street. With access to the sea, fishermen were soon trading with German riverboats traveling downstream and with seafaring boats from Stockholm, Hamburg, and London. Land trade routes converged here as well, and a customs house stood in this spot. Dam Square was the center of it all.

Today, Dam Square is still the center of Dutch life, at least symbolically. The Royal Palace and major department stores face the square. Mimes, jugglers, and human statues mingle with locals and tourists. As Holland's most recognizable place, Dam Square is where political demonstrations begin and end.

Circling the Square: Pan the square clockwise, and take in the sights, starting with the Royal Palace—the large domed building on the west side. To its right stands the New Church (Nieuwe Kerk); it's located on the pedestrian-only shopping street called Nieuwendijk, which runs parallel to Damrak and stretches all the way to Centraal Station. Panning past Damrak, see the proud old De Bijenkorf ("The Beehive") department store. (The store's cafeteria on the top floor is a great place to rise above it all for a light meal and pleasant views; see page 252.)

Farther right, the Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky has a lovely circa-1900 glass-roofed "winter garden." The white obelisk is the National Monument, built in 1956 to honor WWII casualties. When the Nazis occupied Holland from 1940 to 1945, they deported some 60,000 Jewish Amsterdammers, driving many—including young Anne Frank and her family—into hiding. The "Hunger Winter" of 1944-1945 killed thousands of Dutch and forced many to survive on little more than tulip bulbs. This obelisk—with its carvings of the crucified Christ, men in chains, and howling dogs—remembers the suffering of that grim time and is also considered a monument for peace.

A few blocks behind the hotel is the edge of the Red Light

District. To the right of the hotel stretches the street called the Nes, lined with some of Amsterdam's edgy live-theater venues. Panning farther right, find Rokin street—Damrak's southern counterpart, continuing past the square. Next, just to the right of the touristy Madame Tussauds, is Kalverstraat, a busy pedestrian-only shoppers mall (look for *Rabobank* sign).

5 Royal Palace (Koninklijk Huis)

Despite the name, this is really the former City Hall—and Amsterdam is one of the cradles of modern democracy. In medieval

times, this was where the city council and mayor met. Amsterdam was a self-governing community that prided itself on its independence and thumbed its nose at royalty. In about 1650, the old medieval Town Hall was replaced with this one. Its style is



appropriately Classical, recalling the democratic Greeks. The triangular pediment features denizens of the sea cavorting with Neptune and his gilded copper trident—all appropriate imagery for sea-trading Amsterdam. The small balcony (just above the entry doors) is where city leaders have long appeared for major speeches, pronouncements, executions, and (these days) for newly married royalty to blow kisses to the crowds.

Today, the palace remains one of the four official residences of King Willem-Alexander and is usually open to visitors (see page 73).

• A few paces away, to the right as you're facing the Royal Palace, is the...

6 New Church (Nieuwe Kerk)

Though called the "New" Church, this building is actually 600 years old—a mere 100 years newer than the "Old" Church (in the Red Light District). The sundial above the entrance once served as the city's official timepiece.



While it's pricey to enter the church (which offers little besides the temporary exhibits), cheapskates can actually see much of it for free.

Enter the gift shop (through the "Museumshop" door to the left of

the main entrance) and climb the stairs to a balcony with a small free museum and great views of the nave.

The church's bare, spacious, well-lit interior (occupied by a new art exhibit every three months) looks quite different from the Baroque-encrusted churches found in the rest of Europe. In 1566, clear-eyed Protestant extremists throughout Holland marched into Catholic churches (including this one), lopped off the heads of holy statues, stripped gold-leaf angels from the walls, urinated on Virgin Marys, and shattered stained-glass windows in a wave of anti-Catholic vandalism.

This iconoclasm (icon-breaking) of 1566 started an 80-year war against Spain and the Habsburgs, leading finally to Dutch independence in 1648. Catholic churches like this one were converted to the new dominant religion, Calvinist Protestantism (today's Dutch Reformed Church). From then on, Dutch churches downplayed the "graven images" and "idols" of ornate religious art.

Take in the church's main highlights. At the far left end is an organ from 1655, still played for midday concerts. Opposite the entrance, a stained-glass window shows Count William IV giving the city its "XXX" coat of arms. And the window over the entrance portrays the inauguration of Queen Wilhelmina (1880-1962), who became the steadfast center of the Dutch resistance during World War II. The choir, once used by the monks, was turned into a mausoleum for a great Dutch admiral after the Reformation.

This church is where many of the Netherlands' monarchs are married, and all are "inaugurated." (Dutch royals never actually wear the official crown.) While on the viewing balcony, imagine the church in action in April 2013, when King Willem-Alexander—Wilhelmina's great-grandson—was paraded through this church to the golden choir screen. (There may be a video of this.) The king, wearing a tuxedo with an orange sash, is presented with the royal crown, scepter, orb, sword, and a copy of the Dutch constitution. With TV lights glaring and cameras flashing, he is sworn in as the new sovereign. He stands at the church altar with his wife by his side and addresses the assembled throngs. They announce "Long live the king!" (in Dutch), and the new king marches out and across Dam Square, waving to his happy subjects.

** Leave the shop via the main church entrance back onto Dam Square. On your way out, look up to see stained-glass windows showing Dutch royals from 1579 to 1898. From Dam Square, head south (at the Rabobank sign) on...*

📍 Kalverstraat

Kalverstraat (strictly pedestrian-only—even bikers need to dismount and walk) has been a traditional shopping street for centuries. But today it's notorious among locals as a noisy, soulless string

of chain stores. Along with familiar US and international brands, you'll see a few unfamiliar franchises from European countries. For smaller and more elegant stores, try the adjacent district called De Negen Straatjes ("The Nine Little Streets"). Only about four blocks west of Kalverstraat, it's where 200 or so shops and cafés mingle along tranquil canals.

• *About 100 yards along, keep a sharp eye out for the next sight (it's fairly easy to miss): On the right, just before and across from the McDonald's, at #58. Now pop into...*

📍 De Papegaai Hidden Church (Petrus en Paulus Kerk)

This Catholic church—with a simple white interior, nice carved wood, and Stations of the Cross paintings (try reading the Dutch captions)—is an oasis of peace amid crass 21st-century commercialism. It's not exactly a hidden church (after all, you've found it), but it still keeps a low profile. That's because it dates from an era when Catholics in Amsterdam were forced to worship in secret.

In the 1500s, Protestants were fighting Catholics all over Europe. As a center for trade, Amsterdam has long made an effort to put business above ideological differences, doing business with all parties. But by 1578 the division had become too wide to straddle, and Protestant extremists took political control of the city. They expelled Catholic leaders and bishops and outlawed the religion. Catholic churches were stripped of their lavish decoration and converted into Dutch Reformed churches. Simultaneously, the Dutch were rising up politically against their (Catholic) Spanish overlords, and eventually threw them out.

For the next two centuries, Amsterdam's Catholics were driven underground. While technically illegal here, Catholicism was tolerated (kind of like marijuana is, these days). Catholics could worship so long as they practiced in humble, unadvertised places, like this church. The church gets its nickname from a parrot (*papegaai*) carved over the entrance of the house that formerly stood on this site. Now, a stuffed parrot hangs in the nave to remember that original *papegaai*.



City on a Sandbar

Amsterdam sits in the marshy delta at the mouth of the Amstel River—a completely man-made city, built on millions of wooden pilings. The city was founded on unstable mud, which sits on stable sand. In the Middle Ages, buildings were made of wood, which rests lightly and easily on mud. But devastating fires repeatedly wiped out entire neighborhoods, so stone became the building material of choice. But fire-resistant brick was too heavy to rest on mud, so for more support, pilings were driven 30 feet through the soggy soil and into the sand. The Royal Palace sits upon 13,000 such pilings—still solid after 350 years. (The wood survives if kept wet and out of the air.)

Since World War II, concrete has been used for the pilings, with foundations driven 60 feet deep through the first layer of sand, through more mud, and into a second layer of sand. Today's biggest buildings have foundations that go down as far as 120 feet deep.

Many of the city's buildings, however, tend to lean this way and that as their pilings settle—and local landowners are concerned that the tunneling for the new Metro line will cause their buildings to tilt even more. The snoopy-looking white cameras mounted on various building corners (such as on the Beurs) are monitoring buildings for settling.

Today, the church asks visitors for a mere “15 minutes for God” (so says the sign: *een kwartier voor God*)—an indication of how religion has long been a marginal part of highly commercial and secular Amsterdam.

• *Return to Kalverstraat and continue south for about 100 yards. At #92, where Kalverstraat crosses Wijde Kapel Steeg, look to the right at an archway that leads to the entrance and courtyard of the Amsterdam Museum.*

● Amsterdam Museum and Amsterdam Gallery

Pause at the entrance to the museum complex to view the archway. On the slumping arch is Amsterdam's coat of arms—a red shield with three Xs and a crown. The X-shaped crosses represent the crucifixion of St. Andrew, the patron saint of fishermen. (And here you thought the three Xs referred to the city's sex trade.) They also represent the three virtues of heroism, determination, and mercy—symbolism that was declared by the queen after the Dutch experience in World War II. (Before that, they likely sym-



bolized the three great medieval threats: fire, flood, and plague.) The crown dates from 1489, when Maximilian I—a Habsburg emperor—also ruled the Low Countries. He paid off a big loan with help from Amsterdam's city bankers and, as thanks for the cash, gave the city permission to use his prestigious trademark, the Habsburg crown, atop its shield.

Below that is a relief (dated 1581) showing boys around a dove, asking for charity, reminding all who pass that this building was once an orphanage.

Go inside. The pleasant café has a shaded courtyard and old lockers for the orphans' uniforms. The exhibit here (including slice-of-life descriptions on the many lockers) helps you imagine life in the orphanage through the centuries.

The courtyard leads to the best city history museum in town, the **Amsterdam Museum** (described on page 76). Next to the museum's entrance is a free, glassed-in passageway lined with paintings. If it's closed, you'll need to backtrack to Kalverstraat to continue our walk (continue south, then turn right on Begijnsteeg, then look for the gate leading to the Begijnhof). Otherwise, step into the **Amsterdam Gallery** (formerly known as the "Civic Guards Gallery").

This hall features group portraits of Amsterdam's citizens from the Golden Age to modern times. (The collection rotates.)

Giant statues of Goliath and a knee-high David (from 1650) watch over the whole thing. Civic Guard paintings from the 1600s (featuring men and their weapons) established a tradition of group portraits that continues today.



Stroll around and gaze into the eyes of the hardworking men and women who made tiny Holland so prosperous and powerful.

Start with the Golden Age portraits. These are ordinary middle-class people, merchants, and traders, dressed in their Sunday best. They come across as good people—honest, businesslike, and friendly. Remember, the Dutch got rich the old-fashioned way—they earned it. Dutch fishermen sold their surplus catch in distant areas of Europe, importing goods from those far lands. In time, fishermen became traders, and by 1600, Holland's merchant fleets ruled the waves. They had colonies as far away as India, the East Indies, and America (remember—New York was originally "New Amsterdam"). Back home, the traders were financed by shrewd

Amsterdam businessmen on the new frontiers of capitalism. These people are clearly proud of their accomplishments.

The portraits show the men gathered with their Civic Guard militia units. These men defended Holland, but the Civic Guards were also fraternal organizations of business bigwigs—the Rotary Clubs of the 17th century. The weapons they carry—pikes and muskets—are mostly symbolic.

Many paintings look the same in this highly stylized genre. The men usually sit arranged in two rows. Someone holds the militia's flag. Later group portraits showed “captains” of industry going about their work, dressed in suits, along with the tools of their trade—ledger books, quill pens, and money.

Everyone looks straight out, and every face is lit perfectly. Each paid for his own portrait and wanted it right. It took masters like Rembrandt and Frans Hals to take the starch out of the collars and compose more natural scenes.

Now focus on some more modern portraits. You may see simple photos of today's ordinary citizens—workers, police—the backbone of this democracy, or the modern-day town council posing playfully as Golden Age bigwigs.

And don't miss the colorful patchwork carpet. Dutch society has long been a melting pot society and this—with a patch representing each country from where Dutch immigrants originated—celebrates today's multicultural reality. (A chart locates the various countries.)

• *The Amsterdam Gallery offers a shortcut to our next stop, a hidden and peaceful little courtyard. To get there, exit out the far end of the gallery. Once in the light of day, continue ahead one block farther south and find the humble gate on the right, which leads to the...*

10 Begijnhof

This quiet courtyard, lined with houses around a church, has sheltered women since 1346 (and is quite a contrast with the noisy Kalverstraat just steps away). For centuries this was the home of a community of Beguines—pious and simple women who removed themselves from the world at large to dedicate their lives to God. When it was first established, it literally was a “woman's island”—a circle of houses facing a peaceful courtyard, surrounded by water.

As you enter, keep in mind that this spot isn't just a tourist attraction; it's also a place where people live. Be considerate: Don't



photograph the residents or their homes, be quiet, and stick to the area near the churches.

Begin your visit at the **statue** of one of these charitable sisters. You'll find it just beyond the church. The Beguines' ranks swelled during the Crusades, when so many men took off, never to return, leaving society with an abundance of single women. Later, women widowed by the hazards of overseas trade lived out their days as Beguines. Poor and rich women alike turned their backs on materialism and marriage to live here in Christian poverty. And though obedient to a mother superior, the members of the lay order of Beguines were not nuns. The Beguines were very popular in their communities for the unpretentious lives they led, with a Christ-like dedication to serving others. They spent their days deep in prayer and busy with daily tasks—spinning wool, making lace, teaching, and caring for the sick. In quiet seclusion, they provided a striking contrast to the more decadent and corrupt Roman Church, inspiring one another as well as their neighbors.

Now turn your attention to the brick-faced **English Reformed church** (Engelse Kerk). The church was built in 1420 to serve the Beguine community. But then, in 1578, Catholicism was outlawed, and the Dutch Reformed Church took over many Catholic monasteries. Still, the Begijnhof survived; in 1607, this church became Anglican. The church served as a refuge for English traders and religious separatists fleeing persecution in England. Strict Protestants such as the famous Pilgrims found sanctuary in tolerant Amsterdam and may have worshipped in this church. They later moved to Leiden, where they lived for a decade before sailing to religious freedom in America (see sidebar).



If the church is open, step inside, and head to the far end, toward the stained-glass window. It shows the Pilgrims praying before boarding the Mayflower. Along the right-hand wall is an old pew (with columns and clock) they may have sat on, and on the altar is a Bible from 1763, with lot of old-style *f*'s. Also of note is the front pulpit, carved of wood. It's by Piet Mondrian, the famous Dutch abstract artist, and was one of his first professional gigs. As you exit, look to the left of the door for a 1607 proclamation about a sermon preached here that the Pilgrims may have heard.

Back outside, find the **Catholic church**, which faces the English Reformed Church. Because Catholics were being persecuted when it was built, this had to be a low-profile, "hidden" church—notice the painted-out windows on the second and third floors.

Step inside, through the low-profile doorway; you can pick up an English brochure near the entry. This church served Amsterdam's oppressed 17th-century Catholics, who refused to worship as Protestants. It's decorated lovingly, if on the cheap (try tapping softly on a "marble" column). Amsterdam's Catholics must have eagerly awaited the day when they were legally allowed to say Mass (that day finally came in the 19th century).

Today, Holland still has something of a religious divide, but not a bitter one. Amsterdam itself is, like many big cities in the West, pretty un-churched. But the Dutch countryside is much more religious, including a "Bible Belt" region where 98 percent of the population is Protestant. Overall, in the Netherlands, the country is divided fairly evenly between Catholics, Protestants, and those who see Sunday as a day to sleep in and enjoy a lazy brunch.

Step back outside. The last Beguine died in 1971, but this Begijnhof still thrives, providing subsidized housing to about 100 single women (mostly Catholic seniors). The Begijnhof is just one of a few dozen *hofjes* (little housing projects surrounding courtyards) that dot Amsterdam.

The statue of the Beguine faces a black wooden house, at #34. This structure dates from 1528 and is the city's oldest. Originally, the whole city consisted of wooden houses like this one. They were eventually replaced with brick houses to minimize the fire danger of so many homes packed together.

Stroll a few steps to the left of the house to find a display of colorfully painted carved gable stones. These once adorned housefronts and served as street numbers.

• *Near the wooden house and gables, find a little corridor leading you back into the modern world.*

Head up the six steps to emerge into the lively...

⑩ Spui Square

Lined with cafés and bars, this square is one of the city's more popular spots for nightlife and sunny afternoon people-watching. Its name, Spui (rhymes with "now" and means "spew"), recalls the days when water was moved over dikes to keep the place dry.

Head two blocks to the left, crossing busy Kalverstraat, to the bustling street called the



Rokin. A small black statue of Queen Wilhelmina on the Rokin shows her daintily riding sidesaddle. Remember that in real life, she was the iron-willed inspiration for the Dutch resistance against the Nazis.

Canal cruises depart from the Rondvaart Kooij dock across the water, in the yellow canal house (see “Traditional Canal Boat Tours” on page 53).

Turn left on the Rokin and walk up 50 yards to the **House of Hajenius** (at Rokin 92). This temple of cigars is a “paradise for the connoisseur” showing “175 years of tradition and good taste.” To enter this sumptuous Art Deco building with painted leather ceilings is to step back into 1910. Don’t be shy—the place is as much a free museum for visitors as it is a store for paying customers. It’s a world of pipes, cigars, a classy smoking lounge, and tins of tobacco (lift the lid, take a whiff, and compare several). The personal humidifiers allow locals (some famous) to call in an order and have their cigars waiting for them at just the right humidity. Above the street entry, humidifier pipes pump moisture into the room. (A legal notice on the door establishes a strict age limit and limits on promotion—part of the pragmatic “legalize, tax, and regulate” approach the Dutch take toward soft drugs.)

From Hajenius, backtrack to Kalverstraat and continue south. Just before the end of this shopping boulevard, on the right, you’ll see modern **Kalvertoren** shopping mall. Enter and go deeper within to find a slanting glass elevator. You can ride this to the recommended top-floor **Blue Amsterdam Restaurant**, where a coffee or light lunch buys you something that’s rare in altitude-challenged Amsterdam—a nice view.

• *At the center of the square stands the...*

📍 Mint Tower (Munttoren)

This tower marked the limit of the medieval walled city and served as one of its original gates. In the Middle Ages, the city walls were girdled by a moat—the Singel canal. Until about 1500, the area beyond here was nothing but marshy fields and a few farms on reclaimed land. The Mint Tower’s steeple was added later—in the year 1620, as you can see written below the clock face.



Today, the tower is a favorite within Amsterdam’s marijuana culture. Stoners love to take a photo of the clock and its 1620 sign at exactly 4:20 p.m.—the traditional time to quit

work and light one up. (On the 24-hour clock, 4:20 p.m. is 16:20... Du-u-u-ude!)

Before moving on, look left (at about 10 o'clock) down Reguliersbreestraat. Midway down the block, the twin green domes mark the exotic **Tuschinski Theater**. Here you can see current movies (subtitled in Dutch) in a sumptuous Art Deco setting. If you like, take a quick detour to check out its lobby, and imagine this place in the Roaring '20s. Wa-a-ay at the end of the long block (where you see trees) is **Rembrandtplein**, another major center for nightlife.

• *Continue past the Mint Tower, first walking a few yards south along busy Vijzelstraat (keep an eye out for trams). Then turn right and walk west along the south bank of the Singel canal. It's lined with the greenhouse shops of the...*

⑩ Flower Market (Bloemenmarkt)

The stands along this busy block sell cut flowers, plants, bulbs, seeds, garden supplies, and flower-oriented souvenirs and knickknacks. Browse your way along while heading for the end of the block.



The Flower Market is a testament to Holland's long-time love affair with flowers. The Netherlands

is by far the largest flower exporter in Europe, and a major flower power worldwide. If you're looking for a souvenir, note that certain seeds are marked as OK to bring back through customs into the US (the marijuana starter-kit-in-a-can is probably...not).

For more on the history of tulips in Holland, see page 30.

• *The long Flower Market ends at the next bridge, where you'll see a square named...*

⑪ Koningsplein

This pleasant square, with a popular outdoor *haringhandel* (herring shop), is a great place to choke down a raw herring—a fish that has a special place in every Dutch heart. After all, herring was the commodity that first put Amsterdam on the trading map. It's also what Dutch sailors ate for



protein on those long cross-global voyages. Even today, it's a specialty, and locals flock to this popular place. In season you'll see the sign—*Hollandse nieuwe*—alerting locals that the herring are “new” (fresh), caught during the May-June season. They eat it chopped up with onions and pickles, using the Dutch-flag toothpick as a utensil. Elsewhere in the Netherlands, people are more likely to eat the fish whole (a.k.a. Rotterdam style)—you grab it by the tail, tip your head back, and down she goes.

• Turn left, heading straight south to *Leidseplein* along *Koningsplein*, which changes its name to *Leidsestraat*.

⑤ Leidsestraat Canals and ⑩ Shops

As you walk along, you'll reach *Herengracht*, the first of several grand canals. Look left down *Herengracht* to see the so-called **Golden Curve** of the canal. It's lined with townhouses sporting especially nice gables. Amsterdam has many different types of gable—bell-shaped, step-shaped, and so on. This

stretch is best known for its “cornice” gables (straight across); these topped the Classical-looking facades belonging to rich merchants—the *heren*. (For more on gables, see the sidebar on page 143.)

After the bridge, *Koningsplein* becomes *Leidsestraat*. It's a busy street, crowded with shoppers, tourists, bicycles, and trams (keep your wits about you along here, and don't walk on the tram tracks). Notice that, as the street narrows, trams must wait their turn to share a single track.

Cross over the next canal (*Keizersgracht*) and find the little **smartshop** on the right-hand corner (at *Keizersgracht* 508). While “smartshops” like this one are all just as above-board as any other in the city, they sell drugs—some of them quite strong, most of them illegal back home, and not all of them harmless. But since all these products are found in nature, the Dutch government considers them legal. You can check out the window displays, or go on in and browse.



Just over the next bridge, where Leidsestraat crosses Prinsengracht, you'll find a **Delftware shop** (to the right, at Prinsengracht 440). This place sells good examples of the glazed ceramics known as Delftware, famous for its distinctive blue-and-white designs (see the sidebar on page 328). In the early 1600s, Dutch traders brought home blue-and-white porcelain from China, which became so popular that Dutch potters scrambled to come up with their own version. It was traditionally made in Delft, the quaint town about 30 miles southwest of here (and described later in this book). You might spot a tulip vase in the window: a tall, tapering "flower pagoda" with multiple spouts for displaying the prized flower.

• *Looking left, a half-block down Prinsengracht, you can see the home of the **Pipe Museum** (at #488; see listing on page 67). Unless you're detouring to visit the museum, follow Leidsestraat down to the big, busy square, called...*



⑩ Leidseplein

This is Amsterdam's liveliest square: filled with outdoor tables under trees; ringed with cafés, theaters, and nightclubs; bustling with tourists, diners, trams, mimes, and fire eaters. No wonder locals and tourists alike

come here day and night to sit under the trees and sip a coffee or beer in the warmth of the sun or the glow of lantern light.

Do a 360-degree spin: Leidseplein's south side is bordered by a gray Neoclassical building that houses a huge Apple Store—sitting on what may be the city's most expensive piece of real estate. Nearby is the city's main serious theater, the **Stadsschouwburg**. The theater company dates back to the 17th-century Golden Age, and the present building is from 1890. Does the building look familiar, with its red brick and fanciful turrets? That's because it, along with Centraal Station and the Rijksmuseum, were built by the same architect, Pierre Cuypers, who helped rebuild the city during its late-19th-century revival.

Now look to the right of the Stadsschouwburg, down a lane behind the big theater. There you'll find the **Melkweg** ("Milky Way") nightclub. Back in the 1970s, this place was almost mythical—an entertainment complex entirely devoted to the young generation and their desires. Even today it offers an edgy array of new acts—step into the lobby or check out posters nearby to see what's on.



Continue panning. The neighborhood beyond Burger King is Amsterdam's "**Restaurant Row**," featuring countless Thai, Brazilian, Indian, Italian, Indonesian—and even a few Dutch—eateries. Next, on the east end of Leidseplein, is the flagship **Bulldog Café and Coffeeshop**. (Notice the sign above the door: It once housed the police bureau.) A small green-and-white decal on the window indicates that it's a city-licensed "coffeeshop," where marijuana is sold and smoked legally. You could step inside (down a short staircase) and peruse the counter at the entrance with its menu of legally available hash, leaf, pre-rolled joints, and reefers. Incredible as that may seem to



visitors from the States, it's been going on here in Amsterdam for nearly four decades—another Dutch cliché alongside windmill peppermills and wooden shoes.

• Our walk is over. But those with more energy could get out their maps and make their way to Vondelpark or the Rijksmuseum (one stop away on tram #2 or #12). To return to Centraal Station (or to nearly any place along this walk), catch tram #2, #11, or #12 from Leidseplein.