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Going Dutch
A Tale of Amsterdam
(Courtesy Mankato Free Press)

Tell anyone you're going to Amsterdam and they bring up the red light district, legal hash and pot. Once you've been there, you laugh and shake your head.

My three companions and I flew overnight and came down into a foggy Netherlands morning. The first thing I saw was a harbor -- no, a sea -- full of lighted ships, as thick as mosquitoes in a Minnesota summer. Minnesota marinas and even fishing harbors off Maine seem tiny by comparison. This was thick with boats, for miles off the ragged coast. I'd learned about Dutch Traders in seventh grade social studies, but the idea of a world trading center hadn't soaked in until I saw the harbor traffic. As our plane sank lower and lower, I could see individual lights, stretching the lengths of ships and smaller fishing vessels, marking the territory of hundreds, thousands, of lives spent at sea.

The airport was fogged in, so we circled inland. There, beyond the edge of the fog, were green, green fields -- tulip fields, though not in season -- separated by canals, cattle grazing in pastures (no feedlots here) and windmills. Of course, there were towering white modern turbines, but there were also old-fashioned wooden windmills. And canals and more canals.

The city of Amsterdam is laced with canals: more canals than Venice, we learned, and canal boat-busses are a good way to see the city. Roads weave over and between all the canals, and there are as many bike paths as there are roads. Nearly 750,000 inhabitants of the city own and ride 600,000 bikes. Bikes are everywhere. There are, at any given moment, at least 6,000 bikes parked at Central Station. We saw 70-year-old women in dresses and heels riding bikes. We met a concert pianist who said she dons her concert blacks and pedals her bike to the concert hall. At the canal-side Anne Frank Haus, the stairs were narrow and steep enough to be hidden behind a bookcase. Walls, left mostly as they had been in 1944, touted placards with quotes from Anne's Diary, including one about her desire to be a world-famous novelist and someday publish a book called "The Secret Annex." After reading that, I cried through the rest of the house. In her diary, Anne mentions decorating her half of her tiny shared bedroom with pictures of movie stars taken from smuggled magazines.

The 1940s stars' faces, now faded, remain glued to her bedroom walls. In the final room are posted the arrest certificate for the Frank family and death certificates. Finally, a picture of bodies piled in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, the like of which we've all seen, is captioned, "One of these bodies belongs to Anne Frank." This was the girl who had written, "I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart."

The van Gogh Museum put us in sensory overload with painting after painting I didn't even know existed. The colors still brilliant more than a century later, the actual paint that Vincent's own hands mixed and applied rises three-dimensionally from the canvas in a way that can't be reproduced in a textbook or poster. His anguish is as obvious as the texture of his work. The Rijksmuseum, the towering cathedral-like home of the Dutch Masters, covers a city block and can't be conquered in a day. Walking among work by Rembrandt, Vermeer and de Hooch was like being in a holy place. A few years ago, I pored over an art textbook, wondering why it was that Rembrandt was so much more revered than many other artists. When I saw "Night Watch," which is 12 feet high and almost 15 feet wide, with my own eyes, I understood. From a distance of about 100 yards - across the entire floor of the museum - my heart stopped. Light emanated from the painting, as if a real bonfire were burning there; the figures in the foreground literally stood out from the wall, inside the room. His work was alive. I had my answer. And I couldn't stop looking.

From street vendors, we ate pickled herring and frites-french fries served in paper cones-with such topping as mayonnaise and tarter sauce. The pigeons marked us for suckers and flocked around waiting for hand-outs.

We drank Genever, a famous Dutch gin, at the Ouivaar, a bar built in 1611. Harry, the Jewish bartender had been a child during the Holocaust. He survived because he was blonde and his parents disguised him as their neighbors' son. Harry's

parent did not survive. He remembers the American troops arriving to liberate Amsterdam. He says, "As much as I don't like what your president is doing now, I am forever grateful to Americans."

We ate Indonesian food, Indian food, seafood, British pub food and Italian food. We drank wine and ate cheese and fruit on a candlelight canal cruise that toured the harbor and the city.

Everyone in Amsterdam speaks English. We had given ourselves a crash course in Dutch, which meant we could say hello, good-bye, please and thank you. When I thanked a shopkeeper with "Dank u wel," he looked startled and said, "Are you Dutch?" I guess not many American tourists make the effort.

In my opinion, any effort is worth it: the effort to fly to Holland, to soak in the historic cityscape, to talk with Dutch people, to walk or bike the canal roads, to absorb some of the greatest gifts of Western civilization. Sure, the red light district is there, as are hash bars. They are tourist attractions. But nobody imposes their habits on anyone else, and the city feels safer than Minneapolis. And after all, it takes all kinds of color to keep a city thriving for a thousand years.