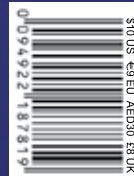


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On a mission to discover the true meaning of *gezelligheid*, Michelle Wranik-Hicks explores Amsterdam's restored canal-side mansions, captivating culture and quirky culinary finds in the Jordaan neighbourhood



Above: *Touriste* is a restored salon boat that has cruised along the canals for more than 100 years. Opposite page: Pulitzer Amsterdam's Music Collector's suite (top); the hotel lobby (centre); and the Book Collector's suite (bottom). Previous spread: evening light on the canals in Amsterdam

Frost clings to the branches of the trees along Amsterdam's Prinsengracht canal and I quicken my pace, sidestepping icy puddles on the footpath and pulling the woollen scarf around my neck closer. With the mercury plunging below zero, the air chilled further by the waterways that criss-cross the Unesco World Heritage listed Canal Ring, January is bitterly – almost cruelly – cold. For a moment, I wonder whether I'm mad to be exploring the Dutch capital in the middle of winter, though some might argue it's the perfect time of year to discover the true meaning of *gezelligheid*.

Looking and sounding a bit like something you might say when someone sneezes (the German word *gesundheit* springs to mind), *gezelligheid* is used liberally across the Netherlands, and most northern European countries seem to have their own version. Norway has *koselig*; Swedes say *gezellig* or *mysigt* and the Danes have *hygge*, which became something of a phenomenon last year when it was shortlisted by The Oxford Dictionaries as Word of the Year. While there is no exact literal translation for these words, they all seem to roughly mean the same thing: wrapping up warm in socks hand-knitted by your grandmother, snuggling beneath woollen blankets in front of a crackling log-fire with your loved one, or defrosting frozen fingers with a mulled wine in the company of friends – you get the idea. They may be inspired by delicious cold-climate creature comforts,

but *gezelligheid* is something both tangible and abstract, something that warms the soul as much as the body.

With the temperature plummeting by the minute, I hasten to return to my own version of *gezelligheid* at the Pulitzer Amsterdam, a characterful member of the Preferred Hotels & Resorts LVX Collection (www.preferredhotels.com). Made up of 25 restored 17th and 18th-century canal-side buildings between the Prinsengracht and Keizersgracht canals, each has a fascinating heritage – one a former light-bulb manufacturer, another once housing a sugar refinery, several more the former residences of prosperous merchants and flamboyant aristocrats. Twelve of the 400-year-old properties were snapped up by American businessman Peter Pulitzer (the grandson of US newspaper tycoon and founder of the Pulitzer Prizes), who joined them together to create a Howard Johnson hotel in late 1960s. Following his motto “Your neighbour's house is only for sale once”, he continued to amass adjacent properties until he had collected 25 in total. Since he sold up in 1990, the hotel has changed ownership – though it still privately owned – and last year, it relaunched after a three-year design overhaul.

The new-look Pulitzer is like honey to the design-boffin bee. The work of Jacu Strauss, who incredibly, spent the better part of a year sleeping in each and every one of the 225 rooms as part of his creative process, the houses connect via light-filled, glass-covered passageways that wind between gardens lined with playful sculptures. With no two rooms

the same, there is also a series of Collector's Suites facing the Keizersgracht canal that include a Music Collector's suite with a wall hung with vintage trumpets, and an Antique Collector's suite, scattered with marvellous rare furniture. I check into the Book Collector's suite, which is like something plucked from the recesses of my childhood fantasies, with an Alice in Wonderland-style floor-to-ceiling archway of books in the bedroom and a bicycle on top of the wardrobe. The sitting room walls are reminiscent of the palette of the Old Masters with a jade-hued velvet sofa, and drapes the colour of bitter chocolate, along with a library of books, a 1930s-style minibar trolley, with Persian carpets pieced together patchwork style, the work of Dutch designer Piet Hein Eek. I'm immediately drawn to the antique oak desk; its drawers stained by ink and the ancient Remington Standard typewriter are an irresistible lure for any writer to tap out a few pages of their novel, but even for non-writers, it's a wonderful place to simply sit and gaze through the windows overlooking the canal, listening to the “tring tring” of the city's bicyclists and daydreaming about what it must have been like to live here during Amsterdam's fabled Golden Age.

Upon check in, along with a swipe card I'm handed a real door key, as four of the suites also have a door with steps that lead down to the Keizersgracht canal. Though I use my private entrance often, it's still a pleasure to enter through the hotel's Prinsengracht side lobby, which is the epitome of *gezelligheid*, with opulent velvet chairs

PHOTO: Merlijn-Roubroeks



and oil paintings, a flower stall and a tiny library filled with books by Pulitzer Prize-winners.

Along with books, art is scattered throughout all nooks and corners of the hotel, from the walls of the atmospheric cocktail den, Pulitzer's Bar, and Restaurant Janz, named for a 17th-century copper smelter Volkert Jansz, who owned four of the 25 Pulitzer houses. With oak floors, cladded walls, and an entrance leading through a former apothecary, the restaurant is where guests take breakfast while overlooking “De Negen Straatjes” (The Nine Streets). The chic shopping area is lined with hip fashion boutiques, upscale vintage stores, design studios and eateries like Pluk, all Scandi blonde wood, organic cuisine and cold-pressed juices ([Reestraat 19; +31 20 3637610; www.pluk9straatjes.nl](http://Reestraat19.nl)).

Though it's best to keep your eyes peeled to prevent collisions with the city's perennially exasperated cyclists, when strolling in this neighbourhood – and in fact, anywhere in Amsterdam – I find it impossible not to pause and gaze upward at the handsome canal houses. Tall and narrow, with elegant gables and heritage façades, some lean higgledy-piggledy as a result of their wooden foundations sinking into the canal's marshy ground, and most still have working pulley systems. Once used by industrious merchants to haul goods up to the roof, today they are used to shift sofas and boxes when Amsterdammers move house.

Further along Prinsengracht, just past the Pulitzer and the famous steeple of Westerkerk (where Rembrandt is buried), I pass a long queue of people snaking around the corner. The queue is a daily occurrence because Prinsengracht 263 is home to the Anne Frank House (www.annefrank.org), the very site where she lived in hiding with her family for more than two years during World War Two. Imagining Anne's life in the cramped, annexe quarters, and her ultimate death, is sobering to say the least.

It's a vastly different scenario along Herengracht (Gentlemen's canal), where aristocrats and noble families once resided in the city's grandest houses. Today, the most impressive (and expensive) properties have been taken over by banks, government offices, and a few beautiful hotels. The most luxurious is the Waldorf Astoria Amsterdam, a collection of six elegantly converted 17th- and 18th-century town houses. With staff clad in beautiful uniforms by Dutch designer Jan Taminiau (a favourite among the royals), a Louis XIV style entrance hall and soaring staircase designed by architect Daniël Marot, complete with the crests of the Hooft and Hasselaer families, it's one of the city's most distinguished addresses. Clefs d'Or concierges, a Guerlain Spa and the two Michelin-starred restaurant Librije's Zusje Amsterdam only add to the experience.

Every element of the stay is ultra-luxurious, right down to the detail, from the generous array of Salvatore Ferragamo amenities in the bathrooms, to the bespoke Cire Trudon fragrances from the centuries-old French candle-makers that



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Clockwise from top left: Dutch art in Rijksmuseum; a winter ice-skating scene in front of Rijksmuseum; the Roccoco-style Maurer Room at Waldorf Astoria Amsterdam is often used for private dining events. Opposite: the gleaming white marble entrance of the Waldorf Astoria Amsterdam

guests choose to have sprayed on their pillows at turndown. And at every turn, the hotel's remarkable history has been maintained. In the Waldorf's enormous gardens, there's a beautifully preserved Baroque tea house, often used for intimate weddings, while in the Roccoco-style Maurer Room, I'm shown how one of the floor-to-ceiling 18th-century paintings slides up to reveal hidden cabinets where the family liked to store their silverware.

On the lower ground level, I disappear for a morning to enjoy the steam room and the pool adjacent to the hotel's Guerlain Spa, enjoy a late lunch at Goldfinch Brasserie, the walls painted a shade of lapis lazuli inspired by the Dutch artist Vemeer, and a cocktail at Vault bar, which sits at the site of a former bank, barmen grabbing bottles from a wall lined with original 1920s safety deposit boxes. It's every inch a regal stay, and I barely raise an eyebrow to learn that Moroccan King Mohammed V was a recent guest. Indeed, he may have even stayed in the Brentano Suite. On a desk in the suite's bedroom, there's a framed photograph of Dutch-Italian merchant Josephus Brentano, the former owner of the house. An avid collector of art, much of his collection now lines the walls of Rijksmuseum (*Museumstraat 1; +31 20 6747 000; www.rijksmuseum.nl*).

It's impossible to see all the wonders of Amsterdam's most monumental museum in one morning, though I do try – gazing at priceless works of art by Dutch masters, none more famous than Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. Viewing

The Night Watch is a must; it gathers the sort of crowds as Mona Lisa does at The Louvre, though unlike the Mona Lisa, there's no disappointment about the size of this painting, which measures 3.79 by 4.53 metres. It's a size that pairs well with the equally colossal Rijksmuseum, which I'm astonished to learn, took 10 years to refurbish, the project delayed in part, by a dispute with the Fietzersbond (the Dutch cyclists' union), which centred on a bicycle path that cuts directly through a tunnel in the museum. For a while there was talk of a referendum, but the cyclists won the battle to keep their popular bike thoroughfare. Dodging the triumphant cyclists here is a living example not to mess with Amsterdammers, who won't hesitate to protest or demonstrate for their rights – and nowhere is this spirited nature more prevalent than in the Jordaan.

Amsterdam's now gentrified working-class area is the focus of Eating Amsterdam, (*www.eatingamsterdamtours.com*), a food tour fused with history and even local humour. Led by the charismatic Rudolph Kempers, a blue-eyed, sharp-witted art historian and foodie on the side, Kempers's dry Dutch wit and innate knowledge on the city both entertains and educates, whether it's sharing insights into Amsterdammer's culinary *gezelligheid* habits, such as forgoing dinner on Fridays for beer and *bitterballen* – deep-fried meatballs served with mustard, rather similar to a croquette – or informing us how many bicycles are retrieved from the canals each year (it's 15,000 for those who wondered).

Our induction into Dutch cuisine begins with *poffertjes* ("A very good scrabble word", according to Kempers). The small puffy pancakes, made in an iron pan, dusted with sugar and drizzled with butter and maple syrup, are just some of what's served at Café de Prins (*Prinsengracht 124; +31 20 624 9382; www.deprins.nl*), one of the city's characterful brown cafés. "A brown café is a little bit like an Irish pub," says Kempers. "It has to be a little shabby, with smoke-stained ceilings and brown wood and tiling". There are around 200 brown cafés remaining in the city, many in the Jordaan area, and they became especially popular in the 1950s for their convivial, living room atmosphere, where patrons could chat over *jenever* (Dutch gin) or beer, and sing rousing songs accompanied by a harmonica. As we stroll the quaint streets, Kempers gives us a small rendition of one of the songs he knows, a patriotic ditty about the city, which contains the verse: "I would rather be in Amsterdam without any money than in Paris with millions".

En route between a traditional fishmonger, where we sample succulent pieces of herring, cod fried in a "secret" batter and even a tulip-infused vodka, we pause at a butcher for *osseworst* – a raw, smoked beef sausage – and a deli for Gouda cheese fused with cumin. At every corner, Kempers regales us with neighbourhood tidbits, pointing out the block where Brad Pitt purchased an apartment and leading us into a drug store to sample Dutch liquorice – including a grimace-inducing salted version. We also glimpse the gardens in various





A night city view of Amsterdam canal Herengracht (left). Clockwise, from top left opposite page: liqueur sold at pharmacies in Amsterdam; a display at Jwo Lekkernijen, which sells wonderful varieties of Dutch cheese from young to mature; more cheese on show at Het Kaasboertje Van De Jordaan; De Kaaskamer van Amsterdam is another specialty cheese store in the city; the legendary apple pie at Café Papeneiland.



hofjes, which are hidden courtyards surrounded by apartments. Once social housing projects funded by wealthy merchants for the poor – mostly women or widows – today, the apartments have been snapped up by Amsterdam residents who, despite having to put up with tourists stickybeaking their lovely gardens, are unlikely to ever leave.

The tour winds up with a Dutch beer at the charming Café Papeneiland, a corner brown café that's stood on the corner of the Prinsengracht and the Brouwersgracht canals since 1642, all Delft tiles and quirky ambiance – the very definition of *gezelligheid*. It's most famous for its legendary, crumbly-crust apple pie – so legendary, in fact, former US President Bill Clinton even stopped by for one with his entourage, and left with several more.

Despite the cold, I can't seem to keep away from the canals, and manage to do one more tour of the city aboard *Touriste*, a beautifully restored salon boat that puttens up and down the waterways. Built in 1909, with polished Javanese teak, brass, and velvet drapes with tasselled cords, its diesel engine may have been replaced by electric, carbon-neutral propulsion, though the little boat has lost none of its historic, maritime charm. Captain Onno tells us Winston Churchill once boarded the boat to tour the city in 1946, reportedly with his bulldog and a cigar in one hand.

As we glide down the waterways, it's fascinating to see the way Amsterdam's once dilapidated or forgotten areas have evolved. I am most intrigued however, not by the imposing structure of the city's new EYE Film Museum, nor by Eastern Docklands, a once insalubrious area now transformed with museums and galleries, but by glimpsing the day-to-day lives of the city's canal residents.

Even at night, few seem to have their curtains drawn, and most seem to be entirely unbothered living their lives in full view of passing traffic, whether it's a canal-side mansion once owned by a patrician, with gilded ceilings and heavy chandeliers, oil paintings and stucco, or a modern houseboat with floor-to-ceiling concertina doors. While most of these houseboats are now rented out to Airbnbbers, these voyeuristic glimpses paint an idyllic picture of Amsterdam canal life. In one, a couple shares a glass of wine while snuggled on a leather sofa, modern art on the walls illuminated by candlelight. In another, a young father in a chequered shirt and scarf spoon-feeds his baby son in a highchair. Each vastly different scenes, yet both have one thing in common: *gezelligheid*. ☺

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