

Amsterdam

More than a “Golden Age” City

> Armin Gemmer

Amsterdam is young, colourful, liberal and multicultural like no other city in Europe. The capital city of the Netherlands is deemed the Northern Venice and is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. Tourists love to sit in the street cafes and to look at the many narrow canals. Today modern Amsterdam is among the most important commercial cities worldwide. It is also considered the most liberal and cosmopolitan city in Europe. The elegant city houses a system of canals (“grachten”) which are a testimony to the affluence of the great trading families who inhabited Amsterdam. But where did all this beauty and riches come from?

Amsterdam is the capital of a small nation which merely acts as background music in the orchestra of the great European countries steeped in history. The city was built in the middle of an inhospitable swampland - not an ideal place to found a city. It is not as old as other European cities and, compared to London, Paris or Madrid, relatively uniform. Even in the Netherlands itself, Rotterdam

and not Amsterdam is the persistently unrivalled biggest port in the world. The most important institutions in modern Europe, the ones that Holland hosts, are not in the capital city, but in the neighbouring city The Hague. Finally, the famous “Golden Age” that people would like to remember only lasted for one hundred years. Nevertheless, Amsterdam is a city with a special attitude towards life and

architecture like no other. It has produced uncountable artists, philosophers and scholars. This uniqueness makes it a popular travel destination. Millions of tourists love the city first and foremost because of its romantic urban canals along which one can endlessly window shop and admire the old houses.

The Dutch call the numerous small canals which criss-cross the city “grachten”.



Stop over for a Grachtentour

محطة للشروع في جولة الكراختينتور



Traditional house in Leidsestraat

بيت تقليدي في لايدزسترات



Church opposite railway station

كنيسة مقابل محطة القطار

Rather than call Amsterdam a city, one can safely speak of Amsterdam as a collection of 90 islands which are joined together by more than 1281 bridges.

The Dutch capital city derives its name from the word Amsteldam, the dam at Amstel river. In the year 1300, at the point where the river meanders into the sea, the first small fishermen's settlement was founded. But with the improvement in ship building and the increasing importance of international maritime trade, the strategic location of the settlement enabled the fishermen to be successful traders.

Soon after, the settlement enlarged into a town and started to attract more and more people. Only 200 years later this narrow area became too small and the first plans for extension created the "prinsengracht", the "herengracht" and the "keizersgracht". These formed the first three circles of the famous canal belt. At first the trenches were meant to be fortifications and drainage

canals for the newly gained marshland. However, the inhabitants soon realized that the new waterways offered another advantage. The canal belt around the town was ideal for transporting goods. As early as 1670 the three main ringcanals had become a system of waterways which was linked by 10 additional canals. This unique traffic system ensured that every house in the city had direct front and back access to the canals. The houses could be used as stores, a great advantage for ambitious traders. This is because they were able to store the goods they sent on ships to every part of the world in their own houses. Even today it is possible to see which houses were used both for living and storage as hoisting winches are attached to the roof ridges. With direct access to the sea, the city was not only a place where people lived but also a labyrinth of uncountable small trading houses. This was an unbeatable advantage over the rival Hanseatic cities with whom

they could now trade on equal terms. Because of this strategic location the city became a connection between the important European ports and the mainland which reached far beyond today's Netherlands.

In what the Dutch today still call the "Golden Age" the maritime traders avoided getting involved in any extensive war but increased their wealth through a then unique network of good trading relations. They left others to fight wars. While other nations engaged in endless wars the Dutch focused on neutrality and trade. This enabled them to access ports which were otherwise inaccessible to other maritime trading nations. During the Reformation wars in Europe when Protestants and Catholics were slaughtering each other Amsterdam provided a haven for refugees from all religions and nations. In turn it gained new trading relations, artisan skills and innovations in all sectors of life. ▶



Bicycle parking garage موقف الدراجات الهوائية

The city burst at the seams, new city quarters were built which in turn became quickly overcrowded because of the never-ending influx of people. Along with the growth of the city the canal system expanded. In a very short time Amsterdam grew to be the third biggest European city and became the leading location for art, culture, philosophy and natural sciences. The inhabitants did not know what to do with their abundant wealth.

However, the construction of the dams between the waterways had a significant disadvantage. From the beginning the plots for the houses were limited in size. Unlike in other cities, Amsterdam's inhabitants displayed their riches and social position not through the size of the houses or magnificent gardens but simply through the adorned gabled facades of the narrow houses as seen from the quayside. However, only an expert could see the differences in the adornments. The small houses alongside the canals are not showy, but have a rather inconspicuous beauty. Unlike in many other cities, this still stands today, as most of these historic patrician homes were spared from burning, looting, destruction or unnecessary refurbishment. Today they still retain the "Golden Age" look. With the coming of peace between England and France this only "Golden Age" in the history of the Netherlands suddenly ▶



Amsterdam harbour

ميناء أمستردام



Nemo-Museum of Technology

متحف التكنولوجيا

came to an end. England gained dominion of the seas. Soon after Napoleon occupied the neighbouring nation and at the Congress of Vienna the former Golden Age city was a mere negotiating chip. Only the gorgeous works of art in the museums and the magnificent house facades along the canals which have retained their original splendour remind us of this Golden Age.

But is this all that reminds us of this period? Today this city has become a symbol of liberality and religious freedom and is a home to immigrants from 145 nations who represent all the world religions. The numerous foreign immigrants and Dutch natives who have chosen to live in Amsterdam make it by far the European city with the youngest population. This in turn has created a diverse artistic, cultural and intellectual scene. And the traditional trading skills seem to have survived.

Six percent of the people living in Amsterdam are Muslims. Ahmed Marcouch, the head of the city quarter called "Slotervaart", is the first Muslim to be elected mayor in Europe. Amsterdam is as young, colourful, liberal and multicultural like no other city in Europe. ■



Traditional building of the Golden Age

بيت تقليدي من العصر الذهبي



Bridge on the harbour

جسر في الميناء