



A TWO-WHEELED TOUR THROUGH THE SCENIC SITES OF AMSTERDAM **BY PAUL FERRISS**



IF YOU'RE CYCLING IN AMSTERDAM, there will come a time when you'll say to yourself, "I have no idea where I am."

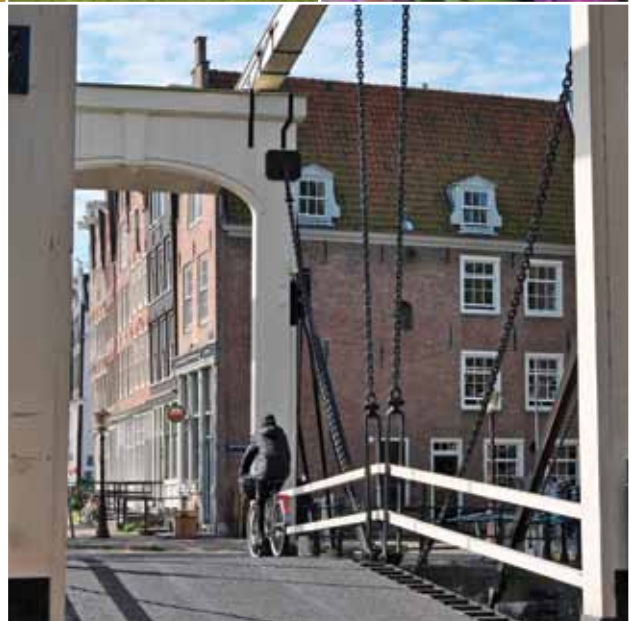
Of course, that's a great way to experience a city when you're a first-time visitor. But it's not that great when you're actually trying to find a specific location, one that you thought was easy to find on the map that you glanced at and then stuffed in your pocket before you set out.

This wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been so eager to jump on a bike after enduring a record-breaking Canadian winter. I'm not a hard-core, ride through snow, sleet and ice kind of cyclist, but I enjoy riding my bike whenever I can. So the chance to spend a few days pedalling around Amsterdam—one of the world's bike capitals—was too good to pass up.

After dropping my bags at The Toren hotel on Keizersgracht, near the heart of a city that dates back to the 17th century, I picked up my red MacBike rental bike.

Rush hour had passed—many Amsterdammers commute to work by bike, and 58% of residents cycle daily—but there was still a fairly steady stream of riders on the street: business men and women in office attire aboard upright city bikes; kids on mountain bikes; and mothers or fathers on cargo bikes, or *bakfiets*, with two or three wheels and a box mounted on the front for a child to sit in. Plus one or two bikes with a repurposed Heineken crate used as a basket in front of the handlebars. The sound of tires whizzing across cobblestones was punctuated by the clang of fenders bouncing over the bumps and the chime of bike bells.

THE FAMOUS SKINNY BRIDGE is one of the most-photographed spots in the city; iconic row houses date back to the 17th century





CYCLISTS OFTEN
take a creative
approach to bike
accessories

It was easy to merge into the flow and I was soon up to speed, rolling across bridges and along canals, savouring the freedom and congratulating myself on acclimating to the city's cycling scene so easily. Except, as I kept one eye on the street names as I rode past—Berenstraat, Molenpad—I realized that I was headed in the wrong direction.

So much for my keen sense of navigation.

My destination was Central Station, the main rail and commuter hub for the city, which I was told was the best place to start any bike ride. Another look at my map told me that I needed to double back. About 10 minutes later I was there, amid the commuters, tourists and cyclists getting ready to navigate the city.

After exploring on my own, it was time to turn to the professionals at Yellow Bike, which runs bike tours throughout the city and beyond. My guide was Jorn Koelemaj, a master's student in urban studies and an enthusiastic cyclist.

"I always tell people that once they've had a tour, to rent a bike and go off by themselves for a while, not because it's our business but because then they get a true feeling of what it's like to be a part of the city," he said.

My tour began at the Yellow Bike HQ on Nieuwezijds Kolk, not far from the tourist area, then went in a loop, ending at the harbour near Central Station.

As we rode, Jorn supplied me with plenty of facts and local lore about biking. For example, the city uses boats with giant magnets to dredge the canals regularly and haul out bikes that have somehow found their way to the bottom.

He pointed out the white squares painted on the sidewalk bricks outside a theatre in the Leidseplein neighbourhood. They're for bike parking, but if you lock up outside of the lines, it'll likely be taken away by city authorities. After paying a fine, you can reclaim your wheels from a warehouse in the docklands area, but you'll have to sort through the jumble of bikes.

We rode through the quiet streets of the Jordaan neighbourhood, a gentrified district of classic 17th-century Amsterdam row houses, shops and small businesses that was once a poverty-stricken slum but grew into a bustling artistic community and the family-friendly community it is today.

From the Jordaan, we had a clear view across the Prinsengracht canal of Anne Frank House and the Westerkerk church next door. Rembrandt is buried within the church, though no one is exactly sure where (he died penniless, and his remains were later moved there). I could hear the church bells every morning from my hotel just a few blocks away.

As she wrote in her diary, Anne Frank could hear those same bells and catch just a glimpse of the steeple from her annex while hiding with ▷

DINNER IN THE LIVING ROOM

What happens when you welcome a bunch of strangers into your house for dinner?

For one thing, they serve themselves, help set the table, keep track of their drinks and pay you when it's all over.

In return, they get a unique and memorable experience—and a great dinner—as I did at Topsy, a café and event space owned by Elien Van Helden.

Located in the Frederik Hendrikbuurt neighbourhood, the "living room" restaurant, as they're known in Amsterdam, is also a community hub. Elien has opened it up to lectures and yoga and theatre classes, and soon a soap opera will be shot there based on stories from the area.

For the past year, Elien's been hosting weekly dinners where about 10 people—some are neighbours, some follow her on Facebook or hear about the dinners from friends—gather for a meal. Guests eat at a communal table and get to know each other as they talk about subjects large and small.

"That's what I really like to do—cook, bring people together and see what takes place," she said.

Over a vegetarian meal of buckwheat noodles with eggplant, mango and tofu, along with a cucumber salad, we talked about food, politics, spirituality, travel, racism, bikes, dogs and urban living. We also learned a bit about each other—just as if we were hanging out in our own living rooms.

Amsterdam Itinerary

✈ GETTING THERE

KLM offers regular flights to Amsterdam and travellers can choose from Economy, Economy Comfort and the new World Business Class.

🛏 WHERE TO STAY

THE TOREN Owned and managed by Eric and Petra Toren, this boutique hotel is located amongst the 17th century homes of the Keizersgracht, making it an ideal base for exploring the city. thetoren.nl

🍴 WHERE TO EAT

For a modern interpretation of traditional Dutch cuisine, try **RESTAURANT GREETJE**. And be sure to end your meal with crème brûlée and licorice parfait. restaurantgreetje.nl/en

PURI MAS This casual spot found in the city's centre specializes in *rijsttafel* (which translates to "rice table," rice served with a variety of meats and vegetables) which harkens back to the Netherlands' colonial past. purimas.nl



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with mayo; a funky kitchen
shop in Jordaan; a Yellow Bike
tour stops opposite the Anne
Frank House



her family from the Nazis during the Second World War. It's just one of the poignant details of her short life that makes a visit to the house something that shouldn't be missed.

Jorn and I continued our tour through Vondelpark with its wide tree-lined bike paths and walkways. The park serves as a commuter route for many cyclists, but it's also an urban oasis—complete with a rose garden and open-air theatre—for city dwellers.

I said goodbye to Jorn after riding through the Red Light District and rolling across the “Skinny Bridge,” or Magere Brug, as it's properly known. Traversing the Amstel River, it's one of the most famous bridges in the city and was once so narrow that it was hard for even two pedestrians to cross it.

My own ride continued with a stop at the Rijksmuseum, home of Rembrandt's larger-than-life world-famous painting *Night Watch*, along with an impressive collection of Vermeer's work, the Dutch masters and many pieces of modern art.

The Rijksmuseum was also the lightning rod for a uniquely Amsterdam controversy when it re-opened in 2013, after a 10-year renovation. At that time, cyclists were initially banned from riding through the tunnel at the centre of the building. The resulting uproar dominated the media and public discourse for weeks, and the museum eventually reached a complicated compromise—referred to as a *polderen*, or a consensus that's intended to cause the least inconvenience—and allowed bikes to use the tunnel. Score another one for the power of the bike in Amsterdam.

The next day, feeling more confident about my navigational skills, I rode over to Spui (pronounced “spy”) and enjoyed a coffee while watching Amsterdam in motion. There are cafés and restaurants on one side of a plaza that hosts a book market on Fridays. Two bookstores, the Athenaeum Boekhandel and the American Book Center, sit on either side of the street.

When I went to get my bike, it wasn't where I left it. Or it wasn't where I thought I left it. The sheer number of bikes in Amsterdam means parking is at a premium.

Amsterdam
cycling by the
numbers

799.442
Population

881.000
Estimated
number
of bicycles in
Amsterdam

6.587
Number of bike
parking spots
at Central Station



Some streets are off limits, which means you'll often need to walk for a while to lock your bike. Or you can use one of the barges that floats in some canals adjacent to the street that are specifically used for bike parking.

But on this day, like most other riders, I chose a railing along a canal. Now if I could only remember which railing and which canal.

Turns out my bike was just two canals over and down a side street, locked and secure. The bright-red rental was easy to spot among all the black local bikes.

Back in the saddle, it occurred to me that there's no better way to see a city. The more you ride, the more details you notice: houses that have begun to lean on each other and have been discreetly shorn up. People sitting at computers in basement offices. A woman enjoying a late lunch on a bench outside a small café. Tourists taking pictures of themselves at the edge of a canal. All of which makes Amsterdam a great place to get lost in. **CAA**

2 MILLION
Number of kilometres
Amsterdam cyclists
travel in a day,
collectively

767 KM
Total length
of cycle paths
and bike lanes

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