

48 HOURS IN GREEN AMSTERDAM

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Explore the hidden gardens of this cosmopolitan city as thousands of bulbs burst into life, says **Harriet O'Brien**

WHY GO NOW?
Because as spring unfurls this magical, watery city is becoming greener by the minute. Well, not only green but red, purple, yellow with orange stripes and more: the burst of colour being provided by the 600,000 bulbs that are planted annually. There are about 600,000 bicycles here as well. On 25 March the "Ronde van het Groene Hart" (Tour of the Green Heart) sees these green machines race around Amsterdam.

TOUCH DOWN
Apart from cycling, the greenest way to get to Amsterdam from the UK is by train: Eurostar trains from London's Waterloo station to Brussels Midi take around 2 hours 15 minutes, with fast connections to **Centraal Station** (1) in Amsterdam – overall journey time, six hours or less.

Amsterdam's Schiphol airport is served from many UK cities by KLM, British Airways, easyJet and others. Fares start at £72 return from Gatwick through www.opodo.co.uk. The airport is 13km southwest of the city centre. Trains serve **Centraal Station** (1) in 20 minutes, one-way fare €3.60 (£2.40).

GET YOUR BEARINGS
The city began life as a dam built across the Amstel river in the 13th century. This is now a tram- and bicycle-filled open space, **Dam Square** (2), bordered by the Royal Palace. It is in the middle of the tiny old centre of Amsterdam. A semi-circle of canals loops around it, following a layout devised in 1609. The main tourist office is opposite **Centraal Station** (1) (9am-5pm, daily). If the queues are dauntingly long, head to the booth on **Leidseplein** (3) (Sun-Thurs 9am-5pm; Fri and Sat 9am-7pm). The city is fringed by green zones that are laced with bike routes: an exhibition at **Arcam** (4), Amsterdam's Centre for Architecture, at Prins Hendrikkade 600, explores these "Green Fingers" (Tues-Sat 1-5pm; admission free; until 31 March).

CHECK IN
Amsterdam has a chronic shortage of hotel rooms, so booking a bed or city-break package ahead is advisable. All the rates

quoted here include breakfast. **The Dylan** (5) at Keizersgracht 384 (00 31 20 530 2010; www.dylanamsterdam.com); doubles from €350 (£235), is one of Amsterdam's most chic boutique hotels. It has 41 rooms, plus a courtyard dining terrace. **Hotel Vondel** (6), handily located for the museum quarter at Vondelstraat 18-30 (00 31 20 612 0120; www.hotelvondel.nl), is a stylish boutique hotel. Doubles from €115 (£82).

Set just down from Prinsen Canal, the **Mercure Arthur Frommer** (7) at Noorderstraat 46 (00 31 20 622 0328; www.acorhotels.com); doubles from €160 (£114) owes its unusual name to the fact that it was once owned by the American guidebook founder.

For an excellent budget option, try the **Van Ostade**

Bicycle Hotel (8) at Van Ostadestraat 123 near Albert Cuypp street market (00 31 20 679 3452; www.bicyclehotel.com); doubles without private bathroom from €45 (£32). Bike hire for €5 (£3.60) per day.

TAKE A HIKE
... around the former working-class quarter of Jordaan. One of Amsterdam's prettiest neighbourhoods, it contains hidden gardens and courtyards. Start your walk at **Noordermarkt** (9), where an organic food market is held on Saturdays. Walk up Brouwersgracht, past the Pompon flower shop on the left and residential canal boats on the right.

Continue past a small drawbridge and turn left into Palmgracht. On the right, at numbers 28-38 of this wide, tree-lined street, is an **almshouse** (10) dating from 1648. Push the orange door, usually open during daylight hours, and you enter a lovely brick-lined courtyard. Continue along Palmgracht and turn left down Palmdwarstraat. This is a foodie street – at **1700 Lekkernijen Deli** (11) you can stop for a coffee. Continue over Willemstraat and Gouds-

bloemstraat and turn left into Lindengracht. At numbers 149-163 there is another old **almshouse** (12) with a hidden courtyard: push open the blue door; walk under the brick archway and you will see little houses on the left facing a garden of hydrangeas and lavender. Continue along Linden-

gracht and turn left down Tichelstraat. Cross West-erstraat into **Tweede Anjeliers Dwarsstraat** (13), lined with funky clothes shops and antique stores. Continue down to Ege-lantiensgracht, perhaps Amsterdam's most photogenic canal. It joins Prin-sengracht, where you turn left walking along this wa-

terway until you arrive back at Noordermarkt (9).

LUNCH ON THE RUN
Finch (14) at Noordermarkt 5 is a café that serves the likes of organic butternut, pumpkin and coriander soup, and chicken and avocado sandwiches (closed Mondays).

TAKE A VIEW
For a great view over the rooftops, have coffee at the sixth-floor café of the department store **Metz & Co** (15) at Leidsestraat 34-36.

CULTURAL AFTERNOON
Get a flavour of Amsterdam's green and gracious living in the 17th and 18th centuries at the **Van Loon Museum** (16) at Keizersgracht 672 (00 31 20 624 5255; www.museumvanloon.nl); open Weds-Mon 11am-5pm; adults €6 (£4). It once belonged to Ferdinand Bol, a student of Rembrandt, and was subsequently owned by the mercantile Van Loon family, whose lovely décor and charming garden remain.

WINDOW SHOPPING
Delicious Food (17) (closed Tuesdays) at Westerstraat 24, just off Noordermarkt, has a

wonderfully rustic-looking array of organic foods. For a burst of colour head to the flower market along Singel, where vibrant bunches of 50 tulips are currently being sold for €10 (£7.10). For specialist tulip bulbs (in the autumn-planting season) as well as summer bulbs, visit the little **Tulip Museum and Shop** (18) at Prinsengracht 112 (www.amsterdamtulipmuseum.com); closed Monday, otherwise open 10am-6pm, admission to museum €2 (£1.40).

AN APERITIF
Walem (19) at Keizersgracht 449 (00 31 20 625 3544; www.diningcity.nl/walem) is a chic café serving a hip crowd. Drink a beer on the tiny front terrace overlooking the tree-lined canal. The brasserie section of this small outfit serves a good selection of salads and pasta dishes.

DINING WITH THE LOCALS
De Kas (20) (00 31 20 462 45 62; www.restaurant-dekas.nl) is a greenhouse set in the midst of Frankendael Park to the south of the city. In 2001 it was transformed by Michelin-star-winning chef Ger Jan Hageman into one of Amsterdam's finest restaurants. Dinners are five-course feasts (€47.50/£34) created from fresh ingredients and changing daily. Booking is essential. Take tram 9 from Centraal station to the Hogeweg stop.

SUNDAY MORNING: GO TO CHURCH
The **Begijnhof** (21) is an enclosed community dating from the 14th century, originally built as a sanctuary for Beguines – a Catholic sisterhood. It is open to visitors 8am-1pm daily (www.begijnhofamsterdam.nl). The English Reformed Church is celebrating 400 years since its founding here. Sunday Communion is at 10.30am; the Begijnhof Catholic chapel opposite

celebrates Sunday mass at 10am in Dutch and 11.15am in French. **TAKE A RIDE**
Bike City (22) at Bloemgracht 68-70 (00 31 20 626 3721; www.bikecity.nl) is open daily 9am-6pm; day rentals cost from €8.50 (£6.10). **OUT TO BRUNCH**
Westergasfabriek (23) is a former gas works transformed into an arts centre surrounded by newly planted gardens; get there on tram 10 to Limburg-sturimpelen. The cheerful café **EspressoFabriek** is set among cinemas and workshops in a complex of 19th-century industrial buildings. It serves huge slices of Dutch apple cake and lavish tramezzino sandwiches of mozzarella and aubergine.

A WALK IN THE PARK
The city's biggest green space was created in 1854 in order to save the area from becoming another gas factory. **Vondelpark** is now a much-loved 48-hectare combination of ponds, bike trails and 120 kinds of tree. **ICING ON THE CAKE**
From Vondelpark you can walk to the **Van Gogh Museum** (24) at Paulus Potterstraat 7 (www.van-goghmuseum.nl); daily 10am-6pm; Fri until 10pm; admission €10 (£7.10) where you'll see sunflowers, wheat-fields and other landscape scenes among the 200 paintings by the great artist.



Graphics: Rob Brooks
Cycle city: a commuter parks her bike outside Centraal Station Peter Dejong

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