

JORDAAN WALK

Length of This Walk: Allow 90 minutes.

The Walk Begins

① Dam Square

Start in Dam Square, where the city was born. The original residents settled east of here, in the De Wallen neighborhood (now the Red Light District). But as Amsterdam grew—from a river-trading village to a worldwide sea-going empire—the population needed new places to live. Citizens started reclaiming land to the west of Dam Square and built a “new church” (Nieuwe Kerk) to serve these new neighborhoods. Over time they needed still more land and continued to push westward. Canal by canal, they created waterways lined with merchants’ townhouses.

By the 1600s—Amsterdam’s Golden Age—residents had moved even farther west, building an even newer church called the Westerkerk (Western Church). The residential neighborhood around it is what we’ll explore on this walk—the Jordaan.

Let’s get going. From Dam Square, leave the fast-food chains, mimes, and tourists behind, and head to the place where real Amsterdamers live. Facing the Royal Palace, slip (to the right) between the palace and New Church, toward a fanciful red-and-white brick building. Approach the building by crossing the busy street called Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal. If it seems like this wide, traffic-filled street doesn’t really fit the city, that’s because it’s new—built over what had been a canal up until the 1880s.

Check out the red-and-white brick building—the **Magna Plaza**



Jordaan Walk



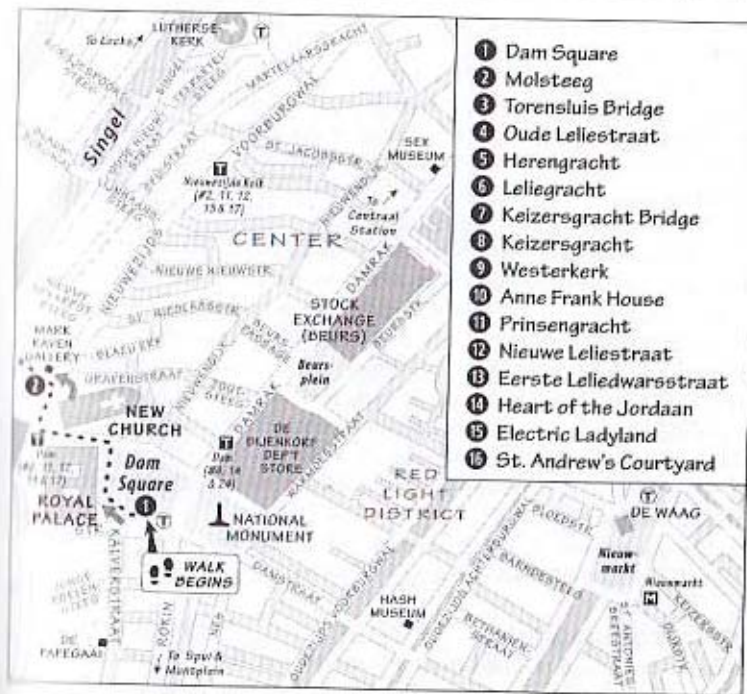
mall. When it was built in 1899, it was Amsterdam's main post office. Like so many buildings in this soggy city, it was constructed atop a foundation of pilings—some 4,500 of them, in this case. In its day, it was ultramodern, symbolizing the city's economic revival after two centuries of decline. The North Sea Canal had just opened, industrialization was on the rise, and a World's Fair in 1883 capped it all off. The building's decorative facade kicks off a theme we'll return to frequently in this walk—Amsterdam's many varieties of architecture. (In the 1980s the post office was converted into a fashionable shopping mall.)

• Facing Magna Plaza, head right, walking 50 yards down the busy street to the corner of a tiny street called Molsteeg. Stand for a minute and survey this slice of Amsterdam.

② Molsteeg

Scan the higgledy-piggledy facades along the busy street. Are you drunk, high...or just in Amsterdam, where the houses were built on mud? Check out the nice line of gables in this row of houses. We'll see more like this on our walk.

Before moving on, notice the T-shirt gallery on the corner. Decades ago, I bought a Mark Raven T-shirt from a street vendor. Now this Amsterdam original has his own upscale shop, selling T-shirts and paintings featuring spindly lined, semi-abstract



cityscapes. Raven works primarily with small etchings—as Rembrandt often did.

• Now head left down tiny Molsteeg street—but don't walk on the reddish pavement in the middle; that's for bikes. From here this tour's essentially a straight shot west, though the street changes names along the way.

A few steps along, on the left, find house #5: It's from

1644. Just one window wide, it's typical of the city's narrow old merchants' houses, with a shop on the ground floor, living space in the middle, and storage in the attic. Look up to see the hooks above warehouse doors. Houses like this lean out toward the street on purpose: Attach a pulley to the hook, and you can hoist cargo without banging it against the house (or, these days, lift up a sofa and send it through a big upper-story window).

Across the street, the building at #6 leans off-center; wooden support beams wedged into the side keep it from encroaching on its neighbor.

At the intersection with Spuistraat, you'll likely see rows of bicycles parked along the street. Amsterdam's 850,000 residents



own nearly that many bikes. The Netherlands' 17 million people own 17 million bikes, with many people owning two—a long-distance racing bike and an in-city bike, often deliberately kept in poor maintenance so it's less enticing to the many bike thieves in town. Locals are diligent about locking their bikes twice: They lock the spokes with the first lock, and then chain the bike to something immovable, such as a city hitching rack.

Amsterdam is a great bike town—and indeed, bikes outnumber cars. Notice how 100 bikes might be parked along the road, yet they blend right in. Then imagine if each bike were a car. The efficient Dutch appreciate a self-propelled machine that travels five times faster than a person on foot, while creating zero pollution, noise, parking problems, or high fuel costs. On a *fiets* (bike), a speedy local can traverse the historic center in about 10 minutes. Biking seems to keep the populace fit and good-looking—people here say that Amsterdam's health clubs are more for networking than for working out.

• After one more block, the street opens onto a small space that's actually a bridge, straddling the Singel canal. It's called...

📍 Torensluis Bridge

We haven't quite reached the Jordaan yet, but the atmosphere already seems miles away from busy Dam Square. With cafés, art galleries, and fine benches for picnics, this is a great place to relax and take in a Golden Age atmosphere.

Find a place to enjoy the scene. Belly up to the railing, take a seat on a bench, or even pause the tour for a drink at one of the recommended **characteristic bars** that spill out onto the



bridge. Café van Zuylen is famous for its variety of beers, and Café Villa Zeezicht is popular for its apple pie. Take in your surroundings.

The Singel canal was the original moat running around the old walled city. This bridge is so wide because it was the road that led to one of the original city gates. The area still looks much as it might have during the Dutch Golden Age of the 1600s. This was when Amsterdam's seagoing merchants ruled the waves, establishing trading colonies as far away as modern Indonesia. Fueled with this wealth, the city quickly became a major urban center, filled with impressive homes. Each proud merchant tried to outdo his neighbor. Pan 360 degrees and take in the variety of buildings.

The houses crowd together, shoulder-to-shoulder. They're built

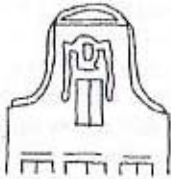
Gables

Along the rooftops, Amsterdam's famous gables are false fronts to enhance roofs that are, generally, sharply pitched. Gables come in all shapes and sizes. They might be ornamented with animal and human heads, garlands, urns, scrolls, and curlicues. Despite their infinite variety, most belong to a few distinct types. See how many of these you can spot.

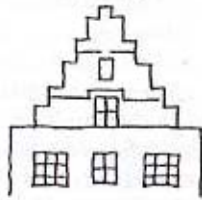
POINT



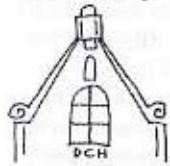
BELL



STEP



SPOUT



NECK



CORNICE



A simple "point" gable just follows the triangular shape of a normal pitched roof. A "bell" gable is shaped like...well, guess. "Step" gables are triangular in shape and lined with steps. The one with a rectangular protrusion at the peak is called a "spout" gable. "Neck" gables rise up vertically from a pair of sloping "shoulders." "Cornice" gables make pointed roofs look classically horizontal. (There's probably even a "clark" gable, but frankly, I don't give a damn.)

on top of thousands of logs hammered vertically into the marshy soil to provide a foundation. Over the years, they've shifted with the tides, leaving some leaning this way and that. Notice that some of the brick houses have iron rods strapped onto the sides. These act like braces, binding the bricks to an inner skeleton of wood. Almost all Amsterdam houses have big, tall windows to let in as much light as possible.

Although some houses look quite narrow, most of them extend far back. The rear of the building—called the *achterbuis*—is

often much more spacious than you might expect, judging from a skinny facade. Real estate has always been expensive on this canal, where buildings were taxed on the width of their street frontage. Taxes were especially high for a home with a wide facade and minimum usable space in back. A local saying back then was, "Only the wealthy can live on the inside of a canal's curve."



Mingled among the old houses are a few modern buildings. These sleek, gray-metal ones are part of the university. Built in the less affluent 1970s, architecture like this wouldn't be allowed today. Though these buildings try to match the humble, functional spirit of the older ones, they're still pretty ugly. But the students they house inject life into the neighborhood.

The "big head" statue honors a writer known by his pen name: **Multatuli**. Born in Amsterdam in 1820, Multatuli (a.k.a. Edu-



ard Douwes Dekker) did what many young Dutchmen did back then: He sought his fortune in the East Indies, then a colony of the Netherlands. While working as a bureaucrat in the colonial system, he witnessed firsthand the hard life of Javanese natives slaving away on Dutch-owned plantations. His semi-autobiographical novel, *Max Havelaar* (1860), follows a progressive civil servant fighting to reform colonial abuses. He was the first author to criticize Dutch colonial practices—a very bold position back then. For his talent

and subject matter, Multatuli has been dubbed "the Dutch Rudyard Kipling."

The Singel is just one of Amsterdam's many canals—all told, there are roughly 50 miles of them. In the distance, way down at the north end of the Singel, beyond the dome, you can glimpse one of the canal's **locks**. Those white-flagpole thingies, sprouting at 45-degree angles, are part of the apparatus that opens and shuts the gates. While the canals originated as a way to drain diked-off marshland, they eventually became part of the city's sewer system. They were flushed daily: Just open the locks and let the North Sea tides come in and out.

The Dutch are credited with inventing locks in the 1300s. (Let's not ask the Chinese.) Locks are the single greatest innova-

tion in canal-building. Besides controlling water flow in the city, they allow ships to pass from higher to lower water levels, and vice versa. It's because of locks that you can ship something by boat from here inland. Thanks to an extensive system of locks, from this very spot, you could hop a boat and go upriver, connect to the Rhine, and eventually—over the continental divide in Germany—connect to the Danube and then sail downstream, finally reaching Romania and the Black Sea.

The copper dome in the distance marks the Lutheran church. To the left of the church is the new city—reclaimed in the 1600s and destined to be the high-rent district. To the right is the old town.

• *Continue west on...*

④ Oude Leliestraat

On “Old Lily Street,” consumers will find plenty of Amsterdam treats—Reypenaer’s cheeses, Puccini’s bonbons, Tuscany’s sausages, Grey Area’s marijuana, California’s burritos, sushi, *sboarmas*—everything but lilies. (The Reypenaer cheese shop is especially worthwhile, as it offers samples and tasting sessions; see page 72.)

The Grey Area is a thriving coffeeshop; like Holland’s other “coffeeshops,” it sells marijuana. The green-and-white decal in the window identifies it as #092 in the city’s licensing program. While smoking marijuana is essentially legal here, the café’s name refers to the murky back side of the marijuana business—how coffeeshops get their supply from wholesalers. That’s the “gray area” that Dutch laws have yet to sort out. (For more on this and other coffeeshops, see the Smoking chapter.)

This esteemed coffeeshop, which works with the best boutique growers in Holland, regularly wins big at Amsterdam’s annual Cannabis Cup Awards—a “high” honor, to be sure.

• *The next canal is...*

⑤ Herengracht

Amsterdam added this canal during its Golden Age boom in the 1600s. It’s named for the *beren*, the wealthy city merchants who lined it with their mansions. Because the city was



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antiroyalty, there was no blue-blooded class; these *heren* functioned as the town's aristocracy. Even today, Herengracht runs through a high-rent district. (Zoning here forbids houseboats.)

Check out the house that's kitty-corner across the bridge, at Herengracht 150. It has features you'll find on many old Amsterdam buildings. On the roof, rods support the false-front gable (which originally supported only a rich merchant's ego). From this side view, you can see that, though a townhouse might have a narrow entrance, it can stretch far back from the street.

Before moving on, notice the parking signs along Herengracht. Motorists have to put money in the meter at the end of the block or get towed. Parking is a major problem in a city like this, designed for boats, not cars.

• *Continue west, walking along...*

6 Leliegracht

This is one of the city's prettiest small canals, lined with trees and lanterns, and crossed by a series of arched bridges. There are some

400 such bridges in Amsterdam. It's a pleasant street of eccentric boutiques, trendy furniture shops, and bookstores. Notice that some buildings have staircases leading down below the street level to residences. Looking up, you'll see the characteristic beams jutting out from the top with a cargo-hoisting hook on the end. The view from a bay window here must be exceptional.

• *Continue on to the next canal, and pause on the...*

• *Continue on to the next canal, and pause on the...*

7 Keizersgracht Bridge

Take in another fine row of gables. Kitty-corner across the bridge is the gray Astoria building, an example of the architectural style known as Amsterdam School: geometrical windows and minimal ornamentation, brightened with a few mosaics, bay windows, and flowery reliefs. Rising behind it is the colorfully crowned tower of the Westerkerk—where we're headed.

• *After the bridge, we'll take a detour off our westward route, and veer left along...*

8 Keizersgracht

Walk south about 100 yards along the canal. You'll reach a set of steps leading down to the water, where a triangular pink stone juts into the canal. This is part of the so-called **Homomonument**—a



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memorial to homosexuals who lost their lives in World War II, and a commemoration of all those persecuted for their sexuality. If you survey the square, you'll see that the pink triangle is just one corner of a larger triangle that comprises the entire Homomonument. (The pink-triangle design reclaims the

symbol that the Nazis used to mark homosexuals.) You may see flowers or cards left here by friends and loved ones.

From here, walk through the square called Westermarkt, between the church and busy Raadhuisstraat. You'll pass three very Dutch kiosks. The first, called Pink Point, gives out information on gay and lesbian Amsterdam, especially nightlife. The next sells French fries; when it's closed, the shutters feature funny paintings putting *friets* into great masterpieces of Western art. The final one sells fresh herring. If you've yet to try a delicious Dutch herring, this is the perfect opportunity (for pointers on how to eat one, see page 230). Should this stand be closed, see "Amsterdam Experiences" in the Eating chapter for other herring stand locations.

• *Keep walking toward the entrance to...*

📍 Westerkerk (Western Church)

Near the western end of the church, look for a cute little statue. It's of Anne Frank, who holed up with her family in a house just down the block from here (we'll pass it in a minute).

For now, look up at the towering spire of the impressive Westerkerk. The crown shape was a gift of the Habsburg emperor, Maximilian I. In thanks for a big loan, the city got permission to use the Habsburg royal symbol. The tower also displays the symbol of Amsterdam, with its three Xs. The Westerkerk was built in 1631, as the city was expanding out from Dam Square. Rembrandt's buried inside...but no one knows where. You can




pop into the church for free or pay to climb to the tower balcony (just below the XXX) for a grand view (see page 71).

The church tower has a carillon that chimes every 15 minutes. At other times, it plays full songs. Invented by Dutch bellmakers in the 1400s, a carillon is a set of bells of different sizes and pitches.

There's a live musician inside the tower who plays a keyboard to make the music. Mozart, Vivaldi, and Bach—all of whom lived during the heyday of the carillon—wrote music that sounds great on this unique instrument. During World War II, the Westerkerk's carillon played every day. This hopeful sound reminded Anne Frank that there was, indeed, an outside world.

• *Continue around the church and walk north along the Prinsengracht canal to the Anne Frank House. Bypass the tourists entering through the modern annex and keep going a few steps more to #263. This doorway was the original entrance to the...*

⑩ Anne Frank House

This was where the Frank family hid from the Nazis for 25 months. With actual artifacts, the museum gives the cold, mind-boggling statistics of fascism the all-important intimacy of a young girl who lived through it and died from it. Even bah-humbug types find themselves caught up in Anne's story.  See the Anne Frank House Tour chapter.

• *At the next bridge turn left. Stop at its summit, mid-canal, for a view of...*

⑪ Prinsengracht

The "Princes' Canal" runs through what's considered one of the most livable areas in town. It's lined with houseboats, some of the city's estimated 2,500. These small vessels were once cargo ships—but by the 1930s, they had become obsolete. They found a new use as houseboats lining the canals of Amsterdam, where dry land is so limited and pricey. Today, former cargo holds are fashioned into elegant, cozy living rooms. The once-powerful engines have generally been removed to make more room for living space. Moorage spots are prized and grandfathered in, making some of the junky old boats worth more than you'd think. Houseboaters can plug hoses and cables into outlets along the canals to get water and electricity. (To learn more about houseboats, visit the charming Houseboat Museum, described on page 71.)

Notice the canal traffic. The official speed limit is about four miles per hour. At night, boats must have running lights on the top, the side, and the stern. Most boats are small and low, designed to glide under the city's bridges. The Prinsengracht bridge is average height, with less than seven feet of headroom (it varies with the water level); some bridges have less than six feet. Boaters need good charts to



tell them the height, which is crucial for navigating. Police boats roam on the lookout for anyone CUI (cruising under the influence).

Just across the bridge are several typical Jordaan cafés. The relaxed (and recommended) **Café de Prins** serves food and drink both day and night. The old-timey pub **De Twee Zwaantjes** (a few doors to the right) features singalongs and live music, occasionally including the mournful songs of the late local balladeer Johnny Jordaan. Finally, there's the recommended **Café 't Smalle**—it's not visible from here, but it's a half-block to the right. It has a deck where you can drink outside along a quiet canal.

• *Once you cross Prinsengracht, you enter what's officially considered the Jordaan neighborhood. Facing west (toward Café de Prins), cross the bridge and veer left down...*

⑩ Nieuwe Leliestraat

Welcome to the quiet Jordaan. Built in the 1600s as a working-class housing area, it's now home to artists and yuppies. The name Jordaan probably was not derived from the French *jardin*—but given the neighborhood's garden-like ambience, it seems like it should have been. Lush vegetation lines this street, as residents greenify their neighborhood with potted plants.

Train your ultra-sharp “traveler’s eyes” on all the tiny details of Amsterdam life. Notice how the pragmatic Dutch deal with junk mail.

On the doors, stickers next to mail slots say *Nee* or *Ja* (no or yes), telling the postman if they'll accept or refuse junk mail. Residents are allowed a “front-yard garden” as long as it's no more than one sidewalk tile wide. A speed bump in the road



keeps things peaceful. The red metal bollards known as *Amsterdammertjes* (“little Amsterdammers”) have been bashing balls since the 1970s, when they were put in to stop people from parking on the sidewalks. Though many apartments have windows right on the street, the neighbors don't stare and the residents don't care.

• *At the first intersection, turn right onto...*

⑪ Eerste Leliedwarsstraat

Pause and linger awhile on this tiny lane. Imagine the frustrations of home ownership here. If your house is considered “historic,” you need special permission and lots of money to renovate.

On this street, you can see three different examples of renovation. At house #9, it was done cheap and dirty: A historic (but

run-down) home was simply torn down and replaced with an inexpensive, functional building with modern heating and plumbing. This was done before the 1980s, when the city started writing more restrictive building codes to preserve the vintage ambience. At #5, there's no renovation at all. The owners were too poor (stuck with rent-control tenants), and they missed the window of time when a cheap rebuild was allowed. At #2A (across the street), the owners obviously had the cash to do a first-class sprucing up—it's historic-looking but fully modern inside. Even newly renovated homes like this must preserve their funky leaning angles and original wooden beams. They're certainly nice to look at, but absolutely maddening for owners who don't have a lot of money to meet city standards.

• *Just ahead, walk out to the middle of the bridge over the next canal (Egelantiersgracht). This is what I think of as...*

📍 The Heart of the Jordaan

For me, this bridge and its surroundings capture the essence of the Jordaan. Take it all in: the bookstores, art galleries, working artists' studios, and small cafés full of rickety tables. The quiet canal is lined with trees and old, narrow buildings with gables—classic Amsterdam.

Looking south toward the Westerkerk, you'll see a completely different view of the church than tourists get as they wait in line at the Anne Frank House. Framed by narrow streets, crossed with streetlamp wires, and looming over shoppers on bicycles—to me, this is the church in its best light.



Turning around and looking north, you'll see the street called Tweede Egelantiersdwarsstraat—the laid-back

Jordaan neighborhood's main shopping-and-people street. If you venture down there, you'll find boutiques, galleries, antique stores, hair salons, and an enticing array of restaurants.

Looking west down the canal, check out the junky old boats that litter the sides. Some aren't worth maintaining and are left abandoned. As these dinghies fill with rainwater and start to rot, the city confiscates them and stores them in a big lot. Unclaimed boats are auctioned off three times a year.

But most boats are well used. When the sun goes down and the lights come on, people cruise the sparkling canals with an onboard hibachi and a bottle of wine, and even the funkier scows can become party magnets.

• *Now head west along the canal (Egelantiersgracht) to the next bridge,*

where you'll turn left onto *Tweede Leliedwaarsstraat*, and walk a few steps to #5.

⑤ Electric Ladyland

This small shop, with a flowery window display, calls itself "The First Museum of Fluorescent Art." Its funky facade hides an il-

luminated wonderland within, with a tiny exhibit of black-light art (under the shop, down a very steep set of stairs, visits by appointment only). It's the creation of Nick Padalino—one cool cat who really found his niche in life. He enjoys personally demonstrating the fluorescence found in unexpected places—

everything from minerals to stamps to candy to the tattoo on his arm. Nick seems to get an even bigger kick out of it than his customers. You can see the historic first fluorescent crayon from San Francisco in the 1950s. Wow. Its label says, "Use with black light for church groups." Wow.

About 100 yards farther down the street and across the canal, old hippies might want to visit the **Paradox Coffeeshop**. It's the perfect coffeeshop for the nervous American who wants a friendly, mellow place to go local (see listing in the Smoking chapter).

• To reach our last stop, backtrack 20 paces to the canal and turn left, then walk a few dozen yards to *Egelantiersgracht* #107, the entrance to...

⑥ St. Andrew's Courtyard (Sint-Andrieshof)

The black door is marked *Sint-Andrieshof 107 t/m 145*. The doorway looks private, but it's the public entrance to a set of residences.

It's generally open during daytime hours, except on Sundays. Enter quietly; you may have to push hard on the door. Go inside and continue through a blue-tile-lined passageway into a tiny garden courtyard (*hof*) surrounded by a dozen or so homes. Take a seat on a bench. This is one of the city's scores of similar *hoffies*—subsidized residences built around a courtyard, and funded by churches, charities, and the city for low-income widows and pensioners. This one, from 1613, is one of the oldest in Amsterdam. Enjoy the green-



ery, the stone fountain, the colorful gable stones embedded in the walls...and the peace and quiet.

• And this is where our tour ends—in a tranquil world that seems right out of a painting by Vermeer. You're just blocks from the bustle of Amsterdam, but it feels like another world. You're immersed in the Jordaan, where everything's in its place, and life seems very good.

