

Coolplans

Amsterdam

Book now if your cool 2013 travel plans include Europe, especially if you're looking at popular river cruises or events like Holland's tulip festival where ground zero is Keukenhof with its seven million blooms, open from March 31 to May 30.

Amsterdam is a terrific base for both and easily accessible with direct flights from Vancouver. Apart from dodging the multitude of bicycles, this is a pedestrian-friendly city where everything in the historic centre is walkable or just a short tram ride away.

To take full advantage, pick up an "I amsterdam" smart card for canal rides and free public transit plus admission or discounts on museums, attractions, food and drink.

I used my card to stand in the room of Rembrandt's house where he painted

his masterpieces; to behold first hand the surreal luminescence of Van Gogh's iconic sunflowers, hanging in the museum that bears his name; to lose myself in the mystical light of a Vermeer at the legendary Rijksmuseum (main building reopening in April 2013 after massive renovations); and to feel humbled by the heroism memorialized at the Dutch Resistance Museum.

But the best of Amsterdam is free. I love just walking, taking in the city-wide gallery of architectural design (can't get enough of those Art Nouveau details), mingling with the crowds amid the fragrant exuberance of the Flower Market (cannabis seeds optional), window shopping the antique stores (just looking), and people watching from a sidewalk table with a mid-morning cappuccino or a brew from a local pub. Now, that's Amsterdam. —Laurie Carter



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PHOTOS BY LAURIE CARTER