

by Karla Zimmerman



'...the party ramps up in 2013, when more anniversaries than you can shake a herring at coincide'

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AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS



- ★ **POPULATION** 780,600
- ★ **FOREIGN VISITORS PER YEAR** 4 million
- ★ **LANGUAGES** Dutch, English
- ★ **UNIT OF CURRENCY** Euro (€)
- ★ **COST INDEX** Glass of beer €3 (US\$3.90), hotel double €110-160 (US\$144-209), *frites* with mayo €3 (US\$3.90), bike rental per day €13 (US\$17)



MARTEN WOUTERS - GETTY IMAGES

ORANGE IS THE ONLY COLOUR TO WEAR ON QUEEN'S DAY

WHY GO IN 2013? LOTS OF BIRTHDAY CAKE

Amsterdam's Golden Age charm and progressive attitude always cast a spell on travellers, but the party ramps up big-time in 2013, when more anniversaries than you can shake a herring at coincide. The famed canal ring turns 400 years old. It's Vincent van Gogh's 160th birthday and the 40th for his colour-swirled museum. The Rijksmuseum re-opens after a 10-year renovation, splashing Rembrandts, Vermeers and 7500 other masterpieces over 1.5km of galleries. The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra – often considered the world's best (and not just because they played on *The Big*

Lebowski soundtrack) – blows out 125 candles. Plus the Artis Royal Zoo and Felix Meritis cultural centre mark 175 years and 225 years, respectively. It all adds up to a slew of celebratory concerts, exhibits and street fests grooving throughout 2013.

LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCES

Pull up a stool and hoist a beer in a candlelit 'brown' cafe. Most have been in business for 300 years or so, and earn their name from the smoke-stained walls. A wander through the Red Light District will make your jaw go limp, even if near-naked women beckoning from backlit windows is the oldest Amsterdam cliché. At the other end



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of the spectrum, Anne Frank's melancholy bedroom and diary, sitting in its glass case, provides a heartbreaking WWII flashback.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

🗓 Queen's Day (Koninginnedag) celebrates the monarch's birthday every 30 April. Uproarious boozing, throbbing techno music and the entire population dressed in ridiculous orange outfits set the scene for the rip-roaring street party.

🗓 In August the Grachtenfestival (Canal Festival) floats classical concerts around the city's waterways – many performances literally take place on boats. Expect extra action for the canal ring's 400th anniversary.

🗓 The International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam rocks 25 years of screen time come November. Yes, it's another big 2013 birthday, and the festival will honour it with films about Amsterdam made by Amsterdammers.

RANDOM FACTS

🗓 More bicycles than people fill the city: there are 881,000 two-wheelers versus about 781,000 citizens. Fifty-eight percent of locals cycle daily.

🗓 Arriving at Amsterdam's airport, your plane lands 4.5m below sea level. The city would be underwater were it not built on huge stakes driven into the ground. Centraal Station has 6000 of them keeping it afloat.

🗓 Amsterdam has more canals than Venice, with 1281 bridges arching over the water.

HOT TOPIC OF THE DAY

A weed pass, man. In January 2013, new laws will ban foreigners from toking in the city's coffeeshops. Only Dutch residents

who have a one-year pass will be able to purchase pot. Politicians initiated the legislation, citing gang-related crime and health risks, but Amsterdammers fought it, saying the new law would drive the trade underground. As of press time, it was still a wait-and-see issue. But it's possible by the time you're reading this, only card-carrying Dutch residents will be able to light up.

CLASSIC RESTAURANT EXPERIENCE

Open since the 1940s, Van Dobben's specialises in traditional Dutch fare: try the *pekelvlees* (something close to corned beef), or make it a *halfom* – *pekelvlees* mixed with liver. In winter, supplement with a bowl of *erwtensoepp*, a thick pea soup with smoked sausage and bacon. Van Dobben's *kroketten* (croquettes) rule the town and are compulsory after a late-night booze-up.

BEST SHOPPING

The Negen Straatjes (Nine Little Streets) comprise a tic-tac-toe board of tiny shops dealing in antiques, vintage fashions, housewares and oddball specialities ranging from toothbrushes to velvet ribbons to doll repairs. Atmospheric pubs, cafes and wine bars pop up in their midst, making it easy to wander away the day here.

MOST UNUSUAL PLACE TO STAY

Xavier's Happy House is a one of a kind, just like owner Xavier Hollander. The former madam and author of *The Happy Hooker* welcomes guests to her B&B in the ritzy Beethovenstraat neighbourhood. Rooms are decked out with erotic photos, red heart pillows, and books, such as her most recent *Guide to Mind-Blowing Sex*.