

Hidden Holland

There's more to Holland than Amsterdam. We took a trip to the nearby cities of The Hague and Delft and uncovered a wealth of cultural delights

WORDS DAN SAVERY PICTURES GETTY, HOLLAND TOURIST BOARD

Think of Holland and often Amsterdam comes to mind. Many foreign visitors rarely venture further than the capital city – famous for its canals, cyclists, relaxing cafés and liberal attitude towards sex, drugs and just about everything else. But there's more to Holland than Amsterdam. Explore further afield and you'll discover that Holland is overflowing with culture, architecture, art, museums, restaurants, theatres and antique shops. We spent a jam-packed weekend uncovering some of Holland's hidden delights in The Hague and Delft.

Landing at Amsterdam's Schipol Airport – Europe's fourth largest and one of the busiest in the world – early on a Saturday morning, it's easy to see why Holland is the perfect destination for a short break. The flight from the UK takes just 45 minutes – less than a bus journey across London! The charming city of The Hague is a 35-minute train journey from the airport and, like most places on earth, the public transport system in Holland is a joy compared to the UK. The trains generally arrive on time, and as you pass windmills and fields, you can relax in peace.

Harmony in The Hague

Peace, of course, is what The Hague ('Den Haag' in Dutch) is famous for. It took its first steps towards being an international 'city of peace, justice and security' in 1899, when it held the world's first peace conference. After the League of Nations was set up, the city became the seat of the Permanent Court of International Justice, which was replaced by the UN's International Court of Justice (ICJ) after the Second World War. In recent years



BELOW: THE KEIZERSGRACHT CANAL IN AMSTERDAM; NO WONDER IT'S OFTEN CALLED 'THE VENICE OF THE NORTH'



"A charming and historic centre with all kinds of entertainment, including world-class shopping"

The Hague was the setting for former dictator Slobodan Milošević's war crimes trial – and where he died before the verdict was given.

Appropriately, our first experience of The Hague is a political one. The tram into the city centre is delayed for 10 minutes while a group of Turkish protesters march by, carrying placards.

"The Hague is a city of many faces," says Rianne Ojeh from the Dutch tourist board. "It has a charming and historic centre with all kinds of entertainment, including world-class shopping centres, theatres and unique restaurants."

The third-largest city in the Netherlands, The Hague has more than 475,000 inhabitants. In spite of its size, there is an urban legend that regards the city as little more than a big village.

It certainly has a quiet, tranquil atmosphere, and in terms of traffic there is more chance of getting run

over by a bicycle than a car! However, as we tour The Hague we learn that change is afoot: three new skyscrapers are being built in the centre, which will transform the city's skyline by the next decade.

It already has a number of impressive buildings, including several palaces. The most famous of these is the Peace Palace, which opened its gates in 1913. This grand building houses the International Court of Justice, and calls to mind the prison in the film, *The Shawshank Redemption*. Outside the palace gates, a lone Buddhist protestor meditates, reminding visitors about human rights abuses in China.

Bizarrely, given that it is not the capital, The Hague is home to the Dutch government and the royal family. On the other side of the city, the Huis ten Bosch Palace is where Queen Beatrix, who has reigned since 1980, resides. The first king of the Netherlands in 1806 was Napoleon's brother, Louis Bonaparte, but the present monarchy was founded in 1813 when William I took the throne.

Perhaps one of the biggest attractions in The Hague is the Mauritshuis, sometimes called 'the greatest of the small museums and the smallest of the great museums'. Set in a lakeside 17th-century urban palace, it houses



ABOVE: TUCKING INTO AN INDONESIAN MEAL
TOP: THE PEACE PALACE, HOME OF THE ICJ

LEFT: YOU ARE NEVER FAR FROM A WINDMILL IN HOLLAND
BELOW: THE SEAT OF PARLIAMENT AT THE HAGUE



"Three new skyscrapers are being built, which will transform the city's skyline"

world-renowned works by Rembrandt, Rubens and Vermeer. The most famous painting is Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which attracts visitors from all over the world. The Dutch *Mona Lisa*, the painting was the inspiration for the Hollywood film of the same name, starring Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth.

Scheveningen, overlooking the North Sea, is just a 15-minute tram ride from the centre of The Hague. This seaside town has a number of hotels, a large Las Vegas-style casino and a pier, making it not too dissimilar to Brighton's seafront. In summer, the long sandy beach attracts people from all over Holland.

Once sightseeing has worked up an appetite, try one of The Hague's fabulous restaurants. If you like spicy food, head to Garoeda for a delicious Indonesian *rijsttafel* (rice table), with several dishes to sample. For a spectacular setting, Binnen on The Hague's seafront is hard to beat. Designed as a 1970s Buddha lounge, Binnen combines contemporary cuisine with funky music and great views.

As the sun goes down, The Hague springs to life and there are some lively nightspots to check out. Leopold's bar, just around the corner from the Mauritshuis Museum, serves an array of Dutch and Belgian beers, and plays a mix of cheesy pop and house tunes to keep you dancing into the early hours.

The Hague is considered to be a leading city in dance and each autumn it holds the International Holland Dance Festival. One of the most unusual venues in the city is De Regentes. This fantastic theatre is set in a former swimming baths, which gives it incredible acoustics. Although dancing is not my forte, I did enjoy watching the modern dance performance by the Cathy Sharpe Ensemble. This was followed by an interactive >



choreography game where we, the audience, got the chance to compose a dance. "This is not Art with a capital 'A,'" explains Dirk Dumon, who created the game. "Instead the spectators are the choreographers and everyone has the opportunity to decide how the piece develops."

We end our two days in The Hague at the dance finale on the Sunday evening, where approximately 1,000 dancers move in harmony to Ravel's *Bolero*, the music made famous by Torvill and Dean's Olympic-winning ice-skating performance in 1984.

Potter around Delft

On Monday morning we travel to the nearby city of Delft, which feels like a mini Amsterdam with its romantic canals, market squares and more cyclists.

At the heart of the city are two spectacular churches. The first, which is nicknamed 'Old Jan', has a leaning tower like the one in Pisa, Italy, and was once considered so unsteady that locals didn't want to live near it – although it has now stood since the 11th century. The main square is home to what is called 'the New Church', even though it was built in the 13th century. It belongs to the faith of Calvinism, the second-largest religion in the Netherlands, after Catholicism. Apart from its history, Holland has been known for its social tolerance, and was once a haven for Jews (although many Dutch Jews

ABOVE: DESIGNER SHOPS AT THE PASSAGE, IN THE HAGUE

BELOW: VERMEER'S GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING ON A DELFT BLUE PLATE



"Vermeer's painting, Girl with a Pearl Earring, attracts visitors from all over the world"

were killed in the Holocaust) and today Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the country.

However, what puts Delft on the map is its world-famous pottery, decorated with the classic Delft Blue patterns. It is all handcrafted and you can see how it is made at the Royal Delft factory.

If you want to discover Delft and The Hague and save money at the same time, buy the City Card, which offers discounts on trams, buses and admission prices to top attractions. In Amsterdam, invest in the 'I Amsterdam Card', which gives you discounted entry into Hermitage Amsterdam, as well as old favourites like Anne Frank's House and the Rijksmuseum.

Between all three cities, you're sure to leave Holland on a cultural high.



FLY Flybe has regular flights to Amsterdam from Exeter, Norwich and Southampton

FACT FILE

City Card: www.citycardthehagedelft.com

Dutch tourist board: www.holland.com/uk

Hermitage Amsterdam: www.hermitage.nl

'I Amsterdam Card': www.iamsterdamcard.com

Mauritshuis: www.mauritshuis.nl

Royal Delft factory: www.royaldelft.com

Where to stay



Carlton Ambassador

Where: Sophialaan 2, The Hague

What: This fantastic four-star hotel is just ten minutes' walk from the Peace Palace, in a beautiful part of The Hague. Rooms start from €119 (£85).

Contact: 0031 (0)70 363 0363; www.carlton.nl/ambassador



NH Hotel

Where: Prinses Margrietplantsoen 100, The Hague

What: A delightful modern designer hotel near the business centre of The Hague. Prices start from €75 (£54).

Contact: 0031 (0)70 381 2345; www.nh-hotels.com



Hotel Mercure

Where: Spui 180, The Hague

What: Towering above the city, this splendid luxury hotel is located in the heart of The Hague and has a gym, restaurant, bar and balconies. Prices start from €94 (£67).

Contact: 0031 (0)70 363 6700; www.accorhotels.com