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## ESCAPE TO AMSTERDAM

By Caroline Phillips

*Caroline Phillips stays in Hotel Seven One Seven in Amsterdam, and then ventures out for some sightseeing....*



Amsterdam, as seen from Tower A'DAM (Image courtesy of Dennis Bouman and I amsterdam)

A member of staff wearing a long cream apron opens the front door.

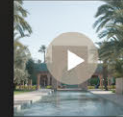
'May I offer you a glass of wine? A seat in front of the fire?' asks this cheery Dutchman. We sit down for a cup of tea in the achtersalon (drawing room) midst classical busts. There are antique leather armchairs, comfy sofas, burning candles and a roaring log fire. Plus fresh roses, orchids and daffodils. Even hot off a KLM flight with my 21-year old daughter, it's easy to set about the business of pretending this is our home.



The hotel's interior decorator — once a fashion stylist — put his signature on the curtains, chairs and lampshades...they're all made from men's clothing material. 'One suite even has a sofa of blue striped men's suit fabric,' says the concierge. Additionally the library (bibliotheek) and the drawing room each boasts a serious and eclectic private collection of art — including bronze statues and antique ceramics. Hotel Seven One Seven, Amsterdam, is nothing if not different.

Seven One Seven was the first and only boutique hotel in the Netherlands when it opened two decades ago. It's in an elegant 1810 building on the architecturally splendid Prinsengracht: a terrace of tall and sometimes lopsided canal houses. The hotel is in an erstwhile merchant's house — its dining room was once a sugar store — and has only nine rooms and suites. It's also centrally located: a five-minute bike ride to the Anne Frank House and the Rijksmuseum.

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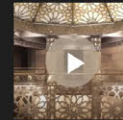
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Guests can chill in the Seven One Seven library with a brandy and ciggie: no Hatha or Ashtanga yoga in this hotel. For lunch (a club sandwich or soup) or dinner (by arrangement), staff will bring a picnic basket of a dish such as chicken curry and rice upstairs. Ah! Those stairs. They're like scaling Killimanjaro. (That's a characteristic of Amsterdam. The merchants were allowed to build towards the sky, but were only afforded limited canal frontage.) We reach our suite — Mahler. All the rooms are named after cultural figures — from Picasso to Tolkien. Each one is decorated differently, but all with antiques, modern and African art. Ours has a brass bed and a sofa large enough to seat an orchestra.

After a peaceful night's sleep and a hearty breakfast (eggs, cold meats, cheeses) taken downstairs in the erstwhile sugar store, we set out for a day's sightseeing. Do we need umbrellas? 'Holland weather,' replies the concierge, enigmatically. We take brollies.



We're also armed with [1 Amsterdam City Cards](#) — which allows us free entrance to more museums and attractions than we could ever visit, a canal cruise and unlimited use of public transport. Plus we have acquired skip-the-line tickets for the Rijksmuseum through [Musement](#). (Musement is like a concierge in an app. They'll book activities, tours and restaurants for you in 50 countries. In Amsterdam they offer 102 suggestions, including eight "must dos"). Call me organised, if you must.

First, we take a taxi to join a [Mike's Bike Tours](#) group. 'Please stop by those bikes,' I say to the Uber driver. Stupid. In these parts, that's like instructing, 'Stop by the man with two legs.' This is, after all, a city where there are more bikes than people.



Our guided cycle tour lasts three hours and involves about 10km: the Red Light district, ('The twins were Amsterdam's oldest prostitutes and retired at 70 after more than 50 years in the sex trade,' says our guide); the coffee shop scene ('Cigarette smoking is forbidden, but joints are encouraged'); the 116-acre Vondelpark, ('Al fresco sex is tolerated, but bongo drums aren't'). 'Wild parking of bikes not allowed,' adds the guide as we finish the tour.

Afterwards we go to the [Anne Frank house](#). Even off-season, there's an enormous queue outside (it attracts one million visitors a year) and only a few people are allowed in at any one time. This was where Anne, the wartime diarist, went into hiding with seven others during the Second World War — before being deported to concentration camps. We walk in silence through its secret annexe, rooms that were emptied on Nazi orders. The witness testimonials are poignant.



Next the [Rijksmuseum](#) ticks all the boxes — it holds one of the largest collections of Rembrandts in the world — and its C19th Cuypers Library (boasting a kilometre of art history books) is also worth a visit. The [Van Gogh Museum](#) is a must too: not just for the Sunflowers, but also for [The Bedroom](#), [Self-Portrait](#) and the [Yellow House](#) — where Gauguin moved in with Van Gogh. "Vincent and I see eye to eye on very little," Gauguin wrote a few weeks later.

And what of food in Amsterdam? There's little that matches the standards of London. I can't recommend everything, but we have an excellent cheeseburger at the Dylan's all-day [Occo Bar Brasserie](#). It's a cosmopolitan eatery on the Keizersgracht — one of Amsterdam's most famous canals — and has a cool, curved bar almost as long, 26 foot to be exact. Plus faultless staff.



Keizersgracht canal houses (image courtesy of Emilio Brizzi and I amsterdam)

We have another meal at *Jansz* in the quirky Pulitzer Hotel. Tuna tartare, miso-glazed cod, US hanger steak, blueberry cheesecake; you get the drift. International. The best aspect of the food is that it's beautifully presented. The restaurant is also light and airy with wooden floors, white walls and brasserie chairs. Plus the service is attentive and charming.

As we sit eating, we discuss Amsterdam. It's a city of spices, porcelain, textiles and tulips. A place that speaks of the legacy of the Dutch West India Company. It's also somewhere with souvenir shops where you can buy salt & pepper penises, and "cannabis" chocolate. A place in which there's a Sex Museum — with interesting art, photos and huge phalluses — and a Museum of Prostitution. Not to mention the Condomerie — the world's first specialist condom shop.



View of the "Skinny Bridge" in Amsterdam (image courtesy of Blue Boat Company and I amsterdam)

That's all very good. But the final, real highlight is our one-hour canal cruise through the UNESCO World Heritage canal district. We boat past the C17th Skinny Bridge and probably around 1500 other bridges, give or take. Past warehouses, old street lights casting a warm, golden glow and C17th houses with decorative gables, ornate door cases and beams for hoisting furniture by ropes and pulleys to the top. As dusk falls, we peep nosily into the former merchants' houses — nobody seems to have curtains here — now bookish, artistic homes. And then, happy as can be, we return to our own home: the Seven One Seven.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

### **Seven One Seven**

Prinsengracht 717. 1017 JW Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Phone: +31 20 427 0717

Website: [717hotel.nl](http://717hotel.nl)

Price: From 300 to 650 euros per night

NB: WiFi is included; breakfast is extra

### **KLM**

KLM Economy fares to Amsterdam start from £71 return and are inclusive of taxes. To book or for additional information, check [www.klm.com](http://www.klm.com) or call the reservation line on +44 (0) 20 7660 0293.

*Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to [www.carolinephillips.net](http://www.carolinephillips.net).*