

**Amsterdam**, city and port, western [Netherlands](#), located on the [IJsselmeer](#) and connected to the [North Sea](#). It is the capital and the principal commercial and financial centre of the Netherlands.

To the scores of tourists who visit each year, Amsterdam is known for its historical attractions, for its collections of great art, and for the distinctive colour and flavour of its old sections, which have been so well preserved. However, visitors to the city also see a crowded metropolis beset by [environmental pollution](#), traffic congestion, and housing shortages. It is easy to describe Amsterdam, which is more than 700 years old, as a living museum of a bygone age and to praise the eternal beauty of the centuries-old canals, the ancient patrician houses, and the atmosphere of freedom and tolerance, but the modern city is still working out solutions to the pressing urban problems that confront it.



**Amsterdam, Netherlands**

Amsterdam is the [nominal](#) capital of the Netherlands but not the seat of government, which is [The Hague](#). The royal family, for example, is only occasionally in residence at the Royal Palace, on the square known as the Dam, in Amsterdam. The city lacks the monumental architecture found in other capitals. There are no wide squares suitable for big parades, nor are there triumphal arches or imposing statues. Amsterdam's [intimate](#) character is best reflected in the narrow, bustling streets of the old town, where much of the population still goes about its business. While there are reminders of the glorious past—gabled houses, noble brick facades clad with sandstone, richly decorated cornices, towers and churches, and the music of [carillons](#) and barrel organs—the realities of life in the modern city often belie this [romantic](#) image.

The inner city is divided by its network of canals into some 90 “islands,” and the municipality contains approximately 1,300 bridges and viaducts.

Amsterdam is the economic centre of the Netherlands, and there tradition persists alongside [innovation](#). Although the city has a modern metro system, about one-fifth of the workforce still relies on the time-honoured [bicycle](#) for transportation. The city continues to be famous for its countless Chinese and Indonesian restaurants and the hundreds of houseboats that line its canals.

Since the mid-1960s Amsterdam also has been known for a permissive atmosphere, and it attracts many people seeking an [alternative](#) lifestyle. Area city, 64 square miles (165 square km); metro. area, 245 square miles (635 square km). Pop. (2008 est.) city, 1,028,603; metro. area, 1,482,676.

## Physical and human geography

### The landscape

## The city layout



**Amsterdam** Map of Amsterdam (c. 1900), from the 10th edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

Amsterdam is situated in a flat and low-lying area mainly on the south bank of the IJ, an inland arm of the former [Zuiderzee](#), now the IJsselmeer, connected by canal with the North Sea. The Amstel River flows from south to north through the city toward the IJ. Parts of the city lie below [sea level](#), some of them on land that has been reclaimed from the sea or from marshes or lakes.



## Countries and Capitals Quiz

### City development

The current Dutch capital first took shape as a small [medieval](#) settlement on dikes containing the Amstel where it met the IJ. The Amstel was dammed to control flooding, and the city's name derives from the Amstel dam. By the 16th century Amsterdam had grown into a walled city centred on the present Dam, bounded approximately by what are now the Singel and the

Kloveniersburgwal canals. Three towers of the old fortifications still stand. Outside the Singel are the three main canals dating from the early 17th century: the Herengracht (Gentlemen's Canal), Keizersgracht (Emperor's Canal), and Prinsengracht (Prince's Canal). These concentric canals, together with the smaller radial canals, form a [characteristic](#) spiderweb pattern, which was extended east along the harbour and west into the district known as the Jordaan during the prosperous [Golden Age](#) (the 17th and early 18th centuries).

The old part of Amsterdam has many ancient buildings, most notably the Old Church (Oude Kerk), built in the 13th century, and the [New Church](#) (Nieuwe Kerk), begun in the 15th century. Next to the New Church is the 17th-century city hall, now the [Royal Palace](#), built in classical Palladian style. Other significant buildings include the Mint Tower (Munttoren), with a 17th-century spire resting on a medieval gate; the South Church (Zuiderkerk, 1611); the West Church (Westerkerk, 1631), where [Rembrandt](#) is buried; the Trippenhuis, housing the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences; and the Old Man's House Gate (Oudemanhuispoort), now the entrance to one of the University of Amsterdam's main buildings. The former Jewish quarter, in the eastern portion of the old town, is the location of the Portuguese Synagogue (1671) and the [Rembrandt House](#) (Rembrandthuis), which is now a museum. The old town's three main squares are the [Dam](#), the Leidseplein (Leiden Square), and the Rembrandtplein (Rembrandt Square). Fine 17th- and 18th-century patrician houses line the canals.





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Major physical change came again to the cityscape in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the booming colonial trade fueled industrialization and the expansion of the city's population. For example, new inexpensive residential, commercial, and industrial construction filled De Pijp, a neighbourhood in the southern part of the city, and workers crowded into the older buildings of the Jordaan in the west. The [North Sea Canal](#), a major new channel running west to the sea, was completed in 1876; new docks and warehouses developed along the waterfront; and in 1889 the city's new rail [hub](#), Central Station, was built on an artificial island in the IJ north of the city centre. In the early 20th century new suburbs were built, several in the Amsterdam school of architectural style; their imaginative, asymmetrical motifs broke up the monotony associated with suburban [public housing](#) units. Sint Nicolaas Church (1886), the Beurs (Stock Exchange; 1903), and the Shipping House (1916) date from this period, as do the [Rijksmuseum](#) (1876–85), the Concertgebouw (Concert Hall; 1888), the [Stedelijk Museum](#) (1895), the Olympic Stadium (1928), and the Amstel Station (1939).

Amsterdam suffered less damage than many other European cities during [World War II](#), but the old Jewish quarter was [razed](#). After the war, [urban renewal](#) programs and large-scale new housing estates attempted to

accommodate increasing population, rising incomes, and the inexorable growth in [automobile](#) traffic. New garden suburbs included Sloterveer on the western edge of the city, Nieuwendam in the north, Buitenveldert in the south, and, in the 1970s, Bijlmermeer in the southeast. Bijlmermeer was the ultimate in modernist utopian [urban planning](#), with bicycle paths, playgrounds, and high-rises built along the city's new metro line. However, it was not a success and was later partly demolished and redeveloped in a mix of building styles for a variety of uses. Since the 1970s, low-rise mixed housing projects have been the vogue, including both public housing and private-sector [dwellings](#). Recent developments of this kind have been built in Sloten and the Middelveldsche Akerpolder in the west, while in the east, in the old harbour district, intense housing construction began in the 1990s. During the last decades of the 20th century, inner-city areas were increasingly renovated rather than replaced.

## The people of Amsterdam

Amsterdam is a small city compared with most national capitals. After [World War II](#) the population stood at more than 800,000; it declined until the mid-1980s but has generally risen since then. Recent increases are due to a steady surplus of births over deaths and to an influx of [immigrants](#). About half of the city's inhabitants are [indigenous](#) Dutch; about one-tenth are of Surinamese origin; and there are significant Moroccan and Turkish minorities. Amsterdam has been a home to immigrants since the 16th century. More recently, many have come from the former Dutch empire ([Indonesia](#), [Suriname](#), and the islands of the former [Netherlands Antilles](#)). Others have come as "guest workers," especially from [Morocco](#) and [Turkey](#), or as employees of multinational corporations and students from developed

countries. Moreover, during the 1990s many new immigrants came as [asylum](#) seekers. Non-European minorities now [comprise](#) well over one-third of Amsterdam's population (and about two-thirds of those less than 19 years old), and the city has an active policy of [integration](#), based on language learning and social orientation.

The birth and marriage rates have been rising since the mid-1990s. Meanwhile, as in other Western societies, increasing numbers live alone, in single-parent families, or as unmarried couples. Unlike the population of the Netherlands as a whole, that of Amsterdam has not become older demographically. Pre-retirement-age residents are not a shrinking share of the population, mainly because there is a continual influx of younger people.

## **The economy**

Like most modern cities, Amsterdam is a service centre, with only about one-tenth of its workforce employed in manufacturing. The most vibrant and expanding part of the dominant [service sector](#) is its business services component, including consulting, information and medical technology, and telecommunications. The consistent lifeblood of the city for the past seven centuries has been [international trade](#) and transport, which together account for about one-fifth of employment. Banking and insurance also have been a mainstay of the Amsterdam economy, together accounting for about one-eighth of all jobs, while about one-sixth of jobholders are employed in health, cultural, and social services. Another important part of the city's economy, tourism, accounts for about one-tenth of all jobs. However, despite this thriving service sector, at the turn of the 21st century the city had many



job seekers who lacked marketable skills, and about one-eighth of the workforce was unemployed.

## **Finance and trade**

Amsterdam is a very popular location for international business, mainly because of its combination of accessibility, cultural richness, [cosmopolitan](#) character, and a human scale that results from the absence of high-rise buildings and multilane highways. The [Netherlands](#) has attracted no less than one-fifth of all U.S. and Japanese investment in [Europe](#), and much of this is focused on Amsterdam. The city also is a major financial centre, though a less important one than [London](#) or [Frankfurt](#). All major Dutch banks have their headquarters in the city, as do the European Options Exchange and the Dutch branch of the Euronext Securities Exchange, and some 60 foreign banks have offices there. The city's busy port and excellent land and [air transportation](#) links have allowed it to maintain its importance as a centre for regional and international trade.

## **Industry**

Industry no longer accounts for a large share of Amsterdam's economy; however, the industrial activities that continue are varied, ranging from shipbuilding and heavy engineering to petrochemicals, [food processing](#) (including brewing), and diamond polishing. Aimed at reducing unemployment, the city's active [economic policy](#) seeks to attract industrial investment by improving infrastructural links with the surrounding region and by providing training, temporary workers, and grants to employers. In the

process, the city government created thousands of subsidized jobs toward the end of the 20th century.

## **Tourism**

Tourism of all kinds is a major and growing economic activity. Many visitors to the city come for business purposes or to [attend](#) conferences, particularly at the large RAI Exhibition and Congress Centre. Because it is possible to see many of the sites on foot in a single day, day trips to Amsterdam are also extremely popular.

## **Transportation**

Amsterdam commands excellent transport connections via rail, water, road, and air. [Schiphol Airport](#) is among the busiest in Europe and indisputably one of the world's major hub airports. Amsterdam's seaport also ranks among the most important in Europe, but, overshadowed by the huge Rotterdam-Europoort nearby, the Amsterdam docks underwent a gradual decline in traffic during the late 20th century. An [extensive](#) network of superhighways connects Amsterdam with all parts of the Netherlands and with [Germany](#) and [Belgium](#). Within the city, since the 1960s, planners have favoured [public transportation](#) to reduce [automobile](#) use. A high-speed metro line opened in 1976, and a new fast rail link to Schiphol entered service in 1988, but trams remain the principal means of transportation in inner Amsterdam, while buses are important in outer districts.

## **Administration of Amsterdam**

According to the Dutch constitution, every municipality in the Netherlands is headed by a council, whose size depends on the number of inhabitants. The 45 members of the Amsterdam City Council are elected to four-year terms of office. The council's College of Aldermen [comprises](#) eight elected aldermen and the mayor, who is appointed by the crown for a period of six years. The mayor also presides at the meetings of the council but is not an official member of this body. Although the council has no say in the appointment of the mayor, the officeholder usually represents the largest political group in the council. Since the end of [World War II](#), the Labour Party has dominated the council, and the mayors have come from its ranks. The council, however, is made up of members of many different political persuasions, including the Greens and the Green Left. Chosen by and from the members of the council, the aldermen are elected to four-year terms. Aldermen also receive an income, while council members are paid only an attendance fee.

As a rule, council meetings are open to the public. From 1655 to 1808 the seat of the council was located on the Dam, where the [medieval](#) town hall was replaced by a building designed by the 17th-century Dutch architect [Jacob van Campen](#). When [Louis Bonaparte](#), the French king of Holland, chose this structure as his residence in 1808 and converted it into what is now the Royal Palace (Koninklijk Paleis), the council moved to the Prinsenhof, a onetime convent that later became the Admiralty Court. In the mid-1980s a new city hall and opera house were constructed on the north bank of the Amstel River, at Waterloo Square. In 1926 Herengracht 502, which was built for a director of the [Dutch East India Company](#) in 1672, became the mayor's official residence.

The responsibilities of the municipality include [public transportation](#), [public works](#) (including [acquisition](#) and allocation of grounds and buildings), [public health](#), housing, electricity and gas, the port, markets, police, the fire brigade, sanitation, social services, waterworks, education, and churchyards. The city has its own clearing bank, credit bank, advertising department, printing shop, swimming pools, theatre, archive department, museums, slaughterhouse, and orphanage.

## Cultural life



1 of 2

**Van Gogh Museum** Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



2 of 2

**History of the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam** Overview of the Anne Frank House, Amsterdam.

[See all videos for this article](#)

As a centre for the arts, Amsterdam has much to offer. There are some 40 museums, which attract about four million visitors annually. The [Rijksmuseum](#) (State Museum) is famous for its collection of 17th-century Dutch masterpieces. The [Stedelijk \(Municipal\) Museum](#) is a leading international collection of [modern art](#). The [Van Gogh Museum](#) is dedicated to the work of [Vincent van Gogh](#) and his contemporaries. Other important museums include the [Anne Frank House](#), the Amsterdam Historical Museum, the Dutch Maritime Museum, and the Rembrandt House.

There are more than 200 live-performance sites, including the Concertgebouw, which is the home of the world-famous Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and the Muziektheater, where the national ballet and opera companies perform. The city is also home to two universities—the University of Amsterdam, founded in 1632, and the Free University, founded in 1880—and numerous academies and conservatories. The architecture of the inner city (and of some of the suburbs) is a delight for many tourists interested in [culture](#), who seek out the superbly preserved canal-side mansions of the Golden Age and the numerous historic monuments, including the Royal Palace. The arts play an important economic role in Amsterdam, employing thousands of people and generating nearly \$1 billion in revenues annually. There are more than 100 galleries, including major auction houses.





### Countries and Capitals Quiz

Recreational facilities are extensive. The Amsterdam Woods, the seaside resort of Zandvoort to the west, Slotter Lake (Sloterplas) in the heart of the western suburbs, and many smaller lakes to the south and north of the city all offer opportunities for outdoor recreation. There are about 40 sports parks, clubs for almost every sport, and more than 250 open-air tennis courts in this

crowded city. For spectator sports, the Amsterdam Arena, home of the [Ajax](#) football (soccer) club, and the Olympic Stadium are world-class [venues](#).

# History of Amsterdam

## Early settlement and growth

Although modern historians do not exclude the possibility that during the Roman period some form of settlement existed at the mouth of the Amstel River, no evidence of one has ever been found. So far as is known, Amsterdam originated as a small fishing village in the 13th century ce. To protect themselves from floods, the early inhabitants had to build [dikes](#) on both sides of the river, and about 1270 they built a dam between these dikes.

Even then, [merchant](#) ships from Amsterdam sailed as far as the [Baltic Sea](#) and laid the foundation of the future trade centre, acting as a link between northern [Europe](#) and [Flanders](#) (now northern [Belgium](#) and northern France). The city was under the jurisdiction of the counts of [Holland](#), one of whom, Count [Floris V](#), granted the *homines manentes apud Amestelledamme* (“people living near the Amstel dam”) a toll privilege in 1275. This document mentions the name Amsterdam for the first time, though a full charter was not granted until 1306. The city rapidly extended its business, and in 1489, as a sign of gratitude for the support given by the city to the Burgundian-Austrian monarchs, Emperor [Maximilian I](#) allowed Amsterdam to adorn its [armorial bearings](#) with the imperial crown. By then Holland’s greatest commercial town and port, as well as the granary of the northern [Netherlands](#), Amsterdam had become a centre of wealth and influence in Europe.

After the Netherlands passed to the Spanish crown in the 16th century, a religious and political rebellion against Spanish oppression spread across the region. Amsterdam hesitated to join the rebellion led by [William I](#) (the Silent), prince of Orange, but in 1578 there was a bloodless revolution in the city. The magistrates, together with the majority of Roman Catholic priests, were deported; the religious orders and [communities](#) were secularized; the Dutch [Reformed church](#) effectively replaced the Roman Catholic church; and Amsterdam joined the Dutch rebellion against [Spain](#).

Amsterdam was still a small city with no more than about 30,000 inhabitants, but things changed quickly, especially in 1585, when Spanish troops recaptured [Antwerp](#) (in modern Belgium), then the dominant port and commercial centre of the Netherlands. Dutch forces responded by blockading the [Schelde River](#), Antwerp's only access to the sea. The fall of Antwerp led to a wholesale influx of mainly Protestant refugees into the towns of the northern Netherlands, especially Amsterdam. Their arrival enriched the city's [intellectual](#), cultural, and commercial life. Banking and shipbuilding especially flourished. Much of the trade formerly concentrated in Antwerp then moved to Amsterdam, and along with the Flemish merchants soon came hundreds of Jews expelled from [Portugal](#), followed by their coreligionists from the area of modern [Germany](#) and eastern Europe. The city soon became a trading metropolis, whose population more than tripled between 1565 and 1618. Merchant ships from Amsterdam not only sailed to the Baltic and the Mediterranean but also plied the long sea route to the [East Indies](#) and established colonies in [South America](#) and southern Africa.

At this time, the still outwardly [medieval](#) town developed into a big city, and in 1612 the city council decided upon a new extension—the Three Canals Plan. Furthermore, the city needed a new and stately city hall, and the architect [Jacob van Campen](#) was commissioned to build one on Dam square in the shadow of the [New Church](#). In 1632 the Athenaeum Illustre (which became the University of Amsterdam in the 19th century) was erected. When the Treaty of Münster ended the [Eighty Years' War](#) (1568–1648) with Spain, Amsterdam was the financial, trading, and cultural centre of the world, lending money to foreign kings and emperors and thus [exerting](#) political influence internationally.





art market: The rise of Antwerp and Amsterdam

Conflict between the city council and other political forces in the Dutch republic was inevitable because the country was effectively no longer ruled by the [States General](#) in [The Hague](#) but by a small elite of magistrates and merchants in Amsterdam. This situation led to political difficulties with [William II](#), prince of Orange, who in 1650 planned to besiege the city. Amsterdam, nevertheless, maintained its dominant position for many years. Decline gradually came in the 18th century; [London](#) and Hamburg surpassed Amsterdam as trade centres, and London became the financial heart of Europe. Amsterdam was occupied in 1787 by the Prussians, who backed the policy of [William V](#), prince of Orange. The French, welcomed as liberators in 1795, brought freedom, but within a few years trade and shipping nearly stopped because of [Napoleon's embargo](#) on trade with [Britain](#). In 1806 Napoleon proclaimed the Netherlands a kingdom, with Amsterdam as its capital, but by 1810 the country was incorporated into the French Empire. Russian [Cossacks](#) drove out the French and entered the city in 1813, and, on March 30, 1814, William VI, prince of Orange, was inaugurated as [William I](#), king of the Netherlands, in Amsterdam's New Church.

## The modern city

The [international trade](#) on which Amsterdam had thrived suffered greatly during the Napoleonic period, and it was only the revival of Dutch rule and commerce in the [East Indies](#) in the 1830s that began to restore prosperity to the city. After 1850 [sustained](#) growth set in, and the population doubled (to 500,000) by 1900. The East Indian trade and associated manufactures remained the backbone of the economy. The [North Sea Canal](#), built during the 1870s, strengthened the port by providing a direct link to the [North Sea](#).



Amsterdam suffered from the disruption of trade during [World War I](#), but modest prosperity resumed in the 1920s. The [Great Depression](#) and [World War II](#) were especially traumatic for the capital. The German army occupied the Netherlands in 1940, and Allied bombers attacked industrial areas several times. However, the city's severest loss was the [deportation](#) of its 70,000 Jewish inhabitants. There were heroic [exploits](#) in Amsterdam by the Dutch [Resistance](#) and many quiet deeds of valour in protecting those persecuted by the Nazi regime, such as the family of [Anne Frank](#). However, the city's Jews and their old quarter were almost entirely eliminated.

After the war there was a difficult period of reconstruction, but by the 1950s the economy was booming. The [Netherlands](#) in the 1950s was not a radical place, and Amsterdam was typically staid and proper. The 1960s, however, brought social and cultural change throughout the Western world, nowhere more so than in Amsterdam, which embraced the libertarian radicalism for which it has been renowned ever since. The reasons for the extraordinary change are still debated but include the long economic boom, the severity of the religious strictures in mainstream Dutch [culture](#) in the mid-20th century, and the traditional Dutch tolerance of difference. This radicalism opened the way for the city's relatively open tolerance for recreational [drug use](#) and prostitution. During the 1960s and '70s, numerous radical movements arose, some of them highly political and tightly structured, but many of them playful and satirical, based on street theatre. Public demonstrations often turned into confrontations with the increasingly bewildered and beleaguered police. Riots took place at the wedding of Princess (later Queen) [Beatrix](#) in 1966 and at her coronation parade in 1980, and demonstrations, [confrontations](#), and riots over a variety of political issues occurred in central Amsterdam repeatedly into the

1980s. During the 1990s the intensity of street protest diminished, but there is still a radicalism in Amsterdam's public life that is hard to find anywhere else.