



The Other Side of Amsterdam

Contrary to its seedy reputation, Amsterdam is full of child-friendly surprises

Amsterdam: city of the lost weekend, the sex-and-drugs capital of Europe. Or just a bunch of dusty, old master-filled museums. Either way, no place to take the kids, right?

That's not what Steven and Sherrie Svymbersky thought when they moved here from Chicago five years ago with their three-year-old daughter, Maddie. They knew you could leave the lads on lost weekends aside (easy to do—they're all staggering around the same five square blocks near the train station) and enjoy a hip, cosmopolitan city that's great for both adults and children of all ages.

One of the best things for families is that Amsterdam is kiddie-scale and not at all intimidating: in the old centre, skinny three-story buildings lean higgledy-piggledy against each other, split by narrow cobblestone streets and winding canals. Even the cars—what few there are—are miniature. At dusk, when the white lights twinkle on the canal bridges and bicyclists whiz by in the dim light, there's a fairy-tale feel. It was on a night like this in 1997, a few weeks after the family had moved, that Maddie asked her parents, "Is this place real?"

Amsterdam may seem like a fantasyland, but its inhabitants are very sensible. The Dutch seem to be constantly dreaming up new ways to entertain and educate children, while helping their parents maintain their sanity. As a result, those with shorter attention spans are given lots to do while their parents tour boring old museums. Take the Nederlands Scheepvaartmuseum (Kattenburgerplein 1, tel: 31-020-523-2222), for instance, an enormous old munitions warehouse crammed with medieval maps, scale models of frigates and other souvenirs of the maritime history of the Netherlands.

Children (OK, some adults too) can be quickly overwhelmed by the ephemera, so they head straight for the replica of a 19th-century Dutch East Indies trading ship. This is staffed with an authentically grubby crew of sailors, who will tour children around the hold, teach them sea chanteys, and tell them all about the hardships and adventures of sailing the high seas.

Nearby is a museum that caters more directly to young visitors, but is done well enough that it's also interesting to adults: NEMO (Oosterdok 2, tel: 31-900-919-1100), dedicated to teaching kids how the world works—from the stock market to hydroelectricity—through nifty hands-on activities. It's been a favourite place of Maddie, and, Steven says, "As a parent I like it because I can let her run off on her own without worries." There are also exhibits that interest Xavier, his two-year-old, as well. From the roof deck (which gets set up like a beach in the summer), you get a bird's-eye-view of the city—it still looks like the medieval maps hanging in the Scheepvaartmuseum.

Artis Zoo (Plantage Kerklaan 38–40, tel: 31-20-523-3400) is another popular destination for all-ages entertainment. Established in 1838, the park still retains a very gracious 19th-century feel, with historic buildings rising out of the rambling gardens. Children will love the planetarium, aquarium, geological museum, and botanic garden. The excellent Jungle by Night building gives visitors a rare glimpse of nocturnal animals, and the murkily fascinating Amsterdam canal exhibit—complete with eels and sunken bicycles—will give kids a new outlook during future strolls or boat rides around town.

If parents want to do their own sightseeing, enriching activities abound. Drop the little ones at the Helden & Boeven Cinema (Nieuwmarkt 11; tel: 31-20-622-4622), where the entrance tickets are tasty cookies and lemonade, popcorn, and sometimes pancakes are served during the show. Call ahead to see if English-language films are on. Or opt for a full day of activity at Circustheater Elleboog ("Elbow Circus"; Passeerdersgracht 32, tel: 31-20-623-5326), which teaches classes in clowning and trapeze skills; parents then watch kids perform in the evening. Participants are mostly Dutch children, but the staff speak English.

The less athletic may prefer the Kinderkookkafé (Oudezijds Achterburgwal 193, tel: 31-20-625-3257), a sunny place staffed entirely by children, who prepare the food, act as waiters, and tally up the bills. Parents drop kids (eight years old and up) off during the day, then return later to eat what they've prepared (with help from the adult owners). Call ahead to reserve.

But you needn't make the little ones wash dishes just to get a good child-friendly meal. Café Restaurant Amsterdam (Watertorenplein 6, tel: 31-20-682-2666), in a converted 19th-century pumping station on the west side of town, is a favourite with fashionable parents because it's stylish, with a sophisticated menu (roast quail, oysters), but the staff are also quick to provide high chairs, crayons, and books.

In de Waag (Nieuwmarkt 4, tel: 31-20- 422-7772) is another hip, kid-friendly restaurant in an impressive setting: the 15th-century weigh-house on the Nieuwmarkt. The interior is lit only with candles—spooky but cool, perhaps enough to make the children hush. Fortunately the menu is modern, with items like North Sea salmon with braised endive.

Some of the best treats for children are a short hop by train from Amsterdam. Less than an hour east is the Apenheul primate park (J.C. Wilsaan 21–31, Apeldoorn, tel: 31-55-3575757), a zoo specializing in monkeys and lemurs, most of which roam free among the visitors. The curious, fearless spider monkeys are the best.

For a little more nature, plan a trip to the Hoge Veluwe (www.hogeveluwe.nl), a 13,000-acre national park. It's as wild as the Netherlands gets, with red deer and wild boars through the woodlands and dunes, which you can tour on bikes (supplied free, with adjustable seats). In the grounds is the esteemed Kröller-Müller modern art museum, which has an impressive collection of Van Goghs.

A little farther, but well worth the trip, is the Efteling amusement park (purchase a combination ticket that includes train fare, shuttle bus, and admission at any train station). Parents jaded by Disney will find Efteling refreshingly non-commercial (though of course there are still shops selling merchandise of the characters, but, as they are so less well known to our children than the crew of Disney characters, your children are less likely to want everything that they see).

The park itself is also full of imaginative, truly fantastic activities and creatures, all based on traditional fairy tales. The main part of the park, designed in the Fifties by Anton Pieck, an

illustrator of fairy tales, is the Enchanted Forest, populated with the likes of Red Riding Hood and Sleeping Beauty, as well as some talking bins that will thank you every time you deposit some rubbish. Even the more traditional thrill-seeking rides will not disappoint, with bewitching dream flights to elfin realms and rip-roaring roller coasters.

Back in the city, everyone might want an afternoon of unstructured play. Younger children love the Melkhuis, generally considered the best playground in the city. Set in the middle of Vondelpark, the city's vibrant central green patch, it holds several slides, swings for children of all ages, a zip-line, and see-saws. It's all enclosed, so parents don't have to worry about tots toddling off, and the café serves beer, coffee, chips and other snacks.

If you've got older children to please, head for De Mirandabad (De Mirandalaan 9, tel: 31-20-546-4444), a *zwemparadijs* (swim paradise) of water slides, wave machines, and baby-wading pools, both indoors and out. Adults can relax in saunas and whirlpools as well.

Another all-ages fun zone that's very high-energy—perfect for wearing the youngsters out and sending them off to bed early—is the recently opened TunFun Speelpark (Mr. Visserplein 7, tel: 31-20-689-4300), a children's activity park housed in a rather unpromising-looking traffic underpass near Waterlooplein. Inside, though, the fun starts with giant plastic-ball pits, an indoor football field, and even an area where children can paint graffiti and draw on the sidewalk. It's a bit raucous but, like the rest of Amsterdam, cool enough that adults will enjoy it too.

SIDEBAR: RESOURCES

HOTELS

Amsterdam suffers a shortage of hotel rooms, and those large enough for families are even scarcer—so book well ahead.

THE GRAND SOFITEL DEMEURE At this historic property in the old centre, children will love the swimming pool; adults, the plush rooms. *£270 for a double room. Oudezijds Voorburgwal 197, tel: 00-31-20-555-3111; www.thegrand.nl*

AMBASSADE HOTEL This canal house has a literary bent (Salman Rushdie counts among the famous guests). There's an in-house babysitter and 24-hour room service. *Prices start from £130 for a double room. Herengracht 341, tel: 00-31-20-555-0222; www.ambassadehotel.nl*

LANCASTER HOTEL Part of the child-friendly Best Western chain, the Lancaster is a 100-year-old building across the street from the zoo. Under-11s stay free. *From £110 for a double room. Plantage Middenlaan 48, tel: 00-31-20-535-6888; www.bestwestern.com/prop_92659*

ACACIA HOTEL Rooms at this friendly budget operation in the northern Jordaan are clean and serviceable, but the main attraction is the several houseboats moored nearby. *From £90 for on of the hotel's houseboats. Lindengracht 251, tel: 00-31-20-622-1460; www.acaciahotel.nl*

HOTEL WIECHMANN For canal-house charm on a budget, Hotel Wiechmann is a good deal. Some rooms sleep up to six. Location, too, is prime: down the street from the Anne Frank House. *Prinsengracht 328–32, tel: 00-31-20-626-3321; www.hotelwiechmann.nl*

ESTHERÉA HOTEL An old-fashioned hotel with family rooms and, rare for a canal-house property, there's a lift. *Prices start from £150 for a double room. Singel 303–309, tel: 00-31-20-624-5146; www.estherea.nl*

SHOPPING

Shopping in Amsterdam is a treat: super-creative toy stores, tiny boutiques for urban-cool kids and lots of bike shops. The best area for browsing is the Negen Straatjes, the nine short streets crossing the canal ring on the west side.

BANKRAS TWEEWIELERS All manner of two-wheeled accessories feature here, and the owner can advise on shipping if you want your own Dutch roadster. *Nieuwe Hoogstraat 21–23, tel: 00-31-20-624-6137*

DE BEESTENWINKEL At this toy store devoted to animals there are toy rabbits, alligator finger puppets, and ladybird wellies. *Staalstraat 11, tel: 00-31-20-623-1805*

BROER EN ZUS For cool clothing, such as hoodies emblazoned with the words 'Little Man'—for children up to age four. *Eerste Bloemdwardsstraat 19, tel: 00-31-20-422-9002*

HEMA This Dutch chain store stocks everything from children's clothing to raingear to kitchen towels. *Kalvertoren, Singel 457/A1, tel: 00-31-20-422-8988*

JOE'S VLIAGERWINKEL Make the best of the many windy days in Amsterdam with a stop at this whimsical shop devoted to kites. *Nieuwe Hoogstraat 19, tel: 00-31-20-625-0139*

KITSCH KITCHEN KIDS Bags made from bright printed Mexican oilcloth are among the goodies at this eye-popping shop. *Rozengracht 183, tel: 00-31-20-428-4969*

'T KLOMPENHUISJE A well-priced stock of handmade children's shoes. *Nieuwe Hoogstraat 9A, tel: 00-31-20-622-8100*

E. KRAMER/PONTIFEX At the back of the store is the precious *poppendokter*, or doll doctor, who can repair anything from antique porcelain baby dolls to modern teddies. *Reestraat 18–20, tel: 00-31-20-626-5274*

OILILY 2003 marks the 40th anniversary of this purveyor of sturdy, bright-coloured clothing for babies, children and teens. *PC Hooftstraat 131–133, tel: 00-31-20-672-3361*

DE WITTE TANDENWINKEL This dental shop will win children over with purple dinosaur toothbrushes and fancy flavored toothpastes. *Runstraat 5, tel: 00-31-20-623-3443*