



American Express Travelcast: Walking on water

American Express

Travelcast

Beyond Sightseeing

Walking On Water

Transcript

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INTRODUCTION

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Hello, and Welkom to the American Express Travelcast for the shimmering city of Amsterdam.

I'm Matthys

And I'm Saskia

And together we'll be introducing you to what people have called the Venice of the North...

Although Amsterdammers prefer to call Venice the Amsterdam of the South. For one thing, we've got more canals! No other city combines the sparkling beauty of Amsterdam's canals with the vigour of an old European port, and the unique free-thinking of its people. Freewheeling too, as they bump over the cobbles on their bone-shaker bikes, and cycle by the canals.

Not even the local people always know that they are often walking or cycling where there once was water. Many of the city's main streets were once waterways, our train station was built on pilings, and even the Royal Palace in Dam Square rests on boggy marshland. Take our walk and come back to the days when the Dutch ruled the waves, hear a story about an eel who killed 26 people, and about a local carpenter who carved out canals.

All of our stops are marked on the Travelcast companion map. You can explore them all today, do a short version of the tour, or follow your own path at any time. We start in the square right in front of the Centraal Station.

STOP 1

Centraal Station: Pierre Cuypers

If you arrive in Amsterdam at the Centraal Station, you are literally stepping into the city's watery history. When the Dutch architect, Pierre Cuypers, built a train station here in the late 1800s, this was a sandy bank on the IJ bay.

Imagine the view as Cuypers saw it. Not cobbles and stones, but water and boats. Vessels of all sizes, from graceful clipper ships arriving from Indonesia bearing cargoes of nutmegs and cloves, to busy little fishing boats fetching their catch for the markets.

This is the scene that Cuypers knew he was being hired to destroy. The new station would block the city of Amsterdam off from its waterfront on the IJ for the first time.

We don't know exactly why the Dutch government had stubbornly decided that the city's new station had to be here, and not south of the Leidseplein, as Amsterdam's own City Council had wished. It was another sign that modern steam transportation had replaced the age of sail.

Centraal Station took seven years to complete, the biggest building project in Amsterdam in the whole of the 19th century. Although many Amsterdammers were against the location, everyone wanted to see this exciting new creation and 14,000 people bought platform tickets on the morning it opened.

Cuypers' challenge was to turn water into what you see before you. He set about it by building three huge artificial islands, and with mathematical precision worked out that if he drove 8,687 wooden stakes into the islands, they would support the weight of the planned station. It was a brilliant feat of construction, for the station still works perfectly well over a century later.

Today, Pierre Cuypers is famous for this building and his other great Amsterdam masterpiece, the Rijksmuseum. Both combine elements of the Gothic and Renaissance Revival styles that were popular during this time of economic revival and large-scale building projects in Amsterdam.

If Cuypers' public works seem like civic cathedrals, it may be because he designed more than 100 churches that he designed throughout the Netherlands. Successful and prolific, Pierre Cuypers trained many young architects, and his son, grandson and nephew all followed in his footsteps.

Follow us now as we walk east to Haarlemmerstraat and another stop in Amsterdam's maritime past.

STOP 2

West India House: Peter Stuyvesant

This handsome mansion on the south side of Haarlemmerstraat is West Indisch Huis, or West India House, where part of the massive Dutch maritime empire was once controlled. The house was built in 1617 and the Dutch West India Company moved in six years later. In those days, these private companies were all-powerful, issued their own currencies and raised their own armies. As they sailed the seas for commercial gain, they helped shape the New World. It was behind these doors that a decision was made to found a settlement on the island of Manhattan, and call it New Amsterdam.

Peter Stuyvesant was the adventurous man that was to lead that colony until the British took over and renamed it New York. If the main doors are closed, go round the east side and peek inside the 17th century courtyard, where his statue poses proudly.

Peter was born in the Netherlands, joined the military and bravely served in the West Indies where he lost a leg in a raid on the Portuguese island of St. Martin. Stuyvesant became known as "Peg Leg Pete", but the injury didn't stop him. He was quite the entrepreneur, in an age of golden opportunities for the enterprising mind. Those who chose to sail the seas — and the Dutch have always been inquisitive explorers — could make their fortunes and rise to great heights.

Stuyvesant became the Governor of the city of New Amsterdam, where his military background was needed on this new frontier. Although the British took over in 1644, many remaining place names reflect the Dutch origin of, what is now, New York City.

The Dutch West India Company didn't survive much longer than Stuyvesant's control of New Amsterdam. It had never been as successful as its rival, the Dutch East India Company, as it had always been more interested in waging war than trading goods.

Cross over the Prinsengracht and walk down Lindengracht to house number 186, halfway down on the north side of the street.

STOP 3

Lindengracht: The Plucky Policeman

As you walked down Lindengracht, you might be walking on water. 'Gracht' is the Dutch word for a canal. This road was once the Linden canal—the canal of the linden trees—until it was filled in to provide for the increasing city traffic.

This pleasant street was the site of what Amsterdammers call the Eel Uprising. It is the story of a policeman who saved an eel, but started a riot.

Back in 1886, a rope was tied to the house at number 186 Lindengracht, and strung across the canal to the opposite side. (Where you see cars parked in the middle of the street was once water.) Picture an eel, alive and kicking, tied to the rope and smeared with soap to make it even more slippery. The game was to row out onto the canal and try to catch the eel. The winner took it home for supper. Cruel? Yes... that's why it was made illegal a long time ago.

A brave policeman, drawn by the shouting and splashing, walked straight through the rowdy crowd and began to cut the rope to let the eel swim free.

He knew that games like the eel-pulling easily turned into boisterous revelries. Here in the Jordaan—the workers' district—the people were angry at poor wages and bad housing and needed to let off steam. Annoyed with the cop for trying to stop their fun, the crowd attacked.

Our peacekeeping hero beat a hasty retreat, fearing for his life. When he returned with reinforcements, the brawl became a riot and the army was called in.

The resulting violence went on for three days, 26 local people were killed and 136 more were wounded. The eel survived. The canal didn't. As we see today, it was covered over and turned into a road, as many canals in the city have been through the years.

Despite that, we've still got more than Venice.

Let's walk back now to the Prinsengracht and head south till you come to number 263, on the east side of the street.

STOP 4

Anne Frank House

Most days you can tell when you've reached number 263, from the long queue of people waiting to go inside.

The Anne Frank House is one of the most visited places in Amsterdam. Prinsengracht 263 is an attractive merchant's home that was built in 1635. It's a typically narrow dwelling in a city defined more by water than buildable land. To create more room, one historical owner added an annexe at the rear of the building, stealing space from the garden.

It was in this annexe, 300 years after the house was built, that the teenage Anne Frank and her family hid from Nazi invaders. Anne's famous diary revealed how the Germans planned to use Amsterdam's water against it. In her entry on the 3rd February of 1944, Anne wrote:

'In the event of a British landing in Holland, the Germans will do what they can to defend the country, even flooding it, if necessary. They've published maps of Holland with the potential flood areas marked. Since large portions of Amsterdam were shaded in, our first question was what we should do if the water in the streets rose to above our waists.'

Thankfully, the Germans never had the chance to try to return Amsterdam to its watery origins. As the American and British troops liberated the south of the Netherlands, the Canadian army arrived in Amsterdam. Sadly too late for the Frank family, and many, many others.

The Canadian soldiers were welcomed enthusiastically, cementing a lasting bond between the Dutch and Canadian peoples. In 1940, Dutch Queen Juliana decided to take her family, including the young Princess Beatrix, first to England, then to Canada for safety. In thanks, she presented Ottawa with 100,000 tulip bulbs in 1945. This was the genesis of the Canadian Tulip Festival, the largest in the world, and a beautiful metaphor of peace and international friendship triumphing over war.

Please walk north to the Leliegracht, then east to the Torenluis Bridge.

STOP 5

Torenluis Bridge and JC Sinck

This broad bridge is not just the city's widest, but also the oldest. Completed in 1648, the Torenluis gets its name from the watch tower which stood here for 200 years. (Toren means "tower" in Dutch; Sluis translates as "lock.") In the pavement of the bridge you can see a modern outline of where the tower once stood.

Walk to the side and look down at the Singel. This canal was once a moat around the walled city centre of Amsterdam. However peaceful the city seems today, its structure still reflects the fortifications of medieval times.

Not quite so old are the barred windows of a former prison visible under the bridge. To be tossed into this dank dungeon must have been a deterrent indeed. You can imagine the prisoners shivering as water crept up to their knees when the canal flooded.

Looking down into the water is also a reminder of one of the hazards of canal side living. Things fall in.

In the 1920s, an enterprising man named JC Sinck invented a hoist for fishing horses out of the canal. It was a common enough occurrence, and it's in the nature of canals that it isn't easy to get out once you're in. Especially for horses. With his creation of a crane on the back of a cart, Sinck made a fortune in the days when one horse-power was all that most people could afford, and no-one could allow their most valuable asset to go down to a watery grave.

There is a model of this interesting invention in the wonderful Amsterdam Historical Museum. You'll pass it as you walk down Kalverstraat to Stop 6 and the second half of our Travelcast.

If you decide to stop, I urge you to also look on the western side of the street, before you get to Spui, for a small street that cuts through to Begijnhof, one of the city's most charming squares. At number 34 is a house that is now almost 600 years old, probably the oldest in the city, and the Begijnhof is one of the hidden gems of Amsterdam.

STOP 6

The Bloemenmarkt: Van Gogh, Flowers, and Fortunes

The floating flower market, the Bloemenmarkt, is one of the city's popular tourist attractions. While today's visitors snap away with digital cameras, the picturesque scene hasn't changed much over the years. We know, for instance, that Vincent Van Gogh passed by here on the fourth of June, 1877, as described in a letter to his brother, Theo:

'Today when I passed the flower market on the Singel, I saw something very attractive and amusing. A man was selling a bunch of pots with all kinds of flowers and plants... and his little girl was sitting between it all, so simple in her little black bonnet, and with a pair of bright smiling eyes.'

In modern times, Van Gogh is loved for his paintings of vibrant sunflowers and a singular canvas of irises which ranks as one of most expensive paintings ever sold. Back in the 17th century it was another flower, the tulip, that aroused people's passions and greed.

Dutch Tulipmania started in 1636 and bloomed, like a flower, for just one year.

A few years earlier, no Dutchman had even set eyes on a tulip. They grew wild throughout Turkey and across the steppes of Central Asia. The word tulip derives from the Persian word for a turban, which the flower resembles.

These exotic bulbs sailed over seas from Turkey to Vienna and then to the Netherlands. They sparked competition between members of the status-seeking upper classes for possession of the rarest tulips with vivid colours and flames on the petals. Special varieties were given exotic names or christened after Dutch naval admirals.

A good bulb could earn a working man a year's wage. People invested their savings to buy tulip crops that had not yet even been planted.

The market crashed within a year. There were fortunes to be lost as well as made in the Golden Age of Amsterdam.

As you look and see tulips being sold all around you in the Bloemenmarkt, it's a reminder of how important this trade is to the Netherlands. Our little country is the world's biggest exporter of flowers.

Now, from golden blooms to the Golden Bend, we'll take a short walk south to pause on the Herengracht, the Gentlemen's Canal.

STOP 7

The Golden Bend: Hendrick Staets

Walk west along the south bank of Herengracht and pause outside house number 466. Here the graceful canal starts to swing round at the point that's been called the Golden Bend, because of its beauty.

In 1609 the Municipal Carpenter, Hendrick Staets, was charged with creating the future look of Amsterdam. The city was growing in unplanned ways. The Siege of Antwerp had taken place, part of the Eighty Years War between Spain and the Netherlands. Refugees from Antwerp came to Amsterdam, and the city centre was becoming overcrowded.

Amsterdam was hemmed in by the Singel canal, which formed a moat around the city and where you are now standing was all marshland. How to turn swamp into space?

The elegant solution we call the Grachtengordel or "canal belt" was provided by a city carpenter with no experience of town planning – which is perhaps why it worked. Hendrick Staets suggested digging out three more canals which would run almost parallel to the Singel like the strands of a necklace.

The earth from the canals would be used in-between them to provide a solid base for buildings. The canals would be exactly 25 meters wide – enough for four barges to pass at the same time. Each house front would be precisely 30 metres across, to provide both proportion and equality.

Hendrick Staets showed all the precision of a man used to working with wood. Every cut, every angle, every joint had to be perfect. He was a craftsman, not a bureaucrat, not a city official. If a carpenter makes a plan, it has to work.

The carpenter's solution tripled the size of Amsterdam, yet no-one was more than about 400 metres from the main Singel canal. The Prinsengracht was the Prince's Canal. Inside this is the Keizersgracht, the Emperor's Canal. And inside this, where we stand, is the Herengracht, the Gentleman's Canal.

Let's walk south and then east toward the River Amstel and the Magere Brug.

STOP 8

The Mager Sisters, the Skinny Bridge and the Amstelsluizen

Here on the wide Amstel River is the most photographed bridge in Amsterdam, the Magere Brug or Skinny Bridge. According to popular legend, there were two sisters, named Mager, who lived on opposite sides of the river. They got tired of the long walk they had to take in order to meet everyday for the gezellig (or cosy) mid-morning coffee break.

So the enterprising siblings built a bridge. We don't know if they commissioned it themselves, or petitioned the city. A new bridge wouldn't be cheap, even in 1670 when the original Magere Brug was constructed. The one you see now is a modern replica, as the old wooden bridge got into poor condition, and was restored and widened several times over the years. The design is a bascule bridge, a type of drawbridge where the two spans swing up to provide clearance for boat traffic.

It is a reminder that the water that shapes our city can't stop two sisters determined to talk to each other. It is so Dutch, very Amsterdam, to want to talk. As you go round the city you will see that we like nothing better than to meet with our friends in the brown cafés, the bars, and the eetcafés.

Today, only pedestrians and cyclists are allowed to use the Magere Brug. In the evenings, with the lights on, it is even more beautiful and a very romantic place.

If you're here around 9.30 in the evening, listen for a noise unique to Amsterdam. Look just south of the Skinny Bridge and you can see the Amstel's sluice gates, the Amstelsluizen, which are closed every night at about this time.

There is a saying here that the canals are 9 feet deep. Three feet of water, three feet of bikes and three feet of mud. The bikes and other debris get fished out with machinery. Closing these sluice gates isolates the canal system, and at a pumping station east of the city centre a few hundred thousand gallons of fresh water are forced through the canals every night. The entire system is refreshed every three days, so that whatever the houseboats and passers-by fling in, gets flushed out..

To get an insight into the importance of water levels in this city that is mostly below sea level, let's walk north to the Waterlooplein, and our penultimate stop — the Stopera. Head for the entrance on the east side of the building.

STOP 9

The Stopera: Normal Amsterdam Level

This unique building is unofficially called the Stopera, because it combines the town hall, or Stadhuis, with the opera. There is another reason it's called the Stopera. Like the Centraal Station a century before, some of Amsterdam's citizens protested about the construction of an opera house. It was considered too costly, and also inappropriate, to build a luxury here in what had been the Jewish quarter.

To disrupt the building of the Stopera, squatters occupied empty houses that were due to be demolished. People also destroyed building equipment. For the opening ceremony in 1986, Queen Beatrix even had to be smuggled in by the stage door to avoid the protestors in the streets outside.

Let's go inside the building, using the entrance to the corridor in-between the two different halves of the opera house and the town hall. Just behind the doorman's cabin you'll find a wall relief showing which Netherlands features would disappear if the sea defences were breached and water level was at real sea level throughout the country. The consequences for Amsterdam? Well, I hope you're a good swimmer.

As so much of Amsterdam lies below sea level, there's little point in using sea level as a measure. Instead here they use something called N.A.P., Normaal Amsterdams Peil, or Normal Amsterdam Level. This dimensional mural artistically depicts how the city is built, showing the round wooden piles and the square concrete more modern ones.

Downstairs, the N.A.P. Pillar holds the bronze reference point for Normal Amsterdam Level, the zero level. Take a look at the water columns which show current tide levels. It is a scientific reminder that the city's fortunes are tied to water in so many ways.

Please go back outside heading north west to Oude Hoogstaat and our last stop. The East India House is now a university building, but no-one minds if you go into the courtyard to have a look.

STOP 10

East India House: Peter Plancius

This cobblestone courtyard was once the bustling headquarters of the Dutch East India Company. Here in the Oost-Indisch Huis, built in 1605, the founders created a company that was to dominate trade from the Cape of Good Hope eastwards, taking in east Africa, India, up to China and Japan and down south as far as Tasmania.

During the age of exploration, global trade depended on successful sea navigation. And the success of the East India Company far outstripped the smaller West India Company, and indeed every other company of the day.

The East India Company was fortunate that one of the founders was Pieter Platevoet (or flatfoot in Dutch), better known under his Latin name, Petrus Plancius. Born in 1552 in Flanders, Peter Plancius was an astronomer, geographer, and clergyman. He acquired 25 Portuguese nautical charts of the world. Such things were valuable property, in those days. Privileged information. From the company headquarters here in Amsterdam, Plancius and his maps helped grow the firm to over 150 merchant ships and 50,000 employees in a Global network of trading posts.

And the trade in spices and perfumes and timber was lucrative indeed. A bag of nutmeg could be bought in the east for half a penny, and sold for 15,000 percent profit in Amsterdam. No wonder the company was powerful enough to mint its own money, run its own private army, and call on the Dutch navy if ever it needed reinforcements.

The maps and navigational guides published by Peter Plancius were one of the competitive advantages of this monopoly. The East India Company would control Dutch trade in the Far East for almost two hundred years. A true Renaissance man, Plancius expanded on his work with sea-faring celestial navigation to study the stars and inscribed several new constellations on a globe he prepared in 1598. He would have fit right in with modern, eclectic Amsterdam.

Thank you for taking the time to explore with us. We hope you've enjoyed this American Express Travelcast of Amsterdam, and these water tales that define our wonderful city. Goodbye.

Dank u en vaarwel.