



VENICE OF THE NORTH

Amsterdam is a laid-back metropolitan city and top European destination, which welcomed a staggering 6.7m foreign hotel guests in 2017. Offering the perfect blend of history and modern culture, it makes for a great city break or weekend away.



ALEX SQUIRE SIA MEMBER

I have a C1 incomplete SCI and I am a tetraplegic, powered-chair user. I love travelling and, back in April, I visited Amsterdam for the first time.

Amsterdam is known as the 'Venice of the North' because of its 165 picturesque canals. The city is famous not only for its waterways but also its culture, architecture, and, ahem, its cannabis.

On 26 April 2018, my two carers and I flew to Amsterdam for five days from East Midlands Airport. The trip was organised by an accessible travel company.

The boarding process was undignified as always. I was hauled out of my wheelchair by two guys, perched precariously on a narrow aisle chair, tied in, wheeled onto the plane, squeezed down the ridiculously narrow aisle as everybody watched, before being unceremoniously dumped into my seat. It's always a pleasure.

Once we arrived at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, a pre-booked wheelchair accessible minibus took us to our hotel.

THE HOTEL

We stayed in the Hotel Ibis Amsterdam Centre, which is right next door to Centraal Station. There are lots of attractions within walking distance, so it's a great location. My room had floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides of the room, lots of space and a wheel-in shower. Being on the seventh floor, we got a fantastic view of the city.

I shared a room with one of my carers and the other one had a separate room. My room contained a double bed and a pull-out sofa bed. It would have been nice if the double bed separated so I could have slept on the bigger bed. However, the pull-out bed was fine and I managed with a pressure-relieving mattress.

THE CITY

Most of the main streets in Amsterdam are relatively flat and easy to roll around. Some areas are quite cobbled, such as Dam Square. Nevertheless, the cobbles weren't too bad. I've experienced worse in England.

Most of the bridges are step-free so you can roll over them fairly easily. There are some very narrow alleyways and streets in the city, especially around the famous red light district. These narrow alleys can be difficult or impossible to get a wheelchair down. However, you can still see most of the area.

Frustratingly, I didn't find a single public disabled toilet while I was there. Not even in any of the restaurants. So, I had to resort to going in dark corners most of the time or sidestreets and hoping no one saw me. I wasn't the only one either. Amsterdam must have some disabled toilets somewhere but they are obviously not signposted very well.

However, it is quite easy to stroll around the city. The trams are accessible as well, which can be a quicker and easier way to get around. There is a raised platform at most of the tram stops and it's usually level with the floor of the tram.



PLACES I VISITED...

BODY WORLDS EXHIBITION

This exhibition displayed real human bodies from people who had donated their bodies to science. The bodies were treated to convert them into plastic statues, which have been arranged in different poses.

Each of the bodies have had their fat and skin removed, so you can see all the muscles and internal organs. It's a fascinating way to learn about anatomy.

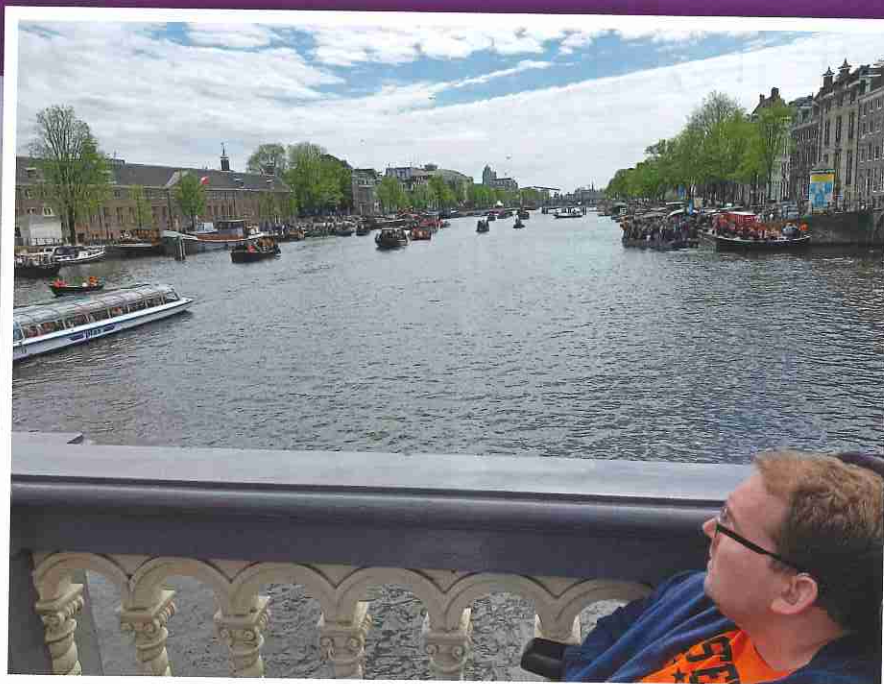
The whole exhibition is wheelchair accessible and there is a lift to take you to all six floors. Unfortunately, the disabled toilet is on the second floor, so if it's busy there can be a wait for the lift. Overall, this exhibition was amazing and it's definitely something I'd recommend seeing if you're interested in human anatomy.

KING'S DAY

King's Day is a Dutch national holiday and takes place on 27 April each year – which is the King's actual birthday. Throughout Amsterdam, there are street parties and thousands of people fill the city. Everyone wears orange and at every turn there is music and you see people dancing. Boats packed with revellers glide down the canals pumping out dance music.

In the main square there was a DJ playing electronic music with a large crowd dancing. Many people were selling their unwanted items from blankets on the streets. On King's Day, anyone can sell their belongings on the roads; it's one big flea market.

It can be quite hard to get around on King's Day as there are so many people



around. In addition, they stop all the public transport for the day so you have to walk everywhere. However, it's great to take in the atmosphere as everyone just has fun.

The downside of King's Day is that the museums are closed. So really, it took one day of sightseeing away from my trip. But it was a good experience in itself and I enjoyed the party atmosphere.

RIJKSMUSEUM

If you like paintings then you will love this place! The Rijksmuseum contains lots of paintings from famous artists such as Rembrandt, Vermeer and Van Gogh. The accessibility of the museum was very good. There were lifts to get

to the different floors and the staff were very helpful. When we asked someone for directions they didn't just point in the general direction, they actually led us to where we wanted to go, which was nice.

Some of the more famous paintings can get quite crowded at busy times of the day. So it's probably better to go to the museum at quieter times to avoid the crowds. Also, book your ticket online beforehand so you don't have to queue at the entrance.

CANAL CRUISE

A great way to see the city is by taking a cruise on the famous canals. I went on one with the Blue Boat Company, which has six accessible boats. These have lifts that enable wheelchair users to board. Although disappointingly they don't have an accessible toilet on board. The cruise lasted for 90 minutes and luckily I didn't need to use the toilet, but I'm not sure what I would have done if I did.

I went on a night cruise that started at 10pm and it was great to see all the city lights. The cruise offered personal audio commentary but, as I have hearing loss, I couldn't understand what they were saying anyway.

THE VERDICT

Overall, many attractions in Amsterdam are accessible. It's quite easy to get around the city by either walking/rolling or using the trams. However, lots of the buildings are quite old and may not be very accessible. Also, it's difficult to find disabled toilets, which could be a problem. That said, it's definitely a place worth visiting and I look forward to going back in the future.



Alex in front of Rijksmuseum