



Looking along a canal toward the Zuiderke Church, built in 1611 (and once painted by Monet).

WHAT RIVERS KNOW

Amstel River, the Netherlands

Amsterdam

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photos by Basia Irland unless otherwise noted

My name, *Amstel*, is derived from the old Dutch, *Aeme-stelle*, which means “water area.” In the 13th Century, a small fishing village, *Amstelredam*, was constructed near my mouth beside a dam. Today we know that town as Amsterdam. As early as the 11th Century, farmers began building dikes to try and keep me from flooding these low lands. In 1936 my mouth was filled in and sealed shut, so that today I end at Muntplein Square, although I remain connected to a body of water called the *IJ* by flowing underground through pipes. The *IJ* (an ancient Dutch word for water) used to be a bay, but currently is considered more of a lake. During the Dutch Golden Age in the 1600’s Amsterdam was the wealthiest city in the world and one of the most important ports. My extensive system of canals, built during this time, is now on the UNESCO World Heritage List.



All kinds of boats ply the river and canals.

I flow south to north through this flat and low-lying city, which is the capital of the Netherlands. Parts of me are below sea level, and some of the land around me was reclaimed from the nearby sea or marshes. Dutch children must learn to swim at an early age and receive diplomas for that effort. Some dive from houseboats and swim in my water, careful to dodge the variety of boats that are found day and night, moving upon my body.

I have a beer named after me! The Amstel Brewery is located along my shore, as are other breweries, and my water is sometimes used in the production of these beers. Renowned artists have painted my portrait including Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), Willim Witsen (1860-1923), and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944).

With the flat terrain, the inconvenience of driving a car, and over 400 kilometers (249 miles) of bike paths in Amsterdam, humans prefer to get around by bicycle. With well over a million bikes, it



A boy dives into the Amstel River.

is no wonder so many two-wheelers are dredged out of my stomach each year.

Amsterdam is located on approximately ninety islands and linked by over 1,400 bridges that cross back and forth. Some of these bridges are especially wonderful at night, when their lights reflect on my dark water. One in particular, the Magere Brug, uses an Old Dutch design called a “double swipe.” In earlier times it was opened by hand, but now an electronic mechanism raises its two sections to let

boats pass underneath to enter one of the many canals that traverse Amsterdam.

Any visitor to this city will notice a lot of plastic trash floating on my surface, and there are currently attempts to clean up my 60 miles (97 km) of canals. One such venture, Plastic

Whale, is a company that fishes plastic bottles and other debris from my water and transforms the trash into material to make a boat that will be used to fish for more plastic. Boat Number Seven is constructed from over seven thousand plastic bottles that might otherwise have found their way out to sea.

Someone else who recycles trash from the canals is my dear friend, the meerkooet. These waterfowl use floating debris to create their unkempt nests, which

Magere Brug with the full moon.





top: A meerkoet and its nest in a boat tire.

bottom: A meerkoet nest built from river debris.

Photo by Derek Irland



are seen everywhere wedged amongst the houseboats. The meerkoet live on my surface, and enjoy tickling my ribs when they dive down to feed on plants. The monogamous pairs also eat aquatic insects, seeds, grass, and small animals, and they are one of my favorite playmates as I flow through Amsterdam.