AMSTERDAM THE NETHERLANDS

It's such a place of noisy jubilation—a city that combines the sacred and the profane. Amsterdam always seems to be wrestling with itself. There's this sense that being there means rubbing shoulders with danger. To clean it up, the way New York's Times Square has been cleaned up, would be untrue to its character. But you also don't want it to be squallid, because one walks and walks in Amsterdam.

It is a city of perversion. You pass the railroad station with its neo-Gothic architecture, and then you look down to the Oude Kerk, a 13th-century church with such a strong sense of the city's beginnings.

In Amsterdam, neighborhoods are intertwined; there are roads that lead both to the university and the red-light district. Whether I'm exploring the Nine Little Streets area, with its cafes and shops, or the Oud Zuid, south of the museums, which is not quite Art Nouveau, not quite Art Deco, there is a sense of what the Dutch call gezellig: a cozy, comfortable, convivial feeling—never smothering. A painting by the great Dutch landscape artist Jacob van Ruisdael, A Panoramic View of Amsterdam Looking Toward the Lij [on display at London's National Gallery], captures these contradictions. It's a bird's-eye view of the wrong side of Amsterdam. He didn't want to showcase the grandest building; instead, he looked back toward the city's emotional and economic fountainhead. That's what one still sees in the city's fishing boats, docks, the oldest churches—Amsterdam's simple origins.

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