

The name of the River IJ consists of the digraph 'ij', which is why both letters are always capitalised

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IJing to get there

AMSTERDAM-NOORD: The northern part of the city – just across the river IJ – is in the midst of a cultural and architectural Renaissance.

By Yvonne Gordon

BICYCLE wheels are lined up and feet rest on pedals as we near the dock. Everyone shuffles forward on the ferry. Nearly all of the passengers are on bikes of all sizes and they're getting ready to zip off once the ramp goes down – whizzing on to the ferry at the last minute and straight off again has become a bit of an art for the locals.

It has only taken a couple of minutes to cross the river IJ from behind Amsterdam Central Station but we are now in Amsterdam-Noord (Amsterdam North). We've left the 17th-century canal houses, museums and cobbled streets of the old city behind to visit an exciting new part



Making waves: Taking the ferry across the river IJ brings you to the rejuvenated Amsterdam-Noord district

of the city which is becoming a hive of culture and creativity.

The best way to explore Amsterdam-Noord is by bike so I've rented one in the city and taken it on the free ferry across the IJ. First stop is the Eye Film Institute, the new landmark building on the waterfront. The film museum is itself a giant white sculpture, with its smooth aluminium exterior and geometric shapes and lines making it look different from every angle.

Officially opened just last Thursday, the Eye has four cinemas and a bar and restaurant. I wander through the free Found Footage exhibition and check out the interactive film museum displays before taking in the panoramic IJ views from the waterfront terrace over a coffee.

Further along the waterfront is the site of the old NDSM shipyard (a short cycle away or take the NDSM-Werf ferry from Central Station). The shipyard, once Europe's largest, was left empty when it closed in 1984 but in the early 1990s, artists and squatters moved in to reclaim the area. If the historic buildings and canals in old Amsterdam have touches of Paris or Venice, this is its East Berlin, with



abandoned warehouses, art studios, graffiti and funky restaurants.

Some of the shipyard hangars are empty, but one is home to Art City, where 250 artists have set up art, design, film and media studios in the giant enclosed space, each artist building their own studio in the hangar. I peek through the half-open doors and then cycle through, passing down a little street between the studios, glancing through windows to see artists at work – painting, welding or designing. The area is also a hotspot for performing arts, exhibitions and festivals.

In a corner of the hangar, up two levels, is Skatepark Amsterdam, a huge suspended skate park packed with kids and teens trying out their skills on banks, ledges and rails. It's possible to rent a skateboard and protective gear if you fancy a go, but I decide it's more fun (and safer) just to watch.

Just behind the NDSM, coloured light shades lead the way to the Noorderlicht (Northern Lights) café, a transparent greenhouse-like tunnel where the terrace has views over the IJ. The exterior might be plastic but the interior is warm and cosy, complete with mismatched furniture and eclectic décor. At weekends, the place comes alive with bands, DJs and festivals. Near the café, two unofficial 'artists' are busy decorating a wall with spray cans, looking nervously over their shoulders every so often.

I've heard about IJ-Kantine, a restaurant in a former factory on the water's edge, so I cycle over to investigate. Colourful furniture, candles, flowers and shelves of bottles lining one glass wall contrast with

EXPLORING

If you have a whole day to explore Amsterdam-Noord by bike or car, visit rustic villages like Durgerdam, Ransdorp and Holysloot, passing typical rural Dutch landscapes and farmland on the way with polders, wooden houses and even barns built in the shape of cheese covers. One of the nicest areas to cycle along is Nieuwendammerdijk, a long, curving street full of crooked wooden 17th century dike houses. In the evening, check out some of the north shore's hip restaurants – at Stork fish restaurant (restaurantstork.nl) a huge hangar has been made into a smart dining space with nautical-themed décor, while over at Hotel de Goudfazant (hoteldegoudfazant.nl) you can eat in a more raw industrial space where there are even cars parked.

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“We’ve left the 17th-century canal houses, museums and cobbled streets of the old city behind



the industrial pipes on the ceiling. Through the huge windows, the view is of a collection of ships on the docks – an old minesweeper boat Mahu; the Pancake Boat – a day-cruiser that serves pancakes; a 1956 Russian submarine; the Amstel Botel (a floating budget hotel); a tall ship and even a red former Irish lightship, which is now a party boat called Finley.

There’s lots to see here. Behind IJ-Kantine are the MTV Headquarters, a colourful stack of shipping containers with windows (pictured left) and doors rented out as student accommodation, and Kraanspoor, a dizzying apartment building perched on an old crane track on the water’s edge. A visit to Amsterdam-Noord is a great way to experience an edgy, artistic and inspiring side to a well-known city.

GETTING AROUND

Take the Buiksloterweg Ferry for the EYE or the NDSM-Werf Ferry for the NDSM shipyard – the free ferries for pedestrians and bicycles run from behind Central Station (www.gvb.nl). For film screenings or dining at the EYE, see www.eyefilm.nl. For bike rental, Mac Bikes is at Central station, Stationsplein 5, www.macbike.nl.

For more information on exploring Amsterdam-Noord, see www.iamsterdam.com. Aer Lingus flights to Amsterdam start from €39.99, www.aerlingus.com.

TRAVEL DEALS OF THE WEEK

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Contact: Sunway Holidays. Tel: (01) 231 1800. www.sunway.ie.
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Contact: Sunway Holidays. Tel: (01) 231 1800. www.sunway.ie.
- Destination:** Canada.
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Details: Seat-only to Toronto. Departs certain dates in April & May. Includes flights & taxes.
Contact: American Holidays. Tel: (01) 673 3894. www.americanholidays.com.
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Price: €569 per person.
Details: Price based on two sharing in the three-star St George Resort in twin room on an all-inclusive basis. Includes flights, transfers, baggage allowance, taxes and charges. Departs Apr 12.
Contact: Thomas Cook. Tel: (01) 514 0328. www.thomascookholidays.ie.
- Destination:** Letojanni, Sicily.
Price: From €679 per person.
Details: Seven nights at the three-star Hotel San Pietro, includes return flights, resort transfers & luggage allowance.
Contact: Topflight. Tel: (01) 240 1700. www.topflight.ie.
- Destination:** Port el Kantaoui, Tunisia.
Price: €379 per adult.
Details: Seven nights at the two-star Dreams Beach Hotel on B&B basis. Includes flights & transfers. Departs Apr 14.
Contact: Sunway. Tel: (01) 231 1800.
- Destination:** Sousse, Tunisia (pictured).
Price: €909 per person.
Details: Seven nights stay at the five-star Movenpick Resort & Marina Spa luxury retreat.
Contact: Direct. Tel: (01) 514 0341. www.directholidays.ie.
- Destination:** Gumbet, Turkey
Price: €339 per person.
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