

Yvonne Gordon is dazzled by the progress in Holland's hotspot

The view from my 18th-floor hotel room in Amsterdam is making me dizzy. I want to step away from the window but I can't take my eyes off it. Far, far below, six or seven sets of train tracks meander in and out, snaking over the ground towards Centraal Station. On the river IJ, wide barges slowly make their way upriver and little blue ferries dash back and forth between.

This is Amsterdam but there isn't a crooked canal house, cobbled street or brown café in sight. It's the vibrant, edgy docklands, full of gleaming glass and steel, clubs and hotels, rivers and islands. In the distance, the church spires and old canal-house roofs of the older part of the city to the south seem like another world.

Much like the docklands in Dublin, until the early Nineties, Amsterdam's eastern port area was a desolate and deserted wasteland; the lengthy quays long abandoned by ships and containers, which had become too large for the space and moved elsewhere.

The east harbour has become a thriving living area and design showpiece. Unusual apartment blocks, arty bridges and old-time maritime buildings mix with innovative building experiments. To spend a day or two here is to really see a different dimension to this old city.

The hotel, the Mövenpick, is 20 floors high and from the outside it looks like a giant has picked up the top 16 floors of the building and put them back down the



wrong way. It's perched sideways in a precarious position over the water. As I look up at it from the ground, my stomach lurches and I wonder about staying here at all, in case it all topples over. But from the inside, the views are worth any discomfort.

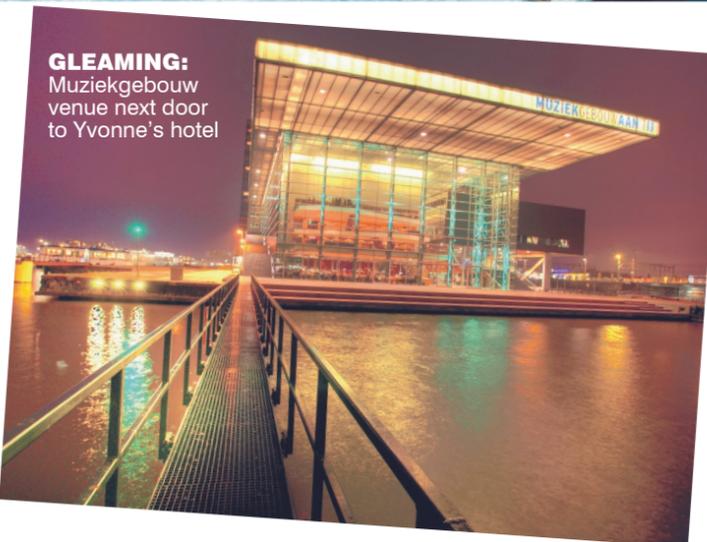
It's a sprightly walk away from the back of Centraal Station. Up to a few years ago, only either those involved in prostitution or the very brave ventured around this side of the station. Now, there is a shiny path and cycle track leading to the revamped docklands.

Beside the hotel is the Muziekgebouw aan't IJ concert hall – a glass affair with a massive roof slab, surrounded by a magnificent waterside terrace, which is a great spot for having a coffee and enjoying the views.

The café – appropriately named Star Ferry (there is a giant, modern passenger terminal for cruise ships next door) is packed with noisy suit-wearers.

Caffeine-revived, we walk past the cruiser terminal and take the waterside path along the quay and Piet Heinkade, the district's main thoroughfare passing a selection of arty buildings, galleries and cafés.

One of the first places we stumble upon is Restaurant Fifteen, based on Jamie Oliver's concept restaurant. It is huge, noisy and just at the start of the lunch rush. It looks like a good place to eat but somewhere more unusual catches my eye: the Odessa, a



GLEAMING: Muziekgebouw venue next door to Yvonne's hotel

floating restaurant nearby. The hull is actually from a fishing boat from Ukraine that sank in Odessa harbour. The wreck was then converted into a sort of medieval Russian merchant's vessel.

From here, it's another short walk and over the bridge to Java Island. It is one of a string of artificial islands that were built when the shipping trade to former Dutch colonies, such as Java and Borneo, flourished.

Java is packed full of high-density apartments but water on both sides gives it a feeling of space, and features like pretty sculptural bridges make it intriguing to explore. The island is alive with sound – a family passes by on a boat, children playing on the street and somewhere above, someone is practising the piano and

the notes are escaping out into the air.

The houses have the same dimensions as canal houses but are made of steel and glass. Little canals in the middle have boats bobbing up and down on them – who needs a car here when you have water for a back garden?

We've been told about the Lloyd Hotel so we settle down at its outside terrace for a drink. The original building was built in 1921 and it was renovated by artists and designers in 2004, giving it a modern but eclectic design feel.

In its 89-year history, the building has been used as a boarding house and a prison, and the corridors do have an institutional feel. In its current incarnation, there's a space six floors high, stream-

ing the atrium with daylight and brightening away the dark past.

You need a bit of a sense of adventure if you're staying here. Each of the 116 rooms is different, ranging from a compact 'linen closet' type one-bed with shared bathroom, to a split-level five-star room with a grand piano. Guests' wallets also range from one to five star, with backpackers and business types mingling on the outdoor terrace.

Dinner is at the Panama, a beautiful old building set in a former power plant. The food is delicious, the cocktails are flowing and the atmosphere among the mostly young diners is relaxed. It's a club evening, so they start clearing the tables away after dinner and in no time, the restaurant is a funky nightclub.

The next day, heads are a bit woolly. Over at the Nemo science centre, where the boat-shaped building has a rooftop beach, a DJ is playing mellow tunes and we grab some bean bags, and settle on the terraced roof. There's a small pool and sandpit at the bottom of the steps – for the real beach die-hards.

Our last stop on the tour is a walk over to another island, Borneo, to have a look at Scheepstimmermanstraat, which means Shipwright's Street. (Thank God we're not staying here, I think, imagining some potentially difficult taxi conversations when trying to give instructions, especially after a night out).

Each of the 60 houses on the street is different – the owners designed their own homes with an architect and they were all built together. It provides an interesting contrast to central Amsterdam, as in the old part of the city, nothing looks as if it has changed since the 17th century.

The eastern docklands of Amsterdam is a refreshing, vibrant and sometimes offbeat place. While the canals, cafés and bicycles of the old part of the city will always remain close to the visitor's heart, a day or two here is a great way to see the shiny, newest side of an old favourite European city.

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AHOY!: The NEMO building, which has a roof beach, left