

'DAM fine!

The Dutch capital shines bright in winter, by Yvonne Gordon

Amsterdam is an ideal destination for a city break all year around, but here are ten great reasons to visit the picture-perfect Dutch capital, famous for its canals, museums and brown cafés, during winter.

1) Admire some of the creative light art installations along the canals and waterways of Amsterdam during the Amsterdam Light Festival (www.amsterdamlightfestival.com/en) which runs every evening from 5pm to 11pm until 21 January. See the lights at their best from an open-topped boat on a Water Colours Cruise, or if you're a group, book a private canal boat (see www.cruisewithus.nl).

2) Book in for high tea in the lounge at the Intercontinental Amstel Hotel — a real treat with four courses of savouries and sweets, accompanied by carefully selected teas, all with beautiful backdrop of the Amstel River. Tea is served daily from 12.30pm to 2.30pm and 4pm to 6pm (€47.50 per person, www.amsterdam.intercontinental.com/en/).

3) One of the nicest things about Amsterdam is the views of the canal in the changing light of the day. Splash out and book a canal-side room and wake up to the most memorable views. The Pulitzer (www.pulitzer.nl)

litzeramsterdam.com, rooms from €275) is set in 25 Golden Age canal houses joined together, so each room is different and full of character, while at the NH Collection Doelen (www.nh-collection.com, standard rooms from €225), the best rooms look out over the Amstel River and an eye-catching drawbridge.

4) See the art of Rembrandt's Master Pupils, Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck through works of art that they painted during their time with the master. The exhibition runs until February 2018 in Amsterdam Museum (open daily, 10am to 5pm, see www.amsterdammuseum.nl) and at Rembrandthuis, where the artist himself once lived and worked (Open daily, 10am to 6pm, www.rembrandthuis.nl).

5) Drop in for a signature gin and tonic at Tunes Bar at

The Conservatorium Hotel (www.conservatorium-hotel.com) which is in the museum district and was once the city's music conservatorium. Try the 'gin raw gastronomic gin' with Fever Tree tonic, a bay leaf and lemon zest (€19) or the Herno Swedish dry gin with Fever Tree elderflower, red currants and thyme (€19).

6) The menu at one-Michelin star restaurant Bridges at Sofitel

Legend The Grand Amsterdam is all about seafood — tuck into trout terrine with apple flan, stuffed squid with kohlrabi ravioli or fried scallops with fennel-greek sauce, along with excellent wine pairings from the sommelier plus views out over the canal at street level (lunch from €29.50, www.bridgesrestaurant.nl).

7) After a day at one of the big museums (the Rijksmuseum, Van Gogh Museum



THE ART OF LIGHT: The Whole Hole and (left) Eye to Eye artworks along the canals

and Stedelijk Museum are all in the Museumplein area), treat yourself to tickets to a classical concert and relax into the red velvet seats and admire the ornate interior at the beautiful Concertgebouw (www.concertgebouw.nl) which is also in the museum area and dates back to 1881.

8) Spend the afternoon smelling fresh scents and picking your favourite to make your own bespoke perfume at Otentic in a canal-side building at Keizersgracht 233, (www.otentic-perfumes.com, 50ml bottle, €74) choosing from 72 unique scents to create the perfect custom blend.

9) Check out Amsterdam's main depart-

ment store Bijenkorf, beside Dam Square, for everything from fashion to electronics, then book into the Personal Shopping

Lounge where a specialist advisor offers free consultations that last around two hours (www.debijenkorf.nl).

10) Spend an afternoon walking or cycling along the canals — for window shopping at a selection of eclectic designer and vintage shops, visit the 9 Streets (9 Straatjes) area and for pretty window boxes, canal houses and photogenic canal scenes, potter around the nearby Jordaan area. Drop into a traditional brown café — a cosy pub — for a hot chocolate or something a little stronger to finish off the perfect day. ■

Getting there

KLM flies from Dublin to Amsterdam from €99 return, see www.klm.com. For more visitor information, see www.iamsterdam.com

GET VIP TREATMENT AT CASTLEMARTYR

If it's good enough for Kimye and Clinton, it's good enough for us, writes Rachael Kane.

The Castlemartyr Spa & Golf Resort, nestled in the east Cork village of its namesake, lives up to all of the hype as a five-star resort.

Kim Kardashian and Kanye West stayed there on their honeymoon in 2014 and former US President Bill Clinton is another famous guest.

A visit to the hotel confirms why.

The bedrooms are enormous, with luxurious touches such as control panels that allow you to switch off the lights and open/close the curtains at the touch of a finger.

Fine dining at the Bell Tower is pricey (a bottle of house wine is €37) but if you're looking for gourmet cuisine in opulent, romantic surroundings (the restaurant overlooks Castlemartyr's beautiful court-

yard gardens) then it's hard to beat.

Tasty but more casual fare is available at on-site Italian restaurant, Franchini's.

The spa at Castlemartyr boasts that it is among the best in Ireland and I certainly found it hard to tear myself away.

Here you can wallow in aromatherapy saunas, vitality lounges, relaxation rooms, jacuzzi and a 20m swimming pool (half-day packages start at €65 midweek).

Later, enjoy a horse and carriage ride around the 220 acres of grounds surrounding the 18th century classic manor house.

If you're thinking that

sounds like the perfect place for walking your dog, the good news is that you can bring your pet to stay here with you.

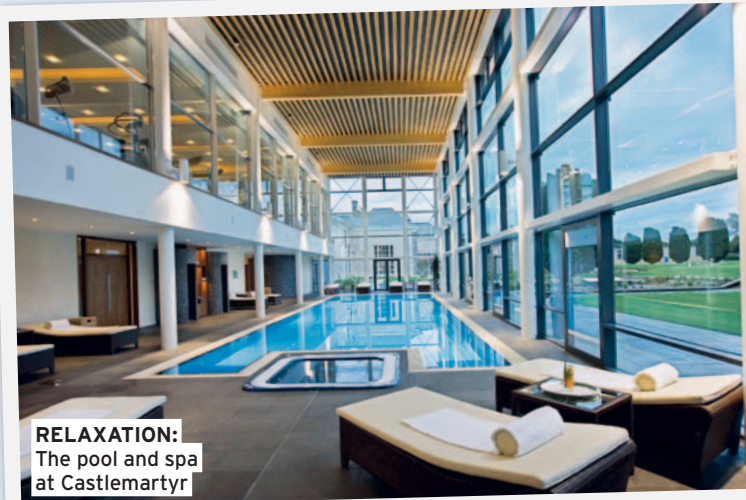
Also, you don't have to be a VIP to

get VIP treatment at Castlemartyr — as revealed in a charming story we heard about the time Bill Clinton stayed at the hotel.

The Presidential suite was already booked by a newlywed couple so the management came up with an ingenious, and very Irish, solution.

They swapped the plaques on the doors, leading Mr Clinton to believe he was staying in the Presidential Suite while the bride and groom were in the REAL Presidential Suite.

HOW MUCH? Book and pre-pay 30 days in advance to receive a 10 per cent discount off your stay, from €144 per night (breakfast extra) at www.castlemartyrresort.ie



RELAXATION: The pool and spa at Castlemartyr