



TRAVELOGUE

Days in Amsterdam

When I landed in Schiphol Airport the long European day was near its end, bathed in the last rays of a setting sun. Standing for a bus with just a backpack, I was on my own in Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands.

The Dutch capital is a top destination for tourists with its many museums, open theatres, cheap transport, friendly people, and picturesque sceneries of endless boats and canals.

ADVENTURE AT NIGHT: FINDING TRANSPORT AND ACCOMMODATION

Two days ago, I had luckily got a last-minute booking for a shared dormitory through Hostelworld, an online site that helps youngsters find cheap accommodation throughout Europe.

The place I was going to stay was called Camping Amsterdamse Bos, and it was 20 minutes by Bus 199 towards Zuid. The transport stopped right in front of the gate of the camping site.

There were other ways to get there, for example, if one took a train they would come from the Central Station. The directions were attached in the booking mail from Hostelworld.

While getting down from the bus I was little anxious because the place seemed absolutely in the middle of nowhere with nothing nearby. However, on seeing two other young girls like me getting off, I felt confident.

On reaching the campsite, we found this large open field with small cottages, which were the dormitories. They looked like a child's Lego house but made of wood. It was calm and quiet because most of the residents had retired for it was almost ten at night. The people at the reception had also left, but they kept a note on the door indicating the cottage numbers of late arrivals like me and the two Slovakian girls. We discovered that we were in the same dormitory and made our way towards it.

Our cottage was at one end of the camping site with rows of identical small shells on two sides making a walkway. As expected, the arrangements in the 'wooden boxes' were very simple with some bunk beds, which had fresh pillows and linens. There was one small table in the middle and one light glowing above it. After all, it cost only 20 euros per night!

Nearby was a large shed, which had toilets on one side like in a 'hostel'. On the other side were the showers and in the middle passage were basins for washing and cleaning. One could even do laundry. The showers and laundry required tokens, which could be bought for a euro or two at

the reception. The kitchens were in another big shed and it had everything from stoves to pots and pans, but one had to bring his own materials to cook.

DAYTIME ADVENTURE: FINDING MUSEUMS AND PARKS

I woke up to a beautiful sunlit morning excited for my day ahead. The reception had opened so the Slovakian girls and I had breakfast from the adjoining shop cum café. The girls invited me to visit them in Slovakia and I asked them to visit Bangladesh if they come to Asia. We took pictures and parted ways.

I had to walk a long way beside highways and under tunnels before reaching the tram station since the camping site was quite far from the city. At some point, I thought I was lost, even Google maps got me confused. However, people in Amsterdam are very friendly and they know English well so there is nothing to worry for tourists. After walking and wan-



dering for an hour, I found the station from where the tram took me to the city centre.

I got off the tram at Museumplein, a park surrounded by famous museums, and made my way towards my first destination—Van Gogh Museum. Other museums in the area are Stedelijk Museum (for contemporary art and design) and Rijksmuseum (for European masterpieces). It is impossible to appreciate all the marvels of these museums in a few hours, but as I was there for a day I had to make the most of it. After hours of running around big halls with paintings, I was starving. I had lunch at one of the museum cafes because I was too tired to go out and search for a restaurant — I had little to complain; the food was delicious.

After satisfying my tummy, I got out in the park and found people lying around basking in the sun. There were families having picnic with children running around, groups of friends chatting over food from baskets and lonely tourists with a book in hand or headphone covering

their ears. This was how Europeans enjoyed summer — I had read in books and seen in movies, but now it was in front of me like a painting of Van Gogh, vivid in colours and imagery. I too settled down under a tree and within minutes fell asleep.

When I got up from my nap, I was immediately anxious about my belongings. Coming from South Asia where safety issues are a serious concern, my mind was constantly bugged with images of looting and mugging. But again, there was nothing to worry.

A MUST-SEE

Next, I walked to the Anne Frank House while admiring the beautiful city full of canals and boats while on the land it was full of cycles and trams. There were hardly any cars or buses. I had never seen such a peaceful or pollution-free city before.

There was a long queue at the Anne Frank House but it was worth the wait. The place where Anne Frank hid from the Nazis

with her family during the Second World War was turned into a museum.

I had the read book when I was young, but the seeing it all was a gripping experience! The house is located on a canal called the Prinsengracht in central Amsterdam so coming out of the museum I bought tickets for a boat ride. I hopped on a long open boat with other tourists and put on the headphones for the commentary. I saw the most breath-taking scenes of buildings floating on water and learnt about the history, culture and architecture of the city from the guide. It is the best thing to do in Amsterdam — take a boat ride!

TIPS

There are many other interesting things to do in this city such as visiting the Heineken Experience, Science Center, Rembrandt House Museum, etc. so it is better to make the trip for two to three days at least.

By Anika Saba, Lecturer, BRAC University
Photo courtesy: Anika Saba

FROM CENTRE

Christmas for Bengalis and expatriates

Fatimah, a student of anthropology, sums up Christmas celebrations in the urban Bangladesh as cosy, homely celebrations, all about sharing an intimate dinner with family and dearest of friends, as she reminisces her childhood memories of going over to her aunt's place where all the children would get exciting gifts to unwrap after dinner.

There were two particular Christmases she remembered from her childhood, with drastically different emotions on either. The first where she had become so scared of her aunt's dogs that she and her mother had to leave before dinner, and the other, more jolly and appropriate to a Christmas surprise, where she unwrapped her gift package to discover her first Barbie!

Celebrating Christmas in the Home away from Home

Living in Bangladesh, — the expatriates — are limited to the number of hotels who host Christmas parties with a number of activities arranged for children, prepare buffet menus with a wide variety of dishes to choose from, making the dinners exciting, with food resembling those eaten at Christmas dinners in the west.

This theme is also evident in the decorations at these hotels, recently taking on the addition of reindeer cut-outs or plush toys as well as red and white trinkets and streamers.

Zareef, an undergraduate student, shares that as a child, he would go to the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Dhaka with his family friends, and lineup to meet Santa Claus, and eat candy and Gingerbread Man cookies.

A vivid memory he has of these Christmas parties in the presence of an elephant and how he always thought their eyes looked sad, besides himself also being scared to take pictures with it.

Susie Halsell, a skateboarder from the USA, shared her experience of spending Christmas in Dhaka, especially in Savar once. "All of the celebration took place at the church. The church members all dressed up in really beautiful saris and suits. The church was decorated very elaborately," Halsell said.

She points out that in America, one could tell it was Christmas season in the month of November even, with all the houses being decorated and Christmas lights being put up early on in the month and all the shops and restaurants being decorated in red, green and white and messages of 'Happy Holidays'.

In Bangladesh however, there are no such elaborate decorations, in fact, one can hardly tell that anything at all is going on.

For those living in Dhaka and celebrating Christmas with their families and friends, be it the Bangladeshi resident or otherwise, the options of celebrating Christmas are quite few, and unless one decides to attend the parties hosted by the number of hotels, mostly to accommodate and make their guests feel part of the celebrations, it tends to be an intimate affair, celebrated over scrumptious food, dancing and drinking with family and friends.

By Ayesha Rahman Chowdhury