



Take a break to....

AMSTERDAM

TRY A MIDWEEK TRIP

The capital of the Netherlands works its magic all year round but spring is the best time to go for its fabulous blooms. **Susie Boulton** goes Dutch...

Despite its ever-evolving, cutting-edge reputation, some of the best things in Amsterdam never change: the elegant gabled houses, the boat-lined canals, the *bruin* (brown) cafés – and the tulips that create a blaze of colour every spring.

The Tulip Festival runs throughout April and flowers cover the city, but for the full floral experience nothing beats a trip to the Keukenhof Gardens, easily accessed by bus, train or car from Amsterdam. Open March 23–May 21, 32 hectares of gardens boast seven million tulips, daffs and hyacinths in a display of intense colour.

If you don't want to leave the city, the world's only floating flower market, Bloemenmarkt, offers a kaleidoscopic range of blooms and, to take home, bulbs.

There's more than flowers, of course. Amsterdam is packed



Explore the city on foot to discover dazzling displays of tulips at every turn, *top*. Get your breath back on a boat trip, *above*, and refuel with *bitterballen*, *left*

with museums, from the revamped Rijksmuseum and the popular Van Gogh Museum to off-beat collections such as bags and purses, smoking pipes and spectacles. For a taste of contemporary Amsterdam, cross the IJ on the free ferry to the EYE Film Museum, which resembles a white spaceship.

Walking, cycling or taking trams are the main ways of getting around this compact city. Canal cruises are a delightful way of seeing the 17th-century waterways and learning some of the city's rich history. But do remember to take a sweater – it's cold on the canals.

Amsterdammers are stylish and so are their shops, whether it's the new Cartier boutique at the exclusive de Bijenkorf department store, the beatnik flair of the De Pijp quarter or the quirky shops (and wonderful eateries) of De 9 Straatjes (The 9 Streets). Here you can eat your way around the world.

For gourmet street food head for Foodhallen in up-and-

coming Amsterdam Oud-West. Start with *truffel bitterballen* (Dutch croquettes) from De BallenBar, move on to the succulent 'hot pig's platter' at The Rough Kitchen or Viêt View's fresh rice-paper rolls.

For nightlife, the city has it all, from world-class classical concerts to clubbing, live music – and the hot-pink shop fronts, craft-beer bars and dope-smoking cafés of the revamped red-light district. It's been cleaned up by the local authorities, but there's still no shortage of its original attractions.

The quintessential watering holes are the *cosy bruin* cafés, named after the centuries-old smoke stains. For the authentic experience, try the wonky but welcoming little Café de Sluyswacht, across from Rembrandt's house. 📍



FIND OUT MORE

For more on Amsterdam and the tulip fields, go to saga.co.uk/mar-mag

FIVE GREAT *whale-watching* EXPERIENCES

CALIFORNIA

Gray whales' annual migration from Alaska to Mexico's Baja California and back makes the North Pacific coast a cetacean-spotter's paradise. Monterey and Big Sur are good excursion bases, or try Santa Barbara – also great for blues and fins. visitcalifornia.com



1

THE ARCTIC

Conservation group ORCA monitors whales and dolphins, and their observers are regulars on our cruises. Join them on Saga Pearl II in May on a voyage through the Arctic. In 2015, 5,866 marine mammals were spotted on six Saga cruises. saga.co.uk/mar-mag



2

THE AZORES

Soak up the sun and tick fins, humpbacks and sperm whales off your must-see list in the Azores. This is a prime location for observing spring and summer whale migration as they head north through the Atlantic. Awash with dolphins, too. visitazores.com



3

THE UK

Our waters are whale- and dolphin-friendly. While spotting a minke may not have the prestige of a blue whale, they can grow into 30-footers and are common off the west coast of Scotland and the islands, and southwest England. seawatchfoundation.org.uk



4

LONDON

An 83ft blue whale skeleton in the heart of London! This summer it replaces Dippy the diplodocus as the focal point of the Natural History Museum's Hintze Hall. Don't miss *Whales: Beneath the Surface*, July 14 till October. nhm.ac.uk



5

GETTY, ALAMY, 4 CORNERS, ©2015 CASSON MANN, NATUREPL.COM