

DUTCH TREAT

The Conservatorium Hotel has an unrivalled blend of location, history, charm and culinary skill that makes it the ideal base for anyone visiting Amsterdam



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Amsterdam's Museumplein, or museum district, was created at the end of the 19th century in a run-down area of the city, and one of the first buildings to be completed was the neo-Gothic Rijkspostspaarbank, designed by architect Daniel Knuttel. You can imagine it teeming with the wealthy burghers for the next 80-odd years. After the Rijkspostspaarbank moved to new premises in 1978, the building was empty for five years but was then remodelled as the Sweelinck Conservatory of Music. It is now home to the Conservatorium Hotel, which is part of 'The Set', a collection of luxury hotels that includes London's Café Royal and the Lutetia in Paris (to be reopened in 2017).

For those seeking cultural excursions, the location could hardly be bettered. A brisk five-minute walk takes you to the Rijksmuseum, with its 8,000-plus objects, including famous Vermeers and Rembrandt's spectacular *Night Watch*, which you approach from a distance along an extensive gallery. Nearer to the hotel is the profoundly affecting Van Gogh Museum, which I visited at 9am on a Sunday to avoid the crowds, while directly opposite the hotel is the Stedelijk Museum (which houses Contemporary art). The world-famous Concertgebouw is also in the vicinity and adjacent to the hotel in the opposite direction is Amsterdam's luxury shopping district, the PC Hoofstraat.

The Set acquired the building in 2008 and commissioned the Milan-based architect and designer Piero Lissoni to work his magic on it, as he has with its other hotels. The emphasis is on space and light, with flashes of colour, contemporary design, and art. As you enter the lobby, inside a giant glass-roofed courtyard atrium, you are greeted by a large Contemporary art sculpture, *Under My Skin* (based on the children's book bunny character Miffy), by Dutch artist Raphael Hermans. (Some guests call it Scary Miffy.) Other permanent art includes works by Dutch painter Henk Helmantel in the Brasserie and works by Australian photographer Kevin Best, based on Dutch and Flemish still lives, in the rooms.

Magnolia and fig trees (the types without flowers or fruit) rise from the Akasha spa in the basement,

past the Brasserie and the wide elevator column, which contains hospitality rooms on the first and second level. The height of the atrium from the lobby to the glass roof is 24 metres, with a gangway traversing the space at the fifth level.

All The Set's hotels contain spas bearing the Akasha Holistic Wellbeing Centre brand. The Akasha spa at the Conservatorium boasts a Watsu therapy pool as well as a private hammam, sauna, treatment rooms offering Natura Bissé therapies, and a spiffy gym.

The arcade of luxury boutiques includes a Bentley digital showroom, where an iPod will interpret your facial reactions to a series of short films and then choose an exterior colour and finish and an interior fabric for your Bentley car. This seemed like a gimmick too far as far as I was concerned, intended to make up for the fact that there was no space for actual Bentley cars, although there are Bentleys to ferry distinguished guests to and from the hotel.

I stayed in a Grand Duplex suite, which looked out on to the courtyard atrium. The larger bathroom (with bath and shower) was downstairs, alongside the wardrobe and sitting room, while a second bathroom (with shower only) was en suite with the bedroom area. The rooms on the building's upper level are wonderfully spacious, with steeply sloped ceilings in the eaves of the roof. The acme of luxury is the 'I ♥ Amsterdam Suite' in the top central space of the building, with a rooftop balcony that affords a 360° panorama of Amsterdam's generally low-rise skyline.

PARTNERS WELCOME

The Conservatorium has established some intriguing marketing partners in addition to the usual bathroom products. Guests with infants can use either a black or orange-with-grey Greentom stroller, all of which conform to the Green Globe initiative. The more expensive rooms have raincoats for guests to use (with an option to purchase), made by Stutterheim Stockholm and provided by the Dutch company Make It Rain. Slightly more *outré* is the Joole love box in the minibar — a tube containing, among other things, a tiny vibrator, massage gel and feather — but those Dutch are well known for their progressively open attitude towards all things sexual. >



FROM ROOFTOP VIEWS TO EXCEPTIONAL RESTAURANTS AND BARS AND CONTEMPORARY ART, THE CONSERVATORIUM HOTEL OFFERS A SERVICE TO MATCH ITS GRAND EXTERIOR



» Dinner in the Taiko restaurant, under the direction of chef Schilo van Coevorden, is a culinary extravaganza. This space was once the archive area of the bank. Choose the €110 eight-course tasting menu (though four courses consisted of two dishes) and ask for wine pairings for each course. The highlights were the piquant and refreshing watermelon sashimi with green shiso, the monkfish green curry,

and the highly marbled Hida Gyu beef (similar to Wagyu), served at your table on a miniature charcoal grill. My wine pairings included a Waiiau River 2012 (pinot gris), a Wijngoed Thorn (auxerrois), an AFS 2014 Junmai sake (according to the tasting notes, ‘the limited young and unpasteurised version of the 30-year-aged sake’, which offers an ‘intense mix of incredibly high levels of sweetness and acidity’), a Weissburgunder 2014 (van volxem), and a young Château Musar 2012 (syrah). Raymond Blanc, his wife, and some friends were seated at the next table and seemed equally impressed.

At one point, a Japanese native arrived to play a taiko drum for a few minutes. He is Amsterdam’s only qualified taiko drummer.

Bicycles are available for hotel guests to rent, provided by a company named Hotelscooters. Cycling in Amsterdam can be fairly hair-raising. Nobody bothers to wear protective helmets, whether adults or children. Everyone seems to go fast. I stopped at one busy crossing where another cyclist travelling in the same direction tried to turn across me, clipped my front wheel, and collapsed in a jangling heap. Before I could ask if he was all right, he had picked himself up and darted off without exclamation or comment.

We were taken on a private canal tour in an electric saloon boat, which lives up to its name as the pilot doubles up as a bartender, offering champagne, wine, spirits, and beer. Aboard the saloon boat *Ivresse*, with a blanket to cover the knees for added warmth, we wove in and out of several canals, past gorgeous canalside town houses and houseboats whose residents make a point of never drawing their

curtains on the water’s side. We stopped for the pilot to fetch us some *bitterballen*, a Dutch croquette of veal ragu deep-fried in breadcrumbs. The most refined Amsterdam natives declare this to be a delicacy beyond rapture and insist that they must go for some *bitterballen* practically as soon as they land home from a foreign trip. It was certainly tasty, though I haven’t been gripped by the obsession.

A REAL TONIC

Back at the hotel, after a short break in my room, it was time for a gin and tonic tasting in the Tunes Bar, where Piero Lissoni’s design includes a transparent illuminated backdrop for the multicoloured bottles. For those minded to smoke a cigarette or cigar indoors, Dutch law permits a smoking lounge on the bar’s mezzanine level, and there’s a late-night DJ on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights.

The Tunes Bar serves Asian tapas (an unusual take on sushi, such as one containing soft-shell crab) with sake pairings, but its signature cocktail is the good old gin and tonic, with 40 kinds of gin, twelve different tonics, and thirteen G&T cocktails to choose from. Of course, if you stand firm against gin there is a dazzling array of specialty whiskies, vodkas, and rums on offer as well.

For those merely familiar with Gordon’s gin and Schweppes tonic, their eyes would gape wide upon sight of the Tunes Bar’s list. I sampled three versions of this classic spirit mixer, each gin paired with a different Fever-Tree tonic. First, was a robust dry London Gin No 1 with traditional tonic. This was followed by a German gin, Monkey 47, paired with elderflower tonic — a combination guaranteed to appeal to most feminine palates. My favourite was a Dutch coastal gin called Hermit, a salty distillation that emphasises Amsterdam’s marine associations (there’s a drawing of a hermit crab on the label), coupled with Fever-Tree’s Mediterranean tonic (with notes of thyme, citrus, and rosemary). I’ve never much liked gin and tonic, but the Conservatorium made a convert of me. *f*

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ABOVE: THE HOTEL'S AKASHA HOLISTIC WELLBEING CENTRE.
RIGHT: HIGH LUXURY IN THE I ♥ AMSTERDAM SUITE

