

The White House & Old Harbour in Wijnhaven light up at dawn



PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES

URBAN SPLENDOUR

A CITY THAT ROSE FROM THE ASHES TO DIZZYING HEIGHTS—
QUITE LITERALLY, DISCOVERS **SUPRIYA SEHGAL**

The caustic jibe on life completely eluded me in Class 9 when “Rotterdam” played loudly on the stereo. To be more accurate, it sometimes played, and mostly barely squeaked on my prized boom-box, a hand-me-down from my sister. Unmindful of the meaning, and even less inclined to discover it, the song was my feel-good tune by The Beautiful South. Through the song, I time-travelled to cobble-stoned streets and meadows carpeted with tulips—my imagination fuelled by what I had seen of Rotterdam from the video itself.

After two decades, I finally stepped into the real Rotterdam to find out why Heaton’s lyrics were moored in such a bleak disposition. He used the backdrop of the city to remind listeners that: “This could be Rotterdam or anywhere/Liverpool or Rome/’cause Rotterdam is anywhere/Anywhere alone...”

Jaded by the world’s breakneck technological advancement and lack of meaningful connections, Heaton jabbed the knife deeper with his take on universal existential loneliness. The related urban legend is that the songwriter’s ferry rides from Hull to Rotterdam reflected his thoughts on the fact that loneliness followed you no matter where you were.

I didn’t agree with him one bit. Neither did my guidebook. In fact, it was listed as one of the most incredible cities in the world to travel to in 2016.

Our bus pulled up in the heart of town, to unload us at the hotel. We had wound our way through the arterial roads and got the first glimpse of Rotterdam. Nose flat-

tened against the window, I tried to make something of the moody cafés, branded clothing stores, a silvery large lake and an old brick-walled government office—all webbed together to make a compelling urbanscape.

But I hadn’t been able to put a finger on a definitive character. The guide left us only with teasing flavours of the city, not the complete platter. The anecdotes mainly hinged on the World War II Rotterdam Blitz, when the Allies burned nearly the entire city to the ground in 1943. The resurrection of Rotterdam into one of the most interesting urban plans of the 21st century was the major talking point. It is also the largest port of Europe and has a fascinating maritime history. But I wasn’t interested in superlatives and history as much as the current spin on what the city stood for.

Over the next day I discovered that Rotterdam is a veritable open-air gallery of modern, post-modern and contemporary constructions, overflowing with inspired initiatives such as inner-city canal surfing and striking skyline extensions such as the Cube Houses. Quickly scribbling notes from the guide on the essential re-developments and new structures, I set out to fall in love with Rotterdam. I put a proverbial pin on the centre of the map and legged it out for hours.

My first stop was the modern village of Cube Houses. Standing in front of the Overblaak Development, I tilted my head 45 degrees, till the ochre-coloured homes seemed straight. This 20th century hexagonal, cube-shaped set of apartments is the city’s drawing card for mind-bending

ROTTERDAM

Clockwise from below: a lady stands in front of *The Tower of Babel* at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen; dusk sets in as people walk around Markthal; the sprawling Beursplein shopping district; and a tram rolls through Eendrachtsweg

architecture. Propped on pylons, the style was conceived by Dutch architect Piet Blom, and disrupted the idea of space utilisation when the apartments were constructed in Rotterdam and Helmond. The homes look like a haphazard pile-up of Lego pieces but there was clear method in Blom's seeming madness: the plan is based on a forest-like format that represents individual homes as trees. But one can only comprehend this when standing at a distance. Up close, with my neck swung back to take a peek inside, it looked plain disorderly. Of the 40 units, one can step inside two: the Stayokay backpackers' hostel and a furnished museum house, Kjik Kubus. I took a stroll into the hostel, constantly being reminded to watch my head as I walked past the common area, surveyed the dorms and the kitchen. It was a surreal experience, somewhat like walking into an alternate reality game.

I teetered out of this eccentric housing complex

and walked across a sprawling open public area to the newly constructed, horseshoe-shaped Markthal (Market Hall) Rotterdam. Only, the horseshoe was a whale-sized supermall designed for lovers of pop art. It was like walking in Alice's shoes, down the rabbit hole, with a floret of graphic fruits, flowers and insects looming in a rather sinister fashion over me. Inside the mall, it was difficult to break the gaze from the floor-to-ceiling mural of the full bloom of trippy supersized art. This was until I spotted a break in this bizarre canvas—a bedroom block in the middle of an apple. I squinted to find that there were many such gaps in the picture and all of them were filled up by personal homes. Markthal marks the apogee of the city's architectural eccentricity. There are 230 homes swung over the curved building, revealing Rotterdam's taste for ludicrously inventive designs.

After two outings of staggeringly odd proportions, it was time for something more sedate. To the extent that this was even possible in Rotterdam. The Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen was otherworldly. The galleries spanned all eras of Dutch and European art with the allure of Van Goghs, Monets, Rembrandts, Dalis and Man Rays. I stood transfixed in front of the world-famous *The Tower of Babel* by Pieter Bruegel and lingered way too long in the Surrealist gallery. A coffee break at the Pavilion, the in-house restaurant, was needed to spring back into action. It helped that the large glass windows overlooked a soothing green garden where a large grey bent-screw stood discordantly in its serene surroundings. I was grateful that a guide on her tea break offered to supply the story. Claes Oldenburg's "Screw Arch" was a design for a



Cube Houses are an architectural wonder

bridge that was to be built over the Maas river in the city. The plan fell through, and in 1978 the museum director, Wim Beeren, invited Oldenburg to make a model right in the garden. The story corroborated the city's love for artistic freedom. This, and her tip-off to see the *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field* by Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, turned out to be the highlights.

There was time enough for an hour more of Rotterdam and I decided to spend it by the Oude Haven (Old Port) at Fitzgerald restaurant. Christened after the famous novelist, the restaurant checked all the boxes for artists, intellectuals and travellers to fraternise. It had timber-panelled interiors with hefty metallic pipes holding up delicate chandeliers, and mellow-yellow lighting. It has devoted regulars that come for the classy vibe and a substantial menu.

Nursing a glass of wine, I thought of the iconic cheeky line that the American writer had once said. "Too much of anything is bad, but too much champagne is just right." It was ironic that I was sitting in a restaurant named after one of the most romantic authors of the 20th century, who found it easy to spot virtues in the bleakest backdrops of his times. Clearly, The Beautiful South could use some inspiration from him.

I left Rotterdam next morning, content with its unique take on 21st-century living. An ingenious architectural playground with a contemporary vibe, Rotterdam has an abiding charm and no sense of loneliness that the song talks about. Having had a memorable time hopping between museums, markets and bistros, I decided to stay wedged to my Class 9 version of the city.

THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

KLM Royal Dutch and Jet Airways connect Indian cities with Amsterdam on direct flights. Flights from Delhi or Mumbai cost from ₹55,000 roundtrip; cheaper options are available on one-stop flights. From Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, take the high-speed train to Rotterdam. The train ride takes 26 minutes (€12.30 for 2nd Class).

GETTING AROUND

Trams, bicycles and walking are the most popular ways of getting around in the city.

WHERE TO STAY

The fact that NH Atlanta has retained its vintage charm since 1929 is an excellent reason to stay here. It lies in the heart of the Lijnbaankwartier district, close

to many of the sightseeing spots in the city (doubles from €75; nh-hotels.com). For a truly immersive experience of the eccentric charm of the city, stay in a Cube House (entire two-bedroom apartment from €152; airbnb.co.in/rooms/817858).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

> See the interiors of a Cube House

or Kjik Kubus (Show Cube is open daily 11am-5pm; entry €2.50; kubuswoning.nl)
> Markthal at Binnenrotte, next to Blaak Station (Timings Mon-Sat 10am-8pm, Sun 12-6pm; markthal.nl)
> Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (open 11am-5pm; entry €15; boijmans.nl)

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