

Moor for less

With its network of canals and relaxed pace, Amsterdam is the perfect place to enjoy a houseboat holiday. Nicole Chabot finds it's all plain sailing in the 'Venice of the North'.

To foreigners, the Netherlands is synonymous with tulips, clogs, Edam cheese and bicycles. Yet, important to the Dutch as these things are, nothing beats their special relationship with water. And far from being afraid of it, Amsterdammers revel in their aqueous lot. They cruise the city's canals in the summer; they skate along them, scarves flapping, in winter. They even live on the water.

Visitors can mimic this unique way of living by staying on a houseboat during their holidays. The advantages of this type of vacation are excellent locations, postcard-pretty views and a sense of adventure.

Since 1800, untold Dutch have made their homes on boats. However, this watery way of life only took hold in Amsterdam in the 1960s thanks to a shortage of conventional housing, the availability and low cost of old working boats and the abundance of mooring places in the heart of the city. The fact that it was the hippie era, when people were keen to embrace alternative lifestyles, also did nothing to hurt the rising popularity of the houseboat. Creative types such as artists, musicians and writers particularly wanted to live on the water. It offered them peace and quiet to work but also allowed them to be as loud and outrageous as they wanted without disturbing the neighbours.

Today, living on the water is largely the domain of those who can afford it. A shortage of old working boats has seen a rise in prices, making the cost of a purpose-built houseboat only slightly less than the price of a house. Boats require much more maintenance than houses, rent is charged for a mooring and houseboat owners are liable to a tax based on the value of the vessel. The Amsterdam government has capped the number of these "water bungalows" at 2,500 and there are no vacant mooring places left in the city centre. These factors have combined to make living on the canals exclusive.

Those new to houseboat holidays will find planning

one requires effort. However, the folks at Amsterdam House (tel: 31 20 626 2577, www.amsterdamhouse.nl), City Mundo (tel: 31 20 676 5270, www.citymundo.com) and Houseboat Hotel & Apartments (tel: 31 20 471 2553, www.houseboathotel.nl) are busy spreading the word about their "Venice of the North".

They offer two main categories of houseboat to tickle your fancy: old working vessels and specially built houseboats that look more like super-size garden sheds than boats. The old iron working craft are charming to look at and make you feel like a real sea dog when you're aboard; the interiors of the purpose-built houseboats, however, are more spacious. Regardless of the type you choose, each will have an outside area, to be shared with the occasional mallard or heron only, from where you can linger over your morning coffee.

Much of Amsterdam's houseboat rental market revolves around private properties, in which visitors live among the owners' belongings. However, some water bungalows are not lived in by their owners at all and are rented out to the public year-round. Choosing to stay in a private property can mean you rent the entire vessel – the preferred choice of honeymooners and celebrities – or that you rent a cabin aboard the bungalow, effectively sharing it with its owners. Taking the second option may mean you get a traditional Dutch breakfast every morning. It will certainly enable you to become acquainted with the Netherlands because, in the absence of a hotel concierge, houseboat owners are founts of local wisdom.

Most water bungalows sleep four or five people, although Houseboat Hotel does offer larger boats sleeping up to 24. Amsterdam House, City Mundo and Houseboat Hotel all lease craft moored close to one another. Note, too, that most houseboats in Amsterdam have no engine, so you won't be sailing anywhere.

One thing every rental water bungalow has, however,

is a bathroom. All have showers and some even have bathtubs for soaking in after a long day's sightseeing. Waste water from bathrooms is pumped away by means of a special pump placed behind the toilet and connected to the city sewerage system, although not every houseboat is yet hooked up to it. A typical houseboat kitchen has a sink, a stove (sometimes an oven), a microwave oven, a dishwasher and a washing machine. Tableware, towels and bed linen are provided, and the boats are cleaned before each new party arrives and often at regular intervals during longer vacations.

Renting a houseboat can be cheaper than checking in to a hotel. Amsterdam House offers two-room houseboats (one living room and one bedroom) sleeping two to four people from €150 (\$1,500) a night, three-room boats for up to six people from €195 and four-room versions for nine from €295.

City Mundo prices also depend on how long you stay and the number of people in your group. A category one rental (the economy option) will set you back €29 a person a night, based on two sharing for three to seven nights; a category four rental (the most expensive) costs €60 a person a night, based on two sharing for three to seven nights. The cost of a houseboat booked through Houseboat Hotel also depends on the size of your party and the length of your stay, as well as the time of year. Prices start at €45 a person a night for a room in a private houseboat and €56 a person a night, based on two sharing, for a vessel of your own.

Getting there: Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.com) and KLM (www.klm.com) fly from Hong Kong to Amsterdam.