

# Dutch quaint meets boldly modern



**Rick Steves**

When traveling in the Netherlands — with its canals, windmills, and tulip fields — it all seems so cute and sweet; you may find yourself exclaiming, “Everything’s just so ... Dutch!” But for another side of the Netherlands, visit the no-nonsense “second city” of Rotterdam.

Mighty Rotterdam has a gleaming skyline and Europe’s largest port. Locals say that while the money is spent in Amsterdam, it’s made in Rotterdam. They boast that shirts in Rotterdam are sold with the sleeves already rolled up.

Once, Rotterdam was quaint and cozy like Amsterdam — but then it was leveled by the Nazis in World War II. Hitler ordered a systematic bombing of the city, and its center was, quite literally, flattened.

Following the bombing, a fire raged for three days, consuming what was left. When Hitler threatened to do the same thing to Utrecht, the Dutch government surrendered immediately.

Photos of WWII Rotterdam are startling: A scant few historic buildings are still standing — barely — and the outlines of the streets around them are hardly visible.

But after the war, rather than rebuild quaint (as most Dutch towns did), Rotterdammers embraced the chance to go in another direction: boldly modern.

Ever since, the city has been a stimulating urban showcase of architectural experimentation, with buildings big and small designed by a Who’s Who of contemporary architects. You’ll see wildly creative and futuristic



If Rotterdam has a single bold icon representing its modern approach to architecture, it’s Piet Blom’s funky cubed houses. **CAMERON HEWITT**

train stations, libraries, market halls, office towers, bridges, subway stations, and apartment complexes that push the envelope toward science fiction.

In the late 1970s, architect Piet Blom turned urban housing on its ear with a striking design: 39 identical yellow cubes, all tilted up on their corners, each meant to house a single family. Taken together, the Cube Houses look like dozens of dice in mid-toss.

If Rotterdam has a single icon representing its bold approach to postwar architecture, this is it. To get a look inside one of the cubes, visit the Kijk-Kubus Museum House.

More arresting architecture is south of the city center, near the Erasmus Bridge, which was built in the 1990s to link the north

and south banks of the Maas River. The southern bank, then underdeveloped, exploded into a new “downtown” zone of commerce. At the far end stands a lineup of creations — nicknamed “Manhattan on the Maas” — by some of the world’s top architects, including Renzo Piano, Rem Koolhaas and Norman Foster.

Their works tower over Rotterdam’s port, which is the ninth largest in the world. It handles about 30,000 oceangoing vessels each year — that’s about 80 ships a day — hauling a total of 450 million tons of cargo.

You can appreciate the immensity of it all with a harbor tour, where you’ll see sprawling het Park (meaning “the Park,” marked by the Euromast tower); several innova-

tive waterfront housing blocks; and a section of the bustling port with stacks upon stacks of containers and a forest of busy cranes.

But not everything in this city is postwar mod. One of the few well-preserved bits wasn’t even originally part of Rotterdam — it was the port for Delft.

Historic Delfshaven is just a short subway ride away from Rotterdam’s city center, but it’s a world away from the 21st century. There’s an idyllic canal pulled straight out of a Vermeer painting, with old boats, a cantilevered drawbridge, and even a classic old windmill still churning away in the distance.

In the heart of the city is Rotterdam’s oldest structure, St. Lawrence Church — completed in 1525 and a rare survivor of the 1940 Nazi bombing campaign.

The church’s nondescript exterior belies its vast, pristine interior, which sports a huge organ. If you enter, be sure to look up to appreciate its roof, one that was clearly made by a city of shipbuilders — it feels like you’re huddled beneath an overturned boat.

Grotekerkplein, the “Great Church Square” in front of St. Lawrence Church, honors Rotterdam native Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) with a 17th-century statue, which also, somehow, survived the bombing.

A great humanist, Erasmus forged the notion of identifying as European — seeing oneself as a citizen of the world and not tied to a single nationality. In many ways he’s the intellectual forebear of the European Union, which named its highly success-

ful foreign-study program after him. On the pedestal, in Dutch, is an excerpt from one of his most famous remarks: “The entire world is your fatherland.”

Rising out of the ashes of war, Rotterdam is a success story — and offers a chance to experience another slice of the Netherlands. Between its modern art and workaday mentality, a visit here makes it clear: For Dutch urbanites, the days of milkmaids and wooden shoes are long gone.

*Rick Steves writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio, and organizes European tours. This column revisits some of Rick’s favorite places over the past two decades. Visit his website at [ricksteves.com](http://ricksteves.com), email him at [rick@ricksteves.com](mailto:rick@ricksteves.com) or follow his blog on Facebook.*

## CELEBRITY TRAVEL

# Cellist dreams of Radio City gig

By **Jae-Ha Kim**  
Tribune Content Agency

For cellist Derek Stein, touring is a part of his life as a member of Vitamin String Quartet. But one of his fondest memories is of traveling with his grandfather many years ago.

“My maternal grandfather took me to Germany the summer between junior and senior year of high school,” Stein said in an interview from Los Angeles. “It was my first time out of the (United) States and an amazing experience. We went there specifically to look for a cello that he would purchase for me. We went all around the German countryside visiting different string shops and looking at the instruments that they had for sale. I was able to sit in on a couple rehearsals for a little community orchestra in one of the villages that we stayed in for a couple of days.”

The popular quartet, now on tour, has had its music featured on the Netflix series “Bridgerton,” and its repertoire includes classical covers of songs by artists such as Taylor Swift, Billie Eilish, BTS, Frank Ocean, Prince and Blackpink.

This interview with Stein has been edited for clarity and length.

**Q: What is your bucket-list venue that you have yet to perform in?**

**A:** Radio City Music Hall in New York City. I haven’t seen any concerts or productions at Radio City Music Hall. I just think it



Leah Zeger, from left, Tom Lea, Rachel Grace and Derek Stein are members of Vitamin String Quartet. **NICK FANCHER**

would be a big milestone if VSQ performed there and sold the place out!

**Q: What do you remember about your first professional gig?**

**A:** I don’t know that I could pinpoint my first professional gig, but my first gig after finishing grad school was performing in a brand-new opera composed by LA composer Veronika Krausas produced by what would become the LA experimental opera company, The Industry.

**Q: Have you worked on any songs while you were on the road?**

**A:** I have spent many hours practicing in hotels but never in airports or the bus.

**Q: Do you have any free time built into your tours to go sightseeing?**

**A:** Thankfully, we do have some days off scheduled on our tours, which we try to use to explore whatever city we (are) in.

**Q: What do you do to maintain your health on the road?**

**A:** Maintain a healthy sleep schedule, try to eat well as often as possible and walk around as much as possible.

**Q: Do you have any trips planned?**

**A:** Just the upcoming VSQ tour to Europe and the States.

**Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?**  
**A:** I enjoy Santa Barbara. It’s close and great for a quick getaway.

**Q: If you’ve ever gone away for the holidays, which was the best trip?**

**A:** Christmas in New York in 2016. My sister was living in the city at the time. I was there with my mother and her fiancé to spend the holiday with family.

**Q: What are your five favorite cities?**

**A:** Los Angeles, New York, London, Manchester, Reykjavik.

**Q: How do you separate work from vacation trips?**

**A:** Vacation trips are rare for me. I attempt to include some vacation in my work trips.

**Q: What is your guilty pleasure when you’re on the road?**

**A:** Breakfast at greasy diners!

**Q: What’s the most important thing you’ve learned from your travels?**

**A:** Take in as much as possible.

**Q: Food truck or fine dining?**

**A:** Fine dining. I like the experience, ambiance and service.

For more from the reporter, visit [www.jaehakim.com](http://www.jaehakim.com).

## TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

# Family misses cruise over flight delay, seeks refund

By **Christopher Elliott** | King Features Syndicate

I booked an Alaskan cruise through Holland America for my family. A Holland America agent urged us to buy our Alaska Airlines flights through the cruise line. We did not purchase travel insurance.

When our flight was canceled because of a mechanical problem, the cruise line said we’d miss the ship, so our only option was to cancel.

We lost \$3,952. Holland America only refunded the taxes after weeks of fighting. Holland America’s agent promised us support if the flight was delayed or canceled.

We would like a refund of the remaining balance since the mishap was a direct result of what was within their responsibility, not ours. Can you help?

— *Michael Ramer, San Jose, California*

**A:** Holland America should have honored its verbal commitment to assist you when your flight delay ended your cruise. It looks like your 7:15 a.m. flight was canceled because of a mechanical problem. The next flight didn’t leave until 10 a.m. This wouldn’t have given you enough time to reach your ship.

You booked your flights through Holland America’s Flight Ease program. This promises that if your flight is delayed or canceled by the airline on the day you are on your way to or from your cruise, their “staff is ready to assist you, 24/7.” They state, “We’ll even take care of any flight changes if needed to join the voyage at the next available port of call.”

But Holland America doesn’t promise that you will make your cruise or that it would refund your cruise under the Flight Ease program if you miss the boat.

You made several mistakes when you booked your cruise. First, you

should always give yourself a cushion between when you arrive and when your ship leaves — preferably an entire day. You were cutting it too close. Second, always get travel insurance for your cruise. Insurance would have covered the full cost of your cruise. Flight Ease won’t.

Finally, in reviewing your paper trail, it looks like you spent a lot of time on the phone with Holland America. Certainly, when your flight is canceled, you’ll want to call your cruise line right away. But afterward, keep everything in writing so that you have a reliable paper trail showing your efforts to resolve the case. You may need to forward it to the Holland America executives whose names I publish on my consumer advocacy site, [Elliott.org](http://Elliott.org).

It looks like you were dealing with a Holland America cruise consultant when you booked your cruise and airfare. I don’t see any evidence that the Holland Amer-

ica agent recommended travel insurance to you. He should have done so.

More importantly, Holland America should have refunded your airline tickets. Under Department of Transportation rules, an airline must automatically refund you when it cancels a flight. It appears that your airline had done this, but Holland America didn’t pass the refund along to you.

I contacted Holland America on your behalf. It agreed to refund \$759 in airfare in addition to the \$832 in taxes and port fees that it had already returned. Unfortunately, you’re going to lose the value of your cruise. This is an expensive lesson that I wish you could have avoided.

*Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at [elliott.org/help](http://elliott.org/help) or [chris@elliott.org](mailto:chris@elliott.org).*