

## A night with Van Gogh in Amsterdam

16/04/2024 Claire Wrathall

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At the venerable Hotel De L'Europe, a new suite offers the chance to spend a night 'inside the artist's head'

Pending the start, in October, of a year of celebrations to mark the 750th anniversary of the founding of Amsterdam, the city's five-star hotels have been raising their game. None more so than the venerable De L'Europe, which has stood at the confluence of the Amstel river and two canals since 1896 and is just completing a five-year renovation.

If the original building retains a timeless look and feel — hushed, plush, palm-filled and still gratifyingly grand, thanks to a sensitive scheme by the fashionable Amsterdam studio Nicemakers — its new wing next door is about design with a capital D. Indeed, so different in spirit is this conversion of a former bank that it has been given its own name, 't Huys, an archaic spelling of the Dutch for house.

Each of its 14 suites is a collaboration with an Amsterdam creative or brand, among them furniture designers Kokke House (whose pieces can be found in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum and New York's Museum of Modern Art), the photography gallery Ravestijn, and the Dutch edition of Harper's Bazaar.

For example, couturier and sustainability champion Ronald van der Kemp — whose label RVDK has been worn by Celine Dion, Lady Gaga and Michelle Obama, among others — has created an almost all-white suite with undeniable wow: a minimalist bedroom dominated by a vast fringe-curtained bed and a living space plastered in images of his gowns and hung with actual examples.

In contrast, two Curaçao-born artist sisters, Tisja and Ziarah Janssen, together with their ceramicist mother and furniture-maker father, have conjured an all-red room that feels like something between a set from *Barbarella* and a womb.

Book into some of them, and you'll be offered an "experience" too. Stay, for instance, in the art- and daylight-filled riverfront apartment named after the jeweller Bibi van der Velden, and you're invited to visit her studio or, better still, have her staff come to you, along with a selection of her ingeniously engineered wearable works of art to try on.

I, however, was assigned the Van Gogh Museum Suite. "It will be like being inside his head," a member of the reception team enthused, not altogether reassuringly. (Just inside the suite's door hangs a reproduction of his oil sketch "Vestibule in the Asylum", made in the hospital in Saint-Rémy to which he was admitted a year before his suicide.)

But then "immersion" is what the world's most popular 19th-century artist is about these days. More than 5mn people have paid to lose themselves in *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*, a digital

extravaganza involving 360-degree projections of his paintings on to 1,000 sq m of screens and VR headsets, which has been touring the world since 2017 and is still on in 17 cities, from Atlanta to Seoul.

Even London's normally conservative National Gallery will mark its own 200th anniversary this year with a blockbuster Van Gogh show promising "swirling clouds", "swaying" trees and an opportunity to "walk beneath a starry night".

The suite, however, is sombre, its grey walls hung with reproductions of illustrated letters to his art-dealer brother and supporter Theo, and a drawing ("Landscape with Houses and Woman with a Spade"), all captioned as though in a museum.

The sitting room is dominated by a bespoke yellow desk inspired by the furniture of Dutch Modernist Gerrit Rietveld, architect of Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum. This opened in 1973 and contains 205 paintings, more than 500 drawings and 800 letters, the majority gifted by Theo's son. His dream was "to share them with the world", the family's current paterfamilias, Vincent Willem van Gogh, an adviser to the museum, writes in a note wishing me an "inspiring stay".

The museum has been closely involved in the suite's decoration, not least in providing letters and drawings from its curator-certified "museum edition" of reproductions. To the untrained eye, these are indistinguishable from the real thing. Perhaps the greatest privilege that comes from staying here is the opportunity to pore over them, in particular the exact facsimiles, every stain, tear and loose thread as it is on the originals, of the artist's four remaining sketchbooks, a set that retails at €22,750, including the special Rietveld-inspired walnut-and-aluminium cuboid cabinet that houses them.

Elsewhere there's a contemporary sideboard bearing a pile of books on Van Gogh, and a table on which two bottles of Absente Absinthe 55 and four glasses are set out.

There's only a slight sense that the gift shop has been raided: the cups by the coffee maker are printed with Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" and there's an "Almond Blossom" robe in the bathroom. But a knock on the door presaged the arrival of a couple of white-gloved staff who proceeded to hang — a little too low — a full-size, convincingly impasto-heavy copy of "Sunflowers" on the wall behind the desk.

**Guests are offered "Landscape at Twilight" or "The Bedroom" as alternatives, but I wanted to test the artist's assertion that it "grows in richness the more you look at it". (It does: Theo had a point when he likened it to "a piece of fabric embroidered with satin and gold".)**

Bar the discreet pattern on the ostensibly Van Gogh-inspired wallpaper, which is approximately the blue of the walls in "The Bedroom", there's no imagery in the suite's bedroom until you reach for the remote by the bed, and switch on the projection of "Wheatfield with a Reaper" that appears on the ceiling.

Lasting a few minutes, it pans slowly across the absinthe-green sky, the purple-headed hills and swirls of golden cereal in extreme close-up to the distorted accompaniment of a piece for solo piano by Remko Kühne.

It is briefly transfixing to lie back and stare up at it. But I did wonder about the choice of painting, for as Van Gogh wrote to Theo, the view is what he saw "through the iron bars of the isolation cell" at the

asylum in Saint-Rémy. “To Vincent,” reads the entry in the museum’s catalogue, “it was an image of death, with humanity represented by the wheat being mowed.” Sweet dreams then!

Still, I’ve never learnt so much from a night in a hotel. Even the “bedtime story” card left at turndown was about Helene Kröller-Möller, who amassed 88 paintings by Van Gogh, now on display at the museum bearing her name in Otterlo, 80km east of Amsterdam.

I’ve yet to eat in the hotel’s two-Michelin-star Flore restaurant, but I very much enjoyed dinner in its Brasserie Marie, which is popular with locals, thanks to its reasonably priced menu (hors d’oeuvres from €5, mains from €24), strong on seafood (sea urchin with mussels and mushrooms; skate with artichoke, mussels, oysters and shrimps; lamb with razor clams), and a waterside terrace that wraps around the building.

Its bar, too, is something of an institution. Named Freddy’s, after Alfred Heineken, who bought the hotel in the 1950s and whose brewing-dynasty descendants continue to own it, it too has undergone a makeover, although it still feels like an old Dutch brown bar that serves croquettes and Heineken. (Perhaps it’s the setting, but I swear it tastes better than what’s brewed in the UK.)

And it’s this sense that the hotel is still family-owned and independently operated that gives it the ability to form unconventional partnerships and take risks.

As I was leaving, I strayed into ‘t Huys’s new “concept store”, IN-HUYS, a repository of beautiful things by Dutch designers, including several of those with suites named after them. My eye was caught by a display of hats. Branded Akavi, they’re made by Nicola Vignini, a waiter in the busy trattoria on the ground floor of ‘t Huys whose side hustle is making clothes and crocheting. It gladdens me that the hotel encourages and supports its staff like this.

But then a happy, appreciated team — and the staff, many of whom have worked here for decades, are great — is what makes a wonderful hotel, and De L’Europe is one I’m always delighted to stay at. Reminders of Van Gogh’s psychosis notwithstanding, it’s a cheering and a cheerful place to be.

## Details

Claire Wrathall was a guest of Eurostar ([eurostar.com](http://eurostar.com)) and the Hotel De L’Europe ([deleurope.com](http://deleurope.com)). Doubles at De L’Europe start from €459; the Van Gogh Suite starts at €1,499, including a pair of multiple-entry tickets to the Van Gogh Museum