

# If you lived in... Oud-West

Style



Late 19th-century architecture and young families

For a truly representative sampling of today's Holland – from kinky to classic – Oud-West may be just the place, **Sophia Kornienko** reports

With a staggering diversity of cultures and social backgrounds on a bite-sized piece of land – much of it an old polder – this densely inhabited neighbourhood has both the laid-back charm of a province and the buzz of a metropolis.

People who have been living here for decades, as well as a growing number of newcomers and students from the many local fraternities and sororities, fill the neighbourhood's busy cafés. In addition to a record number of international eateries (Brazilian, Ethiopian, Scandinavian), Oud-West has its fair share of atmospheric Dutch cafés, best for observing Amsterdam's essence.

Try the delicious Lunchroom Wilhelmina or the perpetually crowded Café De Toog, where any foreigners you see are most likely residents.

'It's only in the past six years that business has really been going well, after the neighbourhood was licked into shape and received a serious yuppie injection,' says Ton Fritz,

De Toog's former owner who now runs the popular Saffraan catering company.

But some of the residents aren't so pleased with the gentrification of the neighbourhood. In 1980, Vondelstraat saw Amsterdam's most ferocious street fight between squatters and the police.

'It has become cool and business-like around here, a bit too decorous, and we miss the beautiful diversity of the cruder homespun shops,' says Toon Toele, who, with his wife Trui, has been running an oriental fabric shop on Overtoom for decades. 'But the atmosphere is very amicable, and it's only for the better that all the yammerers are off to places like Almere and Purmerend.'

**Property prices**

Oud-West is young: over half its population is under 35. Although most of the apartments tend to be on the small side, the average price per square metre is relatively high. Martijn Vlek of Vlek Makelaardij estate agents puts it at about €4,000 per square metre, which, he says, 'means the neighbourhood attracts young couples with a double income and ambitious singles.'

The numbers bear him out: young singles constitute 40 per cent of neighbourhood residents, compared to Amsterdam's average of 30 per cent. Vlek says it's popular with

families, too – 'comparable only to de Pijp'.

As only apartments above roughly 80 square metres are eligible to rent at a free market price, almost all of the rentals here are social flats.

**Good for: romantics**

'It's different from Capetown,' says 28-year-old South African journalist Aurelia Nell, who is looking to move, but not too far. 'It's very cosy, the historic façades are romantic and I've got Vondelpark as my backyard.'

Sometimes Oud-West does look like Africa – the bright-green parakeets that have populated Vondelpark since the 1960s can be spotted sitting on the neighbourhood's power lines.

**Fascinating fact**

Although Oud-West is a 19th-century extension of Amsterdam, its history dates further back. It's hard to believe it now, but summer houses used to stretch along today's busiest Oud-West artery, the Overtoom – a former canal where rich Amsterdammers came to spend summers 'away from the city'.

The canal was also the main waterway bringing agricultural goods into the city. The street running alongside it, the Heiligeweg ('The Holy Way'), led pilgrims to a holy house on Kalverstraat, where the Amsterdam Miracle supposedly took place in 1345. Heiligeweg is still there, minus the holy house.

## FIGURES

- Number of properties** 19,032
- Primary schools** 6
- Dentists** 18
- General practitioners** 20
- Pharmacists** 4
- Cafés** 150

**Transport**

Oud-West is located between the city centre and the A10, walking distance from Leidseplein. Trams 1 and 17 go between Station Lelylaan and Central Station, along Overtoom and Kinkerstraat respectively.

**Addresses**

- Lunchroom Wilhelmina, *Eerste Helmersstraat 83a*
- Café De Toog, *Nicolaas Beetsstraat 142*
- Saffraan Traiteur/Catering, *Jan Pieter Heyestraat 128*
- Vlek Makelaardij, *Overtoom 427*

**Notable architecture**

Peep in Pierre Cuypers' neo-gothic Vondelkerk on Vondelstraat to see the church's dreamy interior. The architect, who lived at numbers 77-79, laid out the street after buying land there.

Also worth a visit is the Hollandse Manege at Vondelstraat 140, a surprise horse-riding school in the middle of the city. Bellamystraat has preserved its pastoral aura with tiny village houses and gardens.

Between Vondelstraat and Vondelpark, take in the whole of Europe: a row of late 19th-century houses in seven architectural styles at Roemer Visscherstraat 20-30a features façades inscribed with the names of different countries, symbolising the tight connections between Europe, Russia and the Netherlands. Cross Overtoom with its stately villas and enter the 'Poets' Neighbourhood' around the three Helmers streets. Watch children play in the yard of former hospital Wilhelmina Gasthuis at Eerste Helmersstraat 104, and visit the childhood home of one of Holland's greatest writers, Willem Frederik Hermans, at Eerste Helmersstraat 208.

**Pros**

One used to have to take Tram 1 to get anything, but today all you need is right in the neighbourhood, from the discount shops on Kinkerstraat and in the Ten Kate Markt to the hip boutiques of Jan Pieter Heijestraat and Bilderdijkstraat. The up-and-coming neighbourhood is also working on its own cultural centre, 'De Hallen', scheduled to open shortly on the site of a former tram barn.

**Cons**

'There are almost no natives left here, you've got to look with a lantern to find one,' says hairdressing salon owner Jaap van Weerdenburg, a born and bred Oud-West-ite. 'Mothers would leave their children alone in Vondelpark and tell them to wait at a certain hour to get picked up,' says Van Weerdenburg. Those days are long gone.