

Cheatsheet to:

The Rijksmuseum

With a million objects in its collection, there's an art to visiting this vast Dutch gallery. **Alicia Miller** has it mastered

Swerve the school groups

Most people assume weekends will be busier, so they come during the week — but do so and you'll have to contend with hordes of local school kids visiting the museum as part of their lessons. Instead, come first thing on a Sunday morning, ideally in November, early December, February or March, the museum's quietest times of year.

Pay less for your ticket

Buy your ticket in advance online (at rijksmuseum.nl) and you'll not only skip the queue at the ticket counter (which can be as long as 30 minutes at peak times), you'll also save money, paying £17 rather than the usual £18. Forgot? Enter the museum via the 'no ticket' doors, then look for the QR code screens in the lobby atrium — snap one with your smartphone to buy a ticket online instantly (the museum has free wi-fi).

get me there

Eurostar (eurostar.com) has one-way fares from London St Pancras to Amsterdam from £35. **Swish hotel Conservatorium** is a five-minute walk from the Rijksmuseum (conservatoriumhotel.com; doubles from £413, room only).

Or, if you're planning to visit three or more other Amsterdam museums, such as Rembrandt House or the Van Gogh Museum, consider an I Amsterdam City Card, which gives you access to more than 70 sights, as well as free public transport; the best value option is for 72 hours (iamsterdam.com; £83).

Don't buy the audio guide

It costs £4.50, and you have to queue separately to collect it. Instead, download the free, official Rijksmuseum app onto your phone and bring a pair of headphones. More comprehensive than the audio guide, the app maps walking routes around the museum on screen (switch on Bluetooth and it will tell you when you're close to a key work), and you can even pre-plan your own circuit taking in the pieces you're keenest to see. Just want to wander? Wait for a painting to

catch your eye, then type in its exhibit number — the app will pull up text or an audio recording with further details.

Snag a locker

The line for the free bag check in the lobby atrium is usually long. Instead, head towards the ground-floor toilet area and you'll find a row of tucked-away, queue-free lockers. You'll need to pop in €1 to activate one, but you get it back on return of your key.

Take the reverse route

From the lobby atrium, most people walk through the stone archways and turn left upwards into the busy 19th-century galleries, starting with Van Gogh, moving on to Goya, then stopping off at *The Night Watch*, Rembrandt's most famous work. It's busy all the way along, so take an alternative route to get some breathing space: enter via the ground-floor Special

Collections (pottery and textiles), then wander up through the underrated 18th-century section (sculpture and glamorous period rooms), then walk through the 1600-1650 wing (look out for Rembrandt's self-portrait), before reaching *The Night Watch*.

Find the 'other' *Night Watch*

The Rijksmuseum's top-billed work is currently being restored, and while the process is fascinating (it's being retouched in public view inside a giant glass box), it also means you can't get very close. So, take only a brief look, then head to room 2.8 to see Bartholomeus van der Helst's 1648 *Treaty of Münster* — up close, without any crowds. It's very similar to *The Night Watch* — it depicts militia celebrating — and Helst was just as respected in his lifetime as Rembrandt was. Still desperate for a good long gaze at Rembrandt's painting? The best time

to see it crowd-free is at 4.30pm, just before the museum closes.

Keep the kids entertained

Dutch Renaissance art isn't thrilling for most children. But you can make it fun — pack colouring pencils and visit the atrium's Information desk to pick up the free '1-Kilometre Route' booklet for families, full of drawing activities inspired by the main galleries. Or purchase a Family Quest audio guide game (£2pp) — playing with two to four people, you have an hour to discover eight of the museum's highlights as a team.

Plan your meals

You're miles from city restaurants here, so you need to think ahead. You can bring a picnic, but you'll have to eat it in the garden grounds (you're allowed to exit the museum and re-enter on the same day). Otherwise, there are two small coffee kiosks on the first floor (the one next to room 1.11 is quieter), and a permanently rammed sit-down cafe in the atrium (book ahead for lunch). But the best option? The gourmet Rijks Restaurant (rijksrestaurant.nl; mains about £16) in the Philips Wing — not your average museum eatery, but actually one of Amsterdam's top restaurants in its own right. Come for a long, lazy lunch between exhibits (the

museum is busiest from 11am to 3pm anyway), or an early dinner after the gallery closes (at 5pm). If you're willing to dedicate a couple of hours to your meal, opt for a tasting menu (from £38 at lunch for three dishes, or £71 at dinner for six dishes) and savour the likes of beetroot millefeuille with beurre blanc and parsley oil, or cuttlefish with caramelised *lardo*, green pea and miso.

Don't miss the history

People cluster around the Gallery of Honour — a roll call of Vermeer, Steen, Hals and Rembrandt masterpieces — as well as the giant *Battle of Waterloo* by Pieneman (room 1.12) and Asselijn's *Threatened Swan* (room 2.3). They're worth seeing, of course, but it's not all about the paintings. The Rijksmuseum is as much a history museum as an art one — look out for the 11th-century narwhal 'unicorn horns' in room 0.1; a carving from the stern of the *Royal Charles*, a British ship captured by Dutch forces in 1667 (room 2.15); and a WWI FK 23 Bantam fighter plane on the often-missed top floor — all tell the story of the Dutch nation. To catch more hidden gems, join a themed museum tour, bookable through the website — topics include Love, Golden Age Fashion, and Eating and Drinking (£67 per hour with a private guide). ■