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Date: 14.09.2022

Reading 1

The Capital of Cool

1 The essential thing to do for a perfect Amsterdam weekend is to rent a bike. Cycling will make you feel more as if you belong, but only if you do it right. Just get an old-fashioned, secure bike, probably stolen 20 times over the years, and sit up straight. With jeans and a T-shirt, you will have the city's style just like having a sports car in Los Angeles or wearing a bikini on Copacabana beach. Now that you have your bike you can relax, and that is the whole point of coming to Amsterdam. The first thing to do is to find a café to eat breakfast – outdoors, preferably. Wherever you eat, it helps to realize that in Amsterdam you should expect poor service. The waiters and waitresses don't mean to be rude, but they don't understand the normal relationship between waiters and customers. In Amsterdam, nobody gets treated with respect. After breakfast get back on your bike, which you should have locked to something that cannot easily be removed, such as a tree. Then you can cycle round the beautiful 17th century canals. There is no need to look out for any particular house. There are almost no palaces or grand buildings, but all the ordinary buildings are lovely and interesting.

2 Amsterdam was built by *merchants*, who buy and sell goods, so wealth was widely spread; and it is almost perfectly preserved – kept as it is. Amsterdam has never really known great difficulties, but it owes its preservation to local campaigners. After the war, there were plans to tear up the old city, build a proper metro system and a four-lane highway to the train station. US cities were the future then. But a group of young people successfully opposed the changes and saved Amsterdam from the terrible fate of Brussels. After lunch you might feel like a trip to a museum. Most famous is the Rijksmuseum, a gorgeous 19th-century building that looks almost exactly like the Central Station, possibly because it was built by the same architect. The full collection will not be on display until 2010, but you can still see a huge range of the Dutch masters and, of course, Rembrandt's "Nightwatch". The rest of the afternoon and early evening can be spent touring the pretty streets beside the canals, and when night falls, you have to have Indonesian food. (You can get all kinds of surprisingly good European cuisine here but there is no point in coming to Amsterdam for that. It is much better in London or Paris or New York). There are plenty of quiet little places where you can order a *rijsttafel* (rice table), a Dutch invention that is a collection of many small dishes – it makes a perfect way to end a perfect day. Over *rijsttafel* an Amsterdam friend said: "We live in an open-air museum where you can get everywhere by bike in five minutes, and there are trees, too. What more could you want?"

1 Only a few years ago, going abroad for medical treatment was mostly for emergency treatment by expensive specialists. Now, cheaper travel and the falling cost of healthcare in some countries have made medical tourism affordable for thousands of people who did not use to think about it seriously in the past. The trend is growing as a result of the increase in demand for cosmetic surgery and the success of some countries in marketing themselves to medical tourists as inexpensive places for treatment. Whether it is cosmetic surgery in Poland or dentistry in India, medical tourism is becoming more and more popular. A comparison between the cost of treatment in Canada or the UK and the cost in other countries sends thousands of people to foreign hospitals and clinics. The long waiting lists in their own country is another reason why people look elsewhere for treatment.

2 Maria Paphitis, a 27-year old Canadian publishing assistant who is working in London, began visiting Greece for dental work four years ago. "I was told I had to wait weeks for a visit to a specialist in London and my teeth were aching," she says. "I flew into Greece and was seen by a dentist the same afternoon. And, while the cost of a dental visit in London would be 110 euro, I was able to have an X-ray and a filling in Greece for a total of 100 euro. It is cheaper, easier and more reliable than going to a dentist in the UK. So, I've been back three times since. I have family in Greece and it's an easy thing to do. My boyfriend needs a bridge (a dental operation) and he's going to get it done in Greece as well. I find it works very well for me." Of course, the cost for a medical tourism trip to Greece has to be taken into account, but as the pressure in domestic health systems in many European countries increases with the aging population, medical tourism looks like it is going to be a popular choice for more and more people in the future.