

Travel

## A glimpse of the Golden Age: Amsterdam's new

### lakeside hideaway, De Durgerdam

A short boat ride from the city, a 17th-century inn reopens this week blending contemporary design and Old Master aesthetics

Claire Wrathall MARCH 15 2023

From the water, the village of Durgerdam, which lies about 6km east of Amsterdam's Centraal Station, looks almost improbably picturesque: a string of 200 or so low, red-roofed, gable-fronted houses stretching 1.5km around a shallow bay, their wooden facades painted pale colours, the better, I learnt, to reflect the moonlight as a warning to passing ships that they were close to shore. Two buildings stand taller than the rest, a small square chapel with a lantern-like tower, and a white-weatherboarded inn. A hostelry has stood on the site since 1664. This month, after a five-year restoration that has seen it almost entirely dismantled and reconstructed, it opens as a hotel.

Alighting from the Eurostar, I'd been met and led not to a car — which would have been the faster option — but to a 10m Dutch saloon boat moored in the basin in front of the station. Built in 1905, it too had fallen into disrepair but has now been restored to its former glory and refitted with an electric engine. Lunch had been laid out to sustain us as we cruised out of the city's Old Harbour, into the river IJ towards the lake known as the IJmeer, on whose northern bank Durgerdam lies, a journey of about an hour. It is a fine way to travel and, especially as we passed through the Oranjesluisen, a series of immense locks that regulate the level of water in the North Sea Canal, west of Amsterdam, to prevent it from flowing into the cleaner IJmeer, and a lesson in what a challenge it is to control the volumes of water that threaten this low land.



De Durgerdam, as the hotel is named, is the creation of Paul Geertman, founder and owner of Aedes, the independent investment and development company behind a number of Amsterdam hotels, ranging from the Hyatt Regency and Andaz to Soho House and The Hoxton. After 15 years as a developer, however, he's decided to embrace hotel management too — this will be the first owner-operated Aedes hotel. (Two further hotels, each with more than 100 rooms, are also in development, one on the corner of the Amstel River and the Prinsengracht, next to Amsterdam's Royal Theatre Carré, and another in a rural location east of the city, comprising 80ha of farmland he plans to rewild.)



restaurant overlooks the IJmeer



r combines old with new



An old-fashioned phone by the bedside

“Over the years we’ve learnt so much about hotels and formed very strong opinions about how they should be run,” he tells me over coffee. “You get to a point where you cannot sit on your hands and watch others do it anymore. We wouldn’t be where we are today [if it weren’t for the management companies he has worked with], so I’m grateful for everything that they’ve brought to us, but it’s time to do it ourselves. We’ve been cheering from the stand for a long time,” he says. “We want to be playing on the soccer field.” In any case, he laughs, with just 14 rooms, “It would have been hard to get Hyatt for this.”

He came to the project through a friend (from his days as an architecture student in Delft) who had bought the inn and opened a restaurant but was finding it a challenge. Initially, “I was helping him out,” says Geertman. “But then later it became clear it would make a very logical first hotel for us. Somewhere we could test our ideas on a very small scale and develop them — a kind of laboratory.”



The exterior of the building has been insulated to 21st-century standards

The result is something very special indeed. First there is the building. The staircase, with its treacherously worn treads, may be 18th century, and some of the beams and exposed masonry older still, but its exterior has been insulated to 21st-century standards (no small feat given its listed status), there are solar panels, and I'm now persuaded that air-source heat pumps can be an effective way to heat ancient houses even in the teeth of a north wind.

The decor, too, combines old with new. The restaurant, for example, is dominated by a still life dated 1645 by the Dutch master Pieter Jansz van Berendrecht. Opposite, hang three of the British artist Glenn Brown's "Layered Portraits (after Rembrandt)" (2008), a nod to the fact that Geertje Dircks, a servant in Rembrandt's household and later his lover, lived in Ransdorp, a half-hour walk inland across the polders. While above the *stamtafel*, traditionally a table reserved for locals but in this case also for those who want to sit with other guests, hangs Ingo Maurer's *Lacrime del Pescatore* (2009), a light installation composed of fishing nets dripping with crystals. Other works are by notable living Dutch artists, among them Philip Akkerman, Frank Van den Broeck, Jacqueline de Jong and Emo Verkerk.

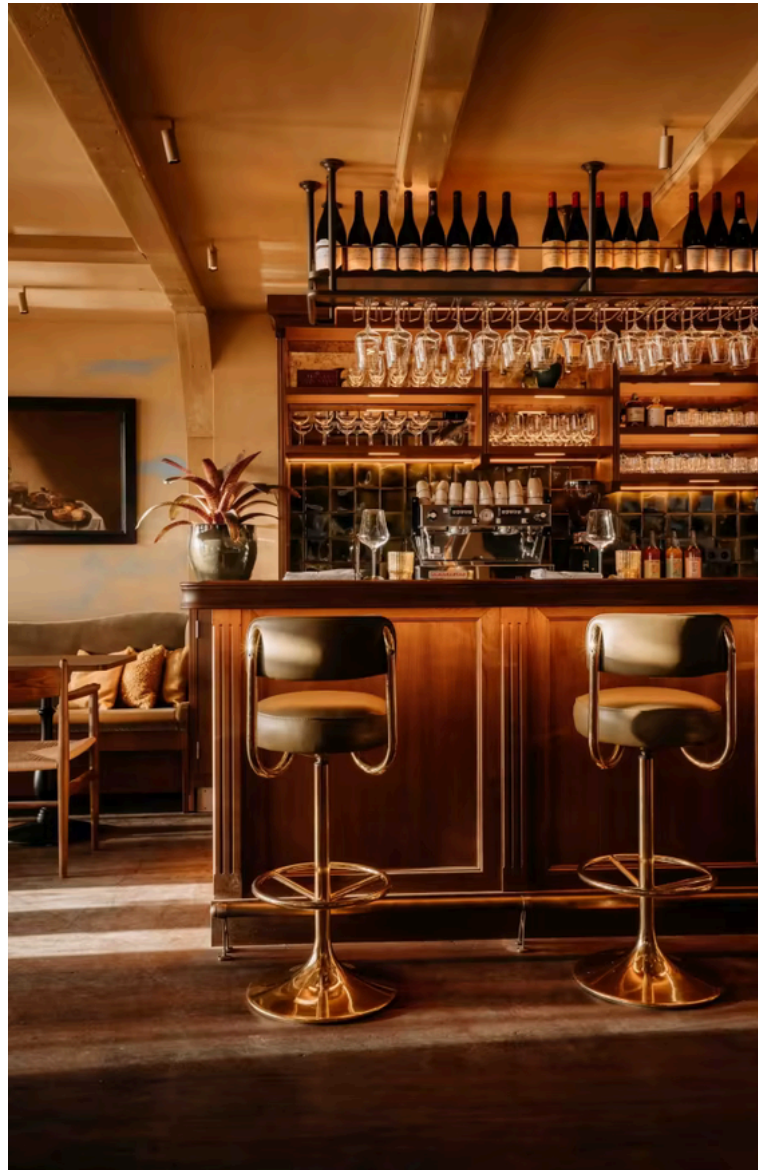




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Interiors at De Durgerdam are contemporary at heart...



...yet rooted in the aesthetics of the Dutch Golden Age

Designed by Amsterdam-based Buro Belén, whose inventive bio-textile curtains featured in the Dutch pavilion at Expo 2020 in Dubai, the interiors at De Durgerdam are contemporary at heart, yet rooted in the aesthetics of the Dutch Golden Age, especially in their use of textiles: light-reflective satin, matt linen and shot-silk velvet.

Just above the window seat in my room, under the eaves at the back of the main building, a tiny glass bee had been fixed to the wall, an allusion to the insect paintings of Jan van Kessel. And in every room there are carefully lit arrangements of objects — seashells, vases, a decanter and glasses — to call to mind a still life. Even the basement “reading room”, a library with a large stove, sofas and an honesty bar, has a chequerboard floor of antique matt terracotta *estriken* and shiny glazed tiles from the Royal Tichelaar ceramics factory, in business since 1572, its products also familiar from Dutch Golden Age paintings.



View of the De Maan suite





Fact bathrooms, though beautiful, are only dimly illuminated

The designers sought inspiration for the bespoke furniture not just in paintings but from exhibits at the Zuiderzee Museum, an hour's drive north if you take the scenic route via the picture book towns of Volendam and Edam, and worth the trip for an insight into the hardships of life in Waterland, as the area is known. But they have been supremely attentive to practical details too. The wardrobe has a shelf deep enough to accommodate most weekend suitcases, obviating the need for a folding luggage stand. And the television is concealed behind doors so there are no annoying lights. My only disappointment is that the compact bathrooms, though beautiful, are dark and only dimly illuminated.

If the rooms are enchanting, De Durgerdam's other glory is its restaurant, De Mark, the creation of Richard van Oostenbrugge and Thomas Groot, the chefs behind Amsterdam's two-Michelin-starred 212. The ethos may be simpler here, but my hunch is that Koen Marees, who presides over the open kitchen, may soon win a star of his own.

There are six starters (from €13 to €15), each of which celebrates a single vegetable and all of which can also be served as a main course. A mix of onions and shallots, cooked in hay to differing consistencies and temperatures and served with a mustard ice cream was a revelation. As were the four ways with leek — roasted, puréed, charred and tempura — garnished with puffed grains. But the absolute highlight was the risotto of morels, wild garlic, bound with an egg yolk, dressed in a buttermilk foam and the nutty, not unparmesan-like cheese from Beemster, which lies about an hour away on one of the hotel's handsome Veloretti electric bikes.

The main courses (from €23 to €43) are less immediately experimental and just as locally sourced: meltingly soft rose-veal cheeks with a herb crumb; chicken with mustard and tarragon; sole meunière; barbecued lobster; even a simple steak frites, washed down with a draft beer at the bar if you don't fancy anything off the wine list.





Rooms have been decorated in colours inspired by the IJmeer lake

Come the spring, it will be also possible to dine by the water on a deck that extends to a jetty, both for the boat to dock at (for the moment you disembark in the village's little yacht-filled harbour) and from which you can swim in the chilly grey-green (but clean) freshwater of the lake.

For proximity to water is really what De Durgerdam is all about. Though only the two main suites have lake views, all the rooms — 10 of which are in a sympathetically designed 21st-century annexe behind the original inn — have been decorated in colours inspired by the IJmeer, whose rippling surface informed the choice of a Dutch-grown tulipwood moiré veneer with an undulating grain for the bedheads, their baroque edges carved to evoke waves.

But the lake exerts a deeper influence too, for rising sea levels present an existential threat to this part of the world. Six centuries may have passed since the catastrophic St Elizabeth's Day flood of 1421, when Durgerdam was one of the 23 villages submerged after a storm tore through the seawall and the interior dykes were breached, but rising sea levels mean floods remain an omnipresent danger. And so, without being preachy, the hotel is careful to keep its carbon emissions in check. At breakfast, you're offered the juice of local pears, rather than imported oranges. And the most interesting dessert on its menu uses honey-soaked fire-roasted caramelised celeriac in place of pineapple. (If I hadn't known what it was, I'd have taken it for an unfamiliar liquorice-like fruit and not doubted its place in a pudding.) Indeed care, I think, is what it all comes down to. As I was checking out, a member of staff nipped up to my room to ensure I'd left nothing behind. I hadn't, but it was a gesture I'd never encountered and one I was touched by. If De Durgerdam is a laboratory for a new approach to hotel-keeping, I'm going to want to keep coming back.

*Claire Wrathall was a guest of De Durgerdam ([dedurgerdam.com](http://dedurgerdam.com)) which has its official launch today. Double rooms cost from €305, including a substantial breakfast*

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