

 **020404 Remember, I just write about what I see. I don't necessarily experience it.**

Copenhagen

Denmark had the time change for daylight savings last weekend which has resulted in wonderfully long days. On March 31, there was still light after 8PM. What a departure from the dreary days of the winter! And the days are only going to get longer as spring progresses into summer. Plus, we have had day after day without rain! I am not sure what to do with myself when there is not a constant drizzle outside. So many absolutely beautiful days in a row has lured many a Dane into the parks and the shopping streets of Lyngby. And as the best is yet to come as the weather gets warmer.

In all of my classes we have laboratory experiments which need to be performed and reported. For my Architectural Acoustics class, we have been writing the lab reports (representing many hours of work), but we recently heard a rumor that doing so was not actually necessary. So on Thursday, I asked one of the professors if we were required to write the lab reports. He told me that well no, the reports did not actually need to be written, but since we were writing them, they didn't want to stop us. Typical Danish. Never give out more information than you need to unless asked specifically for it!

The Netherlands

So, on with the description of my trip. Although the country is often mistakenly referred to as Holland, this name actually only refers to the country heavily populated western provinces which contain the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. The proper name for the country is The Kingdom of the Netherlands. Belgium used to be the United Provinces of the Netherlands, but became an independent nation in 1830.

Lets Go Europe 2002 reads: "The Dutch say that although God created the rest of the world, they created the Netherlands." A good deal of the country is below sea level and was reclaimed through a mastery of water that the Dutch have engineered. Amsterdam and Schiphol Airport are three meters below sea level. They are protected by the Delta Plan which is a huge system of dams and movable barriers which were built after a storm surge in the North Sea killed more than 1800 people and devastated the countryside in 1953. Although our bike ride was blissfully flat with the exception of the remarkable dunes near the sea, there is a rumor that less visited parts of the countryside such as Noord Brabant are actually hilly.

Amsterdam

Everything that you have heard about this city is probably true. The Dutch decided that they would legalize the sale of marijuana and so it is available for sale in the coffee shops

that litter the city. Since I am always eager to describe what I see and the coffee shops are a small part of the culture, but a part that is infamous, I asked around at DTU to see if someone would write more about the shops. A friend was happy to write about them under the condition that I not connect their name with the shops and distribute them together around the world via the internet. They write:

As far as I can tell the Dutch judge the quality of a coffeshops by two main criteria: good music and poor ventilation. Coffeshops play all types of music, but almost always what they do play is among the best in its genre. There are hippy places that play the doors to obscure folk rock, or trendy places playing an energetic techno but rarely will you hear Britney Spears or other Top 40. Air so smoky your eyes water is clear evidence of popular venue, and it seems like coffeshops are proud of their smoggy atmosphere. Even on nice days windows tend to stay closed, and if its a popular place it can be packed with at least half of the patrons puffing on something. Mortals who can't shake the breathing habit should go to places that are a little less popular. They won't be as trendy as those with lungs of steel, but fortunately the music is always great. Coffeshops, particularly in Amsterdam where they cater to the many tourists, have themes ranging from hippies to ravers to blues lovers. There are big chains like Bulldog which has half a dozen big places throughout Amsterdam to tiny little local spots with less marketing and more character. Usually upon entrance you see the coffee bar which sells coffee, teas, and munchies but they don't sell alcohol. Because alcohol and marijuana taken together can dramatically magnify the effect of each the Dutch cleverly set up the system so that although you are allowed to do whatever you like its difficult to do too much. Typically the drugs are sold at a separate booth in the back. They usually have a menu, with about 10 types of marijuana, 10 types of hash (concentrated marijuana), and often some pre rolled joints and space cakes (food with marijuana baked into it). You order from the guy standing behind the counter with bleary red eyes for however many grams you would like. The costs are typically pretty low, a gram of high quality marijuana (about 2-3 large joints worth) costs about EUR6. There are usually couches and tables all over populated by people in various states of consciousness grokking on the music, playing chess, or shooting pool. People are typically friendly, and its not uncommon to get passed a joint from a stranger. Because of the nature of pot coffeshops are typically a little more laidback than bars.. people are less interested in fights and carousing and more into rambling conversations and sweets.

One thing I think important to mention is that although it can loom large in foreigners minds de-criminalized illegal drugs are just one small part of Dutch society. Although the French come down hard on the Dutch for their liberal ways with respect to drugs the percentage of their population addicted to hard drugs is nearly double that of the Dutch. Although the US is terrified of the prospect of medicinal marijuana, let alone coffeshops, America has a higher percentage of regular smokers than Holland.

Some hotels and hostels have liberal drug policies and although they don't sell the marijuana, they don't care if you smoke it in their premises. For example, the last night of my trip was spent in a hotel on the edge of the red light district. The manager of the hotel and the signs in my room both indicated that smoking in the rooms was not allowed due to the fire alarms, but that the guests were welcome to smoke in the bar.

The red light district itself seems to be amorphous and encompassing many blocks. It is called the red light district because there are streets where the buildings on each side are punctuated by single, red neon lights above large, glass windows on the ground floor. Prostitution is legal and in the windows will stand women advertising their products. The red lights are on to indicate that the shop is open for business. The red lights also draw men like moths to a flame. Most are just window shopping, because walking through the red light district is an experience in itself.

The people of Amsterdam themselves seem to be pretty laid back about all of the infamous attributes that their city is famous for. In fact, the majority of people who are in the red light district at night appeared to be tourists, especially university students from the US, England and Australia. And the whole red light district is not just windows with red lights and coffee shops. There are bars and restaurants, shops and hotels which are also located in the same areas.

Whatever your opinion of drugs and prostitution, Amsterdam is a beautiful city to visit. Canals ring the center of the city and are lined by 4 or 5 story buildings of brick or stone. The architecture is unique and was fueled by the old practice of taxing buildings not based on the area that they occupied, but the length of the street that the buildings occupied. These tax laws prompted the design of buildings that were tall and deep, but very thin. Furthermore, the old practice of not assigning street numbers made it important for buildings to stand out. This was achieved by using different style facades on the roofs. Some roofs are sloped, others are square and others are a combination. The brick construction, the thin design, the unique roofs and the canals are delightful. Bridges arch over the canals and the little back streets are home to cafes, antique shops and galleries. Walking along the little cobble stone streets, past the flowers and brick buildings is a fun path of discovery.

However, not all of the houses are brick buildings along the streets. Others are on the canals themselves which are lined with boats where people live. Some are actually boats, but the majority are one story, rectangular buildings built on barges. The design of each is unique but some are really nice with large glass windows and porches overlooking the water. The boats have electricity and water connections along the canal, but I am not sure if they belong to the city or the people of the houses along the canal.

Amsterdam is a cultural mecca with more museums and galleries than you can throw a wooden shoe at. The Van Gogh museum is a work of art in itself and home to many of his famous paintings. There was an exhibit while we were there on both Van Gogh and Gauguin with many of their works present including three versions of Van Gogh's famous Sunflowers along side each other (one each on loan from the National Gallery in

London and the Seiji Togo Memorial Yasuda Kasai Museum in Tokyo especially for the exhibit).

The city is also a mecha of restaurants with cuisines from around the world. You see the Turkish and Greek restaurants which are present throughout European cities, as well Japanese (there is a sushi restaurant in the Van Gogh museum as a testament to the Japanese influence on his painting) and other cultures. And there are huge areas of neon signs in Chinese with restaurants and even a temple in the red light district.

The museums and restaurants are easy to get to since Amsterdam is easy to get around. There are trams and busses that crisscross the city as well as ample sidewalks and bike lanes. The bikers are really aggressive compared to Denmark and more than once I feared for my safety when crossing a bike lane. But, by the end of the trip, I was riding along the streets of Amsterdam with the rest of them. Traffic lights appear to be optional for bikers, but I realized that I was taking it to an extreme when the Dutch stopped for lights, but I did not.

You can also travel through the city via the canals and there are multiple tours offered. Although we did not do so this trip, I did experience the tour when I was last in the city when I was 18 and on an exchange trip to Germany. I also visited the Anne Frank house on that trip which was an amazing experience. One boat tour boasted “fun stops” such as the Anne Frank House and Amsterdam Centraal Train Station. With such fun stops, what could you do next to top that?

Coming next: Leaving Amsterdam by bike

I will be sending you pictures from the trip separate emails. All pictures are courtesy of Micah Allen. You can see all of Micah’s pictures at:

<http://www.livedeliberately.org/micahs/pictures/photoindex.html>

Also, check out his website at:

<http://www.livedeliberately.org>

Missed some of the Denmark emails? Fear not, for they are all online! Go to:

www.geocities.com/denmarkadventure

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