

## The Amsterdam Excursion: Historical Amsterdam and the Red Light District

# Go Where the Action is!

In EE, as in many other media, reaching the audience means knowing the audience. According to conference coordinator Martine Bouman: “If you really want to make a difference, you have to visit people in their homes; you have to learn their rituals, eat their food, speak their language.” In this regard, she said she believes the municipality of Amsterdam sets a strong example with its disease prevention and drug fighting policy in the red light district. Strong, but not without controversy, because it brings in the open what in most places stays underground. To Bouman, however, effectiveness is more important than fashionability. With the motto “Walk Your Talk,” she proved her point at the EE 2000 event by organizing an “experiential learning excursion” into the very heart of the matter.

The EE Walking Tour began with a lecture and reception at the University of Amsterdam. After a special welcome of the dean, Professor Van der Wusten, and vice dean, Professor Schönbach, urban sociologist Leon Deben presented a talk about Amsterdam’s long history of merchants and seamen and how this influenced present-day life in the city.

After the reception, the participants gathered on the “Dam,” the city square, where the guides of social psychologist Rob van Hulst waited. Van

Hulst has been living for decades in the red light district and became involved in its sociological structure long ago.

In his tours, van Hulst wishes to show that there is more to the district than sex and drugs. He combines entertainment and education in the sense that he allows one to experience the atmosphere, while providing information about the ins and outs of the district, such as social background and architecture. He anticipates the type of group that participates in a tour and adjusts the excursion accordingly. Van Hulst shows whatever the group wants: from beautiful architecture to the sex museum, from information about the legal aspects of the trade to explaining about methadone projects and regular health check-ups for the sex workers. The mutual respect between Rob van Hulst and the inhabitants of the red light district literally opens doors. His guides can go freely where most other people would hesitate.

### Place of Contradictions

Each group (of no more than 10) was assigned a guide with special training in providing district tours. For a small group of participants, who had moral objections to the red light district, a less

confrontational tour into the inner city had been organized; the others had opted for the “full monty.” This group quickly learned that the red light district is a place of contradictions. One didn’t expect to find a church building in the middle of the district, let alone a kindergarten. Another interesting feature was that, besides the presence of a high number of sex workers and drug addicts, many different kinds of professionals reside in the area. The guide explained that this creates an interesting acculturation between people of different social layers who seem to get along just fine: “They do not bite each other.” She proved her point by noting that Queen Beatrix enjoys concerts at the area’s old church. In addition, many monuments, such as the oldest street, house, and church building of Amsterdam, are located in the red light district. It’s an odd mix of age-old atmosphere and prurient interests: aged city facades tower over the narrow streets and alleys, directly above the red and purple neon lights that advertise the qualities of the merchandise.

**Social Background**

The guide did not hesitate to explain many details about the sex industry in the district. While walking through the alleys with brightly lit windows, some of them closed with thick curtains, some showcasing a scantily dressed

woman, the guide pointed out that an estimated 80% of the sex workers in the district do not hold Dutch citizenship. Many use fake or irregular passports. Women with similar ethnic backgrounds tend to work in close vicinity to each other, forming clusters.

Immediate questions from the group were why and how women get involved in prostitution. The guide explained that there are three common denominators among sex workers: They are often from unstable backgrounds, generally have a lower-education, and are usually introduced to the business by a friend. Some women become so accustomed to the amount of money they make as prostitutes that they decide to remain in the occupation, never opting for a regular job, because the pay would simply not support their chosen lifestyle. They usually

rent their rooms in shifts of four hours, with costs varying from 100 to 250 guilders (US \$42 to \$106) per shift. The more attractive women tend to use the expensive rooms because they can earn the most.

**Health Aspects**

On the first of October 2000, brothels became legal businesses with working guidelines and employment benefits (prostitution was legalized in the Netherlands by Napoleon in 1815, but brothels were outlawed in 1911). Prostitutes are registered and obliged to pay

income tax. This law has not led to many rights, though. The women now have access to professional health care, but cannot subscribe to government health insurance, special bank accounts, or housing subsidies. With this legislation, the government hopes to gain more control over the industry, including its health aspects. This policy has proved to be partly successful; some prostitutes have fewer health check-ups due to privacy concerns. The legalisation also has led to the formation of a new group of illegal prostitutes who are more underground than ever.

Because of the persistent and straightforward health education efforts made among prostitutes in the district (including comic books in a variety of languages), awareness of health risks is relatively high. Use of condoms is common now among prostitutes.

The tour stopped by the famous Condomerie, a small but well-stocked shop where condoms for regular use and for fun can be obtained. Much to his surprise, conference participant Hugh Rigby, author of the colorful coffee table book *Hardwear: The Art of Prevention*, discovered a volume of his work for sale, which he was invited by the owner of the shop to sign.

### Safety Aspects

Many questions from the group concerned the drug policy in Holland, and several participants were very surprised to learn that drug dealing is as illegal here as it is in other countries. Selling of soft drugs is condoned, but it is restricted to controlled “coffee shops.” Dealing hard drugs is a criminal act like everywhere else, and the police have every means to make arrests. But because of the tolerant atmosphere in the area, the small dealers are mostly unaffected, under the motto: “Better in the open, where we can control it,

than underground.” Consequently, drug-related crime rates in Amsterdam are the lowest in the world compared to other large cities.

When questioned about safety in the neighborhood, the guide responded: “The red light district is one of the safest areas in Holland.” She pointed to several streetcorners where video cameras were stationed to track interactions on the streets and at the doorsteps of the sex rooms. In a moment’s notice, she explained, authorities can be summoned. In addition, the room where the sex workers perform their service is equipped with a button, which can be used to summon help.

### EE at Work

The value of EE was at work and plain to see near the end of the tour: many participants heatedly discussed the pros and cons of the policies in place in the red light district. Apart from being informed about the social and cultural background of the red light district, many admitted to being confronted with their own prejudices and preconceived notions about the proper way to handle the social problems addressed there. “Everyone always talks about these things, but no one cares to investigate,” one of the participants said. “It makes you think how hypocritical we often are in dealing with these issues. Amsterdam’s red light district may have a colorful reputation, because everything is so much in the open, but how do we treat prostitutes in our countries? The tour was not only entertaining, but really educational as well.”

Thanks to Rob van Hulst Productions  
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