

EASYJET IN-FLIGHT MAGAZINE ARTICLE 4

Look at any map of Amsterdam and the first thing you notice is the semicircular rings of the canals, radiating outward from the Central Station, that seem to enclose the old inner city. This is where it all happens; right there, inside this ring is where you will find the things that Amsterdam is famous for, and all within walking distance of each other.

This is part of the joy of Amsterdam: you can easily combine a city tour of the old inner city with its slanted houses and the picturesque canals with a more adventurous excursion. The famous Red Light District is conveniently located in the oldest part of town. Here you will find old churches, historic buildings, brothels and coffee shops amiably sharing a cobbled street or a narrow alley.

There is nothing coy about it; prostitution has been legal in Holland for a long time. Prostitutes pay taxes and there is even serious talk of a trade union to regulate working hours and working conditions, although it is hard to imagine what industrial actions such as strikes and go-slow days would look like. But the industry is a thriving one and as such treated with a typical Dutch businesslike matter-of-factness. When you walk through the Red Light District - the Rosse Buurt as it is called in Dutch - you will be surprised how commonplace and normal it all seems.

Window shopping in the Red Light District can be quite fun. The numerous sex shops have display windows crammed with all kinds of magazines, odd devices and helpful add-on attachments, some of which defy the imagination. Do try to overcome your natural shyness and go inside. If not for a purchase, then just have a look around. Once inside you'll find the staff quite helpful. In a tactful, businesslike manner they will gladly tell you all you need to know about your purchase with a reassuring bland attitude - no nudge-nudge wink-wink here. And don't worry: the ubiquitous but all-telling plain brown bag has been replaced with an even more noncommittal plastic one; some shops even provide carrier bags with prints of leading grocery stores for the more bashful customer.

For the more dedicated shopper there is always the Condomerie, a small shop in the Warmoesstraat, just behind the Dam square, which exclusively sells condoms. Set up ten years ago by two women who were severely disappointed by the lack of variety in the prophylactic market in those days, it caters mainly to the curious and the critical user. Apart from the more utilitarian types, they also sell condoms with assorted flavours such as mango, banana and spearmint, anti-allergic condoms made of organic sheep gut, glow-in-the dark condoms that give off an eerie green glow after

you've turned off the light, an amazing selection of stimulating rubber extensions and even the latest types of women's condoms, which are steadily gaining acknowledgement in this age of sexual awareness.

If all this shopping has left you red-eared and exhausted, take a break and sit down on one of the numerous sidewalk-cafes overlooking the canals. Or if you feel up to it, try out one of the coffee shops, where space-cake (cake with cannabis) and Nederwiet (locally grown marijuana) are common items on the menu. This is Amsterdam too. Controversial to some. Open-minded and liberal to others. But all seem to agree that Amsterdam, with all its idiosyncrasies, is a friendly and heartwarming place you'll never forget.

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In a little out-of-the-way alley near the Rembrandtsplein you'll find Van Dobben, probably the most famous lunchroom in Old Amsterdam. A Broodje (roll) is the mainstay of a Dutch lunch. They come in many varieties, but Van Dobben was one of the first in the sober post-war era to take the roll to a new height, with plenty of butter and lots of good-quality cold cuts.

In those days the sandwich shop originally consisted of three separate lunchrooms adjacent to each other. They were extremely small and narrow; little white-tiled cubicles where the busy clientele fought for elbow room while trying to attract the attention of the overworked staff. The rooms were interconnected by holes in the walls and through which flowed an endless stream of steaming open-faced hot-meat sandwiches, croquettes, plates of cold cuts and snappy remarks.

But with the years, walls came tumbling down and the shop is now one single room - still not very large, but not as painfully cramped as in the old days. Some things haven't changed, though. The walls are still white-tiled. The staff is still dressed in white aprons and still exchange snappy remarks with the kitchen staff in the back through a hole in the wall. And the rolls are still what they should be: fresh, lots of creamy Dutch butter and liberally filled with a choice of cold cuts. Don't leave without trying the rosbief (roast beef), the croquets, the warm vlees (hot open-faced sandwich with gravy) and

the halfom (a typical Amsterdam-style roll with liver and a pastrami-type of meat), by which time you have probably decided to skip dinner that evening. If you are lucky enough to find a seat at lunchtime, sit back and enjoy the busy traffic. Don't expect table service, a choice of deserts or a selection of wines. But you will have a great lunch and a unique view of the assorted characters that make Amsterdam such a funny, heartwarming place to be.

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When archeologists delved into the remains of an old cloister in the Bethaniënstraat, they discovered the remains of a brewery. Almost three hundred years later the brewery was resurrected and is now a well-known watering hole among lovers of high-quality beers. Apart from the home brews, they also serve both lunch and diner at reasonable prices.

The interior is decorated in a stylish modern way - no fake Ye Olde Brewery kitsch here - with strings of hops hanging from the ceiling and bannisters. Shiny brass pipes run through the café, straight from the brewery, to make sure the beer travels the shortest route to your glass. And beer is what it is all about. Their Kloosterbier is an innocuous looking, rich dark-brown ale with a red glow to it. Its thick and creamy foam hides one of the most potent beers in the house. If you decide to go for something lighter, try the Bethaniën, a light and wonderfully refreshing beer named after the founding fathers of the original monestary that once stood there. Or look at the blackboard on the wall and see what this week's special is. The staff will be happy to advise you and explain the subtleties of each variety.

The food is very good and reasonably priced. On the bilingual menu (English/Dutch) check out the dished prepared with (what else?) beer and ale or ask the waiter for today's special. For those seeking a hearty, simple and wholesome meal the restaurant provides a plate service of typical Dutch dishes that all seem to go well with - what else? Beer of course.

After dinner, do ask for the liquer menu. Besides the heart-warming beers they also have an impressive collection of old-fashioned Dutch liquers with exotic names such as Widow's Consolation,

Venus' Oil, Parrot Soup and Hans in the Basement. Ranging from the sweet and flowery to the dark and bitter, they are just what you need before you go off into the night again, either on a moonlit walk through the old city center or straight off to bed.