

Living in Amsterdam

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Having visited Holland before, I knew that they were going to ask me three questions at the border: 'How long are you staying? Have you got a return ticket? How much money have you got with you?' Since I guessed that at least two of my answers were going to be unsatisfactory to them, and so that I wouldn't be kept too long, I had my invitation letter from the Mathematical Centre (as the CWI was then called) close at hand, as I dragged my trunk the size of a small house along.

A friend had come with me to help me move in, and she went through passport-control first. How long was she staying? One week. Had she a return ticket? Yes. How much money did she have? 200 guilders. All satisfactory answers, and she got waved on. Then me. 'Are you together?' Yes, I said. 'Ok, you can go.' And that was it! I wonder what he thought I had in my trunk for a week's stay!

Amsterdam. City of canals, trams, bars that stay open later than 11 o'clock at night, and in Summer a hippy on every corner singing yet *more* Bob Dylan songs.

I was determined not to be the sort of Englishman abroad who only sticks with other English people, and whose house is a pocket of Englishness. No, I was going to merge in. I was going to be a real Amsterdammer.

DELIGHT OF TRANSPORT

One of the distinguishing features of Amsterdam is its wide range of transport facilities. More than half the working population of Amsterdam go to work under their own steam (in other words by foot or bike — while there's a lot of water, I still haven't heard of anybody who swims to work). And the canals with their opening bridges are a real way of life for Amsterdammers — it is said that half the people who are late for work use the excuse 'I'm sorry, the bridge was up'. The other half use the excuse that it was down.

On trams, what distinguishes tourists from Amsterdammers is that tourists don't pay, because they get on the tram with everyone else and then sit staring

around wondering how you pay and whether a conductor is going to come and collect fares. Amsterdammers on the other hand just don't pay. They know how much the fine is, and how often you get one, and they know which is cheaper.

But of course the *real* Amsterdammer rides a bike, and so the first step for any aspiring Amsterdammer is to go to the Waterlooplein flea market and buy one. So that I duly did, a lovely job with three speeds. A week later I discovered the second step to becoming an Amsterdammer — you get it stolen.

In fact since then I've discovered a little known fact that may interest you. Cyclists must pay a cycle tax, and this is levied by taking your bike, and re-selling it (on the Waterlooplein flea market). The current tax rate is one bike per year: everyone that I asked how long they had lived here and how many bikes they had lost, always said the same number for both. Well, with one exception. A friend here at the CWI boasted to me that he hadn't had a bike stolen in four years. Alas, someone must have been listening, because by the end of that year he had had four stolen. (This story got around the CWI recently, and some more people started coming to me boasting. Foolish people who didn't recognise the warning in the last sentence. I especially pity the person who told me he'd had the same bike for 35 years...)

As an Englishman, people ask me 'Don't you find it difficult riding on the right?' but the answer is no. I believe that the world is divided into two sorts of people — those who read maps by turning the map round in the direction they're travelling, and those who do it by turning their brains round in the direction they're travelling. Being of the latter type, I just had to flip my brain over, and there were no problems. Well — except now with reading maps ...

No, it wasn't with left and right I had problems, but with colours. I still haven't got used to red traffic lights meaning 'go' for cyclists. And another thing. Having been a cyclist in a particularly hilly part of England, I was looking forward to coming to flat Amsterdam. What I hadn't anticipated was the compulsory passenger that you must carry on the back of your bike here. Terrible.

STREET LIFE

Another step to becoming a true Amsterdammer is to see a riot, and I think the police realised this, and so as a sort of welcoming gesture, organised a riot in my neighbourhood. I lived in a quiet street then, full of trees and birds, not your usual sort of street for a riot thus, and so one evening just as I was cycling home from work (on my second bike), the police chased some rioters into my street as a sort of 'surprise party', and proceeded to set about me with clubs.

Only that week I had learnt my first three Dutch sentences, and this was my big chance to try two of them out. After having received the legal minimum number of blows to my body, I was able to get up off the ground and blurt out 'Ik ben Engels. Ik woon in deze straat.' This seemed to convince him, despite, or perhaps because of, my bad Dutch, and he rudely pushed me out of the street with his stick, with some of his chums joining in for the fun.



That evening also gave me the chance to experience the wonderful new Academic Hospital on the outskirts of Amsterdam, having my arm X-rayed.

TWO LIPS IN AMSTERDAM

Learning Dutch is of course an important step to becoming a true Amsterdammer, and so as soon as I arrived in Holland, much to the surprise of many of my Dutch friends, I set about learning it. 'But it's such an unimportant language!' they would plead. But to tell the truth, I had always wanted to learn Dutch. I knew that after Frisian it is the closest living language to English (excluding American of course), and the idea of this fascinated me — I really wanted to see in what ways the two languages had diverged from their common source of a thousand odd years ago.

However, when I was in England I could find little justification for putting the effort into learning it. 'It's such an unimportant language' I would say to myself. And so coming to Amsterdam was my big opportunity.

It's not difficult to find the similarities between the two languages. One's first few weeks in Holland are filled with being charmed by sentences that are recognisably the same as English. 'Beter dan de rest!' proclaimed a bag of apples I bought at the greengrocers; on all the windows in trams, in jolly red letters, is the sign 'Wilt U zitten? Ik kan staan!', presumably some sort of subliminal suggestion to make you give up your seat as the tram fills, though the only time I tried it, I was greeted with gales of laughter.

Learning a language is a funny affair. For a start, the first thing you learn to say is 'I'm sorry I don't speak your language'. And another thing is, you can never ask a native speaker any but the simplest questions. I have a particular memory of one time I was complaining to a Dutchman about one especially difficult property of the language that I continually have problems with, and giving a few examples of how you had to say different things in very similar situations. He blinked at me blankly for a few moments, and then said 'Yes — why is that actually?'

The closeness of the two languages makes it relatively easy to learn for the English speaker, though of course relying on similarities can be very misleading. The word 'warm' for instance, looks identical in the two languages, but in Dutch I've found that it clearly means something much warmer than in English. I mean, who would be tempted by the offer of a 'warm meal'? Not I. And consider the words 'slim' and 'stout' that occur in both languages. Who would guess that in Dutch they mean respectively 'clever' and 'naughty'? (apart from the Dutch of course).

Interestingly enough, the two strongest words in the English language, the only two I believe that don't appear in the original edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (they added them in supplement I'm told), these two words have acceptable, everyday, but it must be admitted related, meanings in Dutch. It is initially quite a shock to hear them being used in polite company, the sort of shock an English person experiences when an American announces he's going to change his pants, or an American experiences when an English man talks about going to the Norfolk Broads, or how he can't give up fags.

Now the question arises, if Dutch is so easy for an English speaker to learn, then why do so few English speakers in Holland actually speak Dutch? What I have only recently discovered is something that the Dutch people reading this will already know about only too well, and that is the organised movement to stop English speakers learning Dutch. For the benefit of English-speaking readers who don't know about this plot, I'll explain.

The major tactic is one of demoralisation. 'But Dutch is such an unimportant language!' they proclaim, if they hear that someone plans to learn it, or 'It's a terribly difficult language to learn' (as if they knew). A subtler approach is sarcasm. 'What good Dutch you speak!' they say, as you stutter out some half comprehensible anglicism, receiving the praise only because you pronounced the g's right.

The final tactic is ridicule. You go into a shop, and they suffer you to speak in Dutch and they reply in Dutch. But the moment you make a mistake, or fail to understand, they immediately continue in English, and nothing, nothing you say or do will get them back to their mother tongue.

But why this organised plan to prevent English speakers from learning Dutch, you ask. Well of course, if all the English speakers spoke Dutch, who then could the Dutch practise their English on?

For indeed, I can't imagine a country with more linguists than Holland: it's quite normal for a Dutch person to speak four languages, and watch TV programs from four countries. And which other country demands the ability to speak a foreign language as a condition for joining the police force? And where else can shop assistants, even outside the tourist areas, converse with you in English?

Living and working in Amsterdam has had one unexpected effect. Now when I go to an international conference, people say to me 'What good English you speak!' I still haven't decided whether to say 'Oh, I lived in England for awhile' or 'Yes, my mother's English you know.'

But the worst thing happened on holiday in Greece. I was speaking to an English man, and when I said I was on my way back to Amsterdam, he said 'Aha! I *thought* you weren't English!'