

From the Kitchen

20 October 2010



Sometimes the best-laid plans of mice and men ... can be as nothing if the workers of the Belgian railway decide to strike. Plan B for getting to Amsterdam from London: train, ferry, train. Includes a two-berth cabin for the night crossing. Travel and accommodation for the same price as the non-existent train through Belgium. Thank you, striking workers.

London involved more parks and museums and crowded streets, meeting the first relatives pre-reunion, good and bad coffee, some memorable meals and lots of fun. Museums in London are free but you pay them to look after your bag and coat. In Amsterdam you pay to enter the museums but the cloakroom is free.

We gave the Tower of London a miss (I'm reading Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time*, about the princes who were supposedly murdered there by Richard III). We did, however, climb the five hundred and thirty steps to the top of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, Christopher Wren's masterpiece. I didn't get around to doing that when I lived in London for more than two years. But then, I have lived in Melbourne for fifty-five years and I have not yet visited the Old Melbourne Gaol or been to the Heide Gallery.

One thing about staying in youth hostels is that you are out in the street (or at least out of your bed) by ten, even if you have booked in for the next two nights; unlike a hotel, where you can stay in bed all day if you like and order room service. So out on the streets all day it has been.

Both London and Amsterdam, at least in their buildings, remind me that all this existed long before anyone got it into their heads to send western (British) 'civilisation' to the great, unknown, southern continent in the late 1700s. (Mahatma Gandhi is reputed to have told Lord Mountbatten that "British civilisation would be a good idea".) Although most of London's buildings post-date the fire of 1666, Amsterdam's go back much further – the city has been there in some form for over eight hundred years. Both cities also contain their share of modern travesties of architecture and some modern gems. Some of the ancient buildings can also be ugly, while still interesting. Churches and palaces can be a conglomeration of styles that span centuries, as additions were built or damaged parts rebuilt. One church in Amsterdam (*de Oude Kerk* – the Old Church) started as a small wooden structure to minister to the fallen souls who were involved on the two sides of prostitution and it grew rich on the dispensations that the earthly embodiments of those souls bought. The church is now a massive monument to pragmatism. The red light district still demonstrates pragmatism: the women display themselves in windows while potential customers (and tourists) window-shop.

The traffic in Amsterdam seems indicative of the relaxed attitude of 'almost anything is permissible as long as no-one gets hurt'. The part of the traffic to be wary of, however, is the constant stream of bicycles. Even on one-way streets these almost silent beasts are allowed to go both ways. Look left, look right, look left again, look right again, look ... run like blazes –

the drivers of the cars between the two streams of peddle-power are more likely to make an effort to avoid hitting you. And in amongst the bikes are motor scooters, and motor-assisted bikes called 'snorers', which sounds more benign than the reality.

Our Amsterdam youth hostel is next to one of the largest mid-city parks I have ever seen: the *Vondelpark*. Vondel was a Dutch writer (1587 - 1679), held in as much esteem by the locals as the English hold Shakespeare. It has wide, meandering paths, ponds and fountains, cafés, dog walkers; and watch out for the bikes. One thing I noticed missing in the Amsterdam parks since I was last here more than thirty years ago, are the signs which translate, more or less, as "It is forbidden to find yourself on the grass." The grass is apparently no longer sacred. Could it have anything to do with the sweet-smelling 'grass' available in some cafés?

Contrary to popular (foreign) belief, possession or smoking / eating marijuana is not legal in Nederland. The current practice comes from the authorities having decided to ignore small amounts (up to 5 g) for personal use and a (larger) limited amount for sale, so that the police can concentrate on issues to do with heavy drugs. Although smoking marijuana on the streets *is* frowned on, one can indulge in the inhalation of the distinctive sweet smoke in many alleyways and doorways at other people's expense. Police presence is highly visible, but I didn't see anyone apprehended. Perhaps they also enjoy breathing deeply.