

THE RED LIGHT DISTRICT

The tourists' point of view



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Introduction

“Some tourists think Amsterdam is a city of sin, but in truth is a city of freedom. And in freedom, most people find sin”.

Amsterdam’s Red Light District is Worldwide famous and attracts tourists from all over the world. According to a survey presented in the website iamexpat.nl the **66,1%** of the interviewed declared that the main reason for visiting Amsterdam is its cultural history, while the **16,5%** choose to visit Amsterdam because of Coffeeshops and soft drugs. Furthermore, always according to the survey, almost half of the interviewed (**46%**) position “exploring the Red Light District” among the most popular activities.

It is no new that the Red Light District and its surroundings represents something unique in the entire world, and because of that people are so willing to visit it at least once in life.

I also did not know anything about the Red Light District before coming to Amsterdam in August 2016 but stories. I have always been very curious of this reality so close from the one of my country (Italy), so I always asked many questions to people I knew had been there in order to understand better how such a thing could become an integral part of the city and how it could actually work. My questions used to concern mostly the women in the windows. In Italy we are used to think about prostitution in not really positive terms. In Italy, as in many other

countries, prostitution is illegal. Of course there are still prostitutes, but one can find them usually late at night on the streets in specific areas. However, all of them are working illegally, maybe under the control of a pimp, presumably suffering from several venereal illnesses. Prostitution is illegal in many countries, as already stressed, but in Italy as in many other countries still there is prostitution.

Apparently, it looks like something people can not do without, just like alcohol, cigarettes, light drugs and so on. However, prostitution (if kept under control) does not represent a danger for people's health such as alcohol and eventually tobacco and drugs in general. Said so, I always wondered: then, why is it illegal? Even without having the knowledge of what was going on in Amsterdam, I always admired the way this city was able to 'satisfy' their citizens' needs even profiting from it!

I still did not find an answer to my questions concerning why governments could not understand the utility of rendering this kind of market legal and, above all, kept under control. However, I decided to document myself about how this market in Amsterdam impacts on Amsterdam's citizens themselves and on tourists as well in order to figure out if the way this city dealt with prostitution was worth the admiration I had towards it or if it was just a honey trap*.

In the following paragraphs, I will present briefly my own experience of 1-year exchange student in the beautiful city of Amsterdam where I had the possibility to enter this 'candy land' and researching its history and collecting people's opinion about it. However, in this essay* I will focus on the impact the area had on people, focusing on what they expected and what they actually experienced once they arrived here.

My experience in the Red Light District

I would like to start with my story. Before coming here I asked many people that went to Amsterdam how the Red Light District was like. In my mind I painted Amsterdam's Red Light District as an area of total perdition, where one could have found tons of drunk guys staring at the prostitutes the whole time and for sure I expected way more people than just the ones I saw once I have arrived having deals with the prostitutes and eventually having sex with them. I am not saying that I expected the Red Light District to be unsafe, as I knew since long time that Amsterdam was one of the safest cities in Europe, at least according to statistics found on the internet and according to many people's opinion. But still, I expected it to be so vibrant and certainly I did not expect there to be more than one red light district in the city.

Once I arrived there I was kind of shocked. I remember the day I visited the Red Light District for the first time as if it was yesterday. Me and my flat mates had just arrived in town and a few days after we decided to go to visit the city center. We ended up in Dam Square with the tram and at some point we started walking towards one of the streets nearby. I was just following the guys, since I felt quite disoriented at the time. Suddenly, I started to notice the first windows: we had just entered the Red Light District! It is quite funny because apart from the windows with the girls inside it did not feel like a different area with the city (especially 'that' area as I expected it to be) at all. It was almost night, and honestly I did not feel unsafe and nobody ever bothered me not even for a single moment. Honestly, after all the time spent in this city, I might argue that I felt more safe in Amsterdam's Red Light District than in the city center of my hometown. I spent a lot of time looking at how the girls were dressed and I was really intrigued by the way they expressed themselves through the clothing. In my mind I was always wondering things like: "Oh, this girl looks so punk dressed up like this" or "Oh, this girl looks like one of those bimbos walking on the streets with a dog in their purse". But then I started to

wonder: “How far is the person they try to ‘interpret’ while working from the person they actually are?”

Some of my friends told me that they were surprised from the fact that many of the girls were ugly, especially during the day and warned me not to take any photos or I would have gone into troubles. They also told me that when they see girls staring at them too much, they feel bothered and they could probably pull the curtain closed in order not to be seen anymore by them. I might agree with the first two points, but not with the last one. Every time I was walking through the RLD girls never looked bothered from my presence at all. But maybe it is because I have always tried to behave as polite as possible towards them, because somehow I felt kind of sorry for them. I knew that the vast majority of them are not forced to sell their bodies and actually choose prostitution. However, I still do not think it is an easy decision and above all an easy job. During my time in Amsterdam I have seen many people not just staring at the prostitutes, but also pointing at them, eventually mocking them and often many guys behaving slimy to them. I consider prostitution a work like many others, worthy of respect as any other job. I might argue then, that is is rude to make fun of prostitutes just as it is rude to go to watch a movie and start being loud with friends and throwing pop-corns all around. Both are considered rude behaviors, but I am sure I am not wrong when I think that examples such as the second one happen less often. Indeed, if we see somebody being loud at the cinema we start to think things like: “Oh, that’s so immature!” Or “Oh, did not his/her mum teach him/her how to behave?”. However when I saw episodes of prostitutes’ mocking I have never noticed such reactions in the people around.

This was nothing more than my first impact on the Red Light District of Amsterdam. According to the Amsterdam magazine which can be found online, the average stay of tourists in Amsterdam goes between the 3 and the 4 nights. Amsterdam is no big city to visit, however, since the RLD represents one of the main attractions I wanted to understand what kind of knowledge about it tourists actually ‘bring home’* after they have visited the city of Amsterdam. Tours are probably the easiest and fastest way to have a glimpse on this area of the city and its history, so I decided to analyze this kind of entertainment for tourists in the next section.*

Amsterdam's Red Light District tour

First of all, I would like to give my personal opinion about the tours of the RLD the city of Amsterdam offers and how much quality information is actually provided. I can argue I did not know almost anything about Amsterdam's RLD before I actually documented myself through historical readings and discussed with people that had a certain knowledge of the topic.

The city offers many free city tours, presenting the city in general and outlining some facts about the RLD itself as well. However, no free of charge tour of the Red Light District is offered. Most of them cost around 10 euros, but also more expensive ones can be found such as the ones offered from the Prostitution Information Center, certainly more expensive (17,5 euros) but presumably more complete.

I took part on one of the city free tours and, as already stated, the information about the Red Light District provided was very little. Afterwards, I took part on other 2 tours focused on the Red Light District. The first time I took the tour with Amsterdam Underground: this company is really peculiar, because it is the only non-profit organization that organizes tours offered by homeless people in Amsterdam, eventually involved in illegal trafficks back in time in the same area, everything for 12,5 euro. The tour was really interesting, since our guide presented his own experience as a drug dealer in the area, that was supposed to be still quite dangerous in the recent past. The tour focused on this particular aspect of the area as a place of danger, sleaze and sin. The guide himself admitted to have often visited the prostitutes when he used to work there as a drug dealer. Together with that, he offered us a wide explanation concerning other aspects, not necessarily linked to danger. This was the tour which I found the most interesting and the most worth taking part in.

I decided to take also part to another tour, offered by the company Sandeman, which turned out to be one of the most popular among tourists according to a survey I made and that I will present later. First of all, I would like to describe

accurately the tour, in order to give an idea to people of what to expect when taking part in such tours. It lasts around 2 hours and the price I paid was 12 euros (14 euros for not-students).

1 – The Condomerie



The first stop of our tour was the Condomerie, the famous condom-shop in Amsterdam. The guy explained that the shop was first opened in 1987 and that it was the first condom shop to be opened, which is however just partly true. Indeed, the Condomerie was just the first shop dedicated entirely and just to condoms. After that, he explained what kind of contraceptive methods were popular back in time, especially referring to condoms. Most of those

informations, however, I found to be not really relevant to the tour itself. Then he explained that Warmoesstraat (where the Condomerie is) was, years ago, the financial center of the city.

2 – The Oude Kerk

The guide presented The Old Church as the oldest building still surviving in Amsterdam. At that point he outlined a few aspects of the history of the city. Amsterdam became, indeed, worldwide famous because of fishing and trade. The Golden Age sort of launched the city of Amsterdam in the whole Europe as an economic and trading center.

He argued also that the reason why this church emerges right in the center of the RLD is closely linked to the selling of indulgences (actually, however, the church was first built, and then the Red Light District developed around it). He narrated that the

church was little frequented (only 5% of the inhabitants attended church) and that men used to go there just to visit the priest and confess that they had sin or that they were going to sin in the next future (intended as whoring). At this point, the priest would have forgiven the guys' sins in change of a certain amount of money.

Furthermore, he described the church as the best church in Amsterdam for the acoustic, also thanks to its wooden roof.

3 – Belle's Statue



Belle is a modern representation of sexworkers as well as the first and only statue celebrating sexworkers all over the world. According to the guide, this feeling of awareness was sort of founded by the Prostitution Information Center (in the same square as the Old Church). The Prostitution Information Center (http://www.pic-amsterdam.com/wordpress/en/?page_id=52), founded in August 1994 argues that prostitution is no reason for shame in any sense and this organization apparently keeps on taking great care of the prostitution environment, by helping the girls,

providing information and so on.

The guide then argued that in the Red Light District in the area of the Oude Kerk there are mostly east european girls and that the windows are all relatively new. According to him, the sex trade in the area is of a medium/low level compared to the one in other red light districts in the city such as the one in the area of De Pijp. However, apparently prostitutes of a certain level, do not work in the windows.



He then explained the trade in financial terms: pointing out the advantages of legalized prostitution for the government as well as a description of costs and shifts: the windows are rented from the prostitutes for 8 hours shift and the price is 150 euros. The prices for the performances

depend on the 'package' you choose. The cheapest one is the standard one, called 'suck and fuck', and it lasts 15 minutes. Customers willing to have a wider experience might choose also the 'girlfriend package' for 30 mins (price 150 euros) or the 'porn package' (250 euros).

The explanation that followed was then dedicated to the prerequisites a girl must have in order to become a prostitute: being a European citizen, and older than 21 years old (even though back in time the limit was 18 years). Then they have to have a discussion with the chamber of commerce and wait for their eventual approval.



The end of the explanations in this area regarded a couple of curiosities: the guy stated that the girls always keep close to themselves a cup of pee, in case they are bothered by potential clients. He also pointed out how weird it is that right in the middle of the Red Light District one can find activities such

as Christian Hostels and Kindergartens*. Last but not least, he stressed that once we would have gone in the heart of the Red Light District we were not allowed to take pictures, because the majority of them, choose prostitution to achieve a goal in their life that eventually requires a certain amount of money, but still they want their privacy to be protected because it might be that the goal they are trying to achieve is not compatible with their job. Could you imagine if people knew that the teacher of their children in the elementary school is an ex-prostitute?

3 – The Sex Shops



As soon as we got in this sex shop, the guy explained a brief history of the vibrator. Apparently it was invented around the 19th century to ‘heal’ women from hysteria. It seemed, indeed, that women’s madness was caused from the fact that they did not have good sex in a while. It was actually a medical issue and the church was also involved. Indeed, since masturbation and sex between not-married people was a sin, at some point the vibrator was invented and doctors used it to cure their patients.

3 – Café In ‘t Aepjen



This building is really peculiar. This pub is located in one of the last two Amsterdam’s wooden houses (part of the classical dutch architecture). Above the entrance of some houses in the area there is a gablestone. Back in time, indeed, they had no street addresses and the picture in the gablestone symbolized the activity that was run in the building. In this specific case, the building was a sugar refiner. It then became a shop and finally a pub. Here dutch gin was served (*Jenever*). There are two styles of dutch gin: the young and the old.

The guy explained that the old one is a bit more like scotch so he suggested us to go for the young one in case we want to try it. The drink must be sip and there is a specific way to drink it. The



name of the pub in dutch means 'in the monkeys' and there is a reason why this place owns such a peculiar name. This pub had always been popular among fishermen and sailors and apparently they used to take monkeys as a payment. According to what he explained, if someone still nowadays purchased something and tried to pay with a monkey, the owner should accept it. Apparently this was one of the worst spots in town back in the days, you should have been in great troubles to go there and rent a room. Those same rooms are nowadays part of a 5 star hotel.

4 – The heart of the Red Light District



At this point of the tour, we had a walk through the main street of the Red Light District. A bit before that, the guy told us a couple of interesting anecdotes.

Bet Van Beeren, opened in 1927, is apparently regarded as the first gay bar ever. However this is still not 100% sure, but certainly is among the first ones. The interior remained unchanged since then.

After that, he explained that the blue lights mean that the sexworkers is a transgender. However, actually all windows have also blue lights inside at the back of the girls, to balance the contrast with the red light. A couple of theories about why red lights are used to highlight the presence of a sexworkers followed.

He then answered one of the most frequently asked questions: are there any guys that work as sexworkers in the Red Light District? It seems like they tried to introduce male sex workers in 2007. In a specific area of the RLD they put some announcement on the walls with the purpose of recruiting male sexworkers but things did not work very well, especially because the only customers that came were gay guys.



The sex palace is one of the few peep shows still running. Indeed, with the advent of the internet and online porn, many of these places had to shut down. Inside, one can find random people having sex or masturbating. They're not professionals, they just get paid to do it.



Teatro casa rosso is instead more of a venue. For 45 euros one can get a couple of drinks and watch sex shows. Apparently solo acts often involve a banana and the guy explained that the idea was taken from the Bananenbar close by and was then brought in Casa Rosso.

5 – Amsterdam and the Coffeshops



In the same area, there is also The Bulldog, the first and most Famous coffee shop in Amsterdam. We had a brief discussion about how the light drugs market works He mentioned of course cannabis and hash, but also truffles. Before coming to Amsterdam I had no idea that also hallucinogens can be found.

6 – Back to the Old Church Square



We were then brought back to the square in front of the Old Church where this art piece lays. In 1993 this art piece was found one morning out of the blue and the artist remained unknown.

A discussion about the future Red Light District followed. I found this part very interesting. He explained that the government wants to restrict the Red Light District trying to turn the windows into bars and restaurants. Less prostitution and more tourism is the motto. Since he knew I lived close to Venice, he took the city of Venice as an example of how they want

to transform Amsterdam. Indeed, Venice is merely a city for tourists. There are almost no locals living there and the city is just full of shops, restaurants and shops. I wonder if it could be a good idea in terms of tourism, since the main attraction is, indeed, represented from the Red Light District!

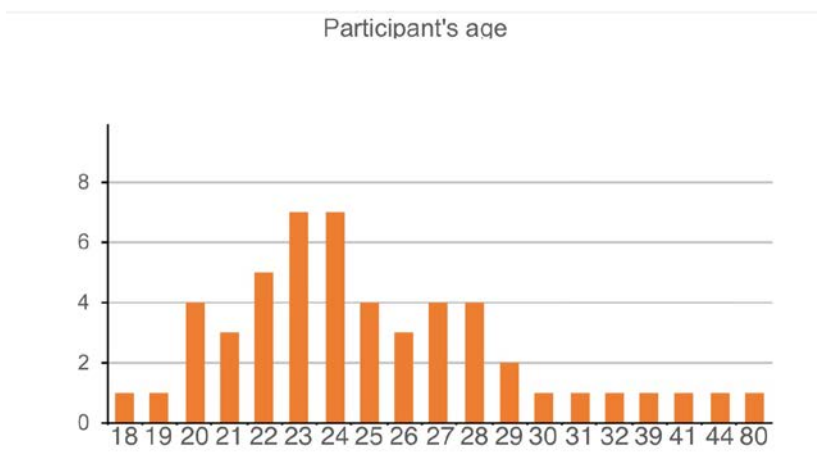
Surveys

I started with collecting a few opinions.

The first survey is about the experience of taking part in a tour of the Red Light District, while in the second I asked a few people to tell me about their first experience in the Red Light District, in order to understand how such a different environment could impact a foreign tourist.

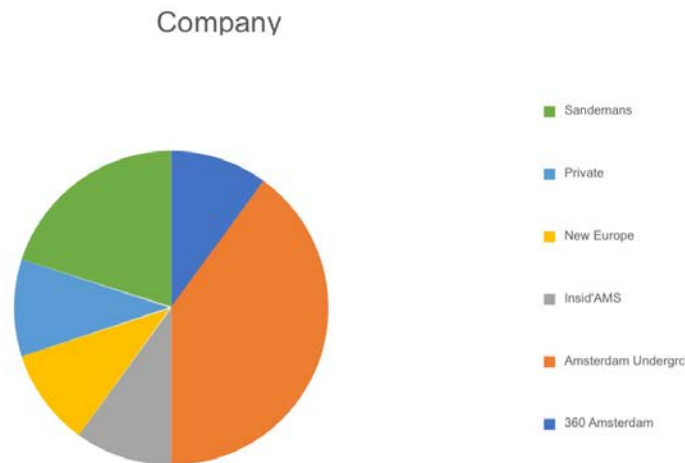
Red Light District tours

I first asked the participants their age and their nationality. The majority of the participants were in their 20s and they were mostly from Europe and italians. A slight amount (c.a. 10%) came also from Germany and Spain (c.a. 6%). 42% were females, while 10% were males.



55,80% of the interviewed never participated in any tour and 23,10% never participated but would like to. 21,20% did take part in a tour.

Most of the interviewed took part in Amsterdam Underground's tours (40%) while 20% took part in Sandeman's tours. Other company were chosen by approximately 10% people each.



The majority of the participants (54,50%) regarded their **overall experience** as 'Excellent'. C.a. 18% of the participants regarded it as 'very good' and the remaining 18% as 'good'. Nobody had a negative opinion about it.

The majority of the participants (64%) thought that the guide had an 'Excellent' **knowledge** on the topic and 27% of the interviewed judged it as 'very good'.

18% of the interviewed regarded their knowledge about the topic **before** the tour as poor, while 82% regarded it as average.

According to the interviewed, **after** the tour, their knowledge became good for the 36,4%, very good for the 47,5% and excellent for the 18,2%.

All of the interviewed would suggest other people to take part in the tour. Some of them specified that they would recommend the tour to friends, people with a range age between 25-65. Furthermore, some of them would recommend the tour to both locals and tourists in order to have a different perspective about the area.

When asking the favourite aspect of the tour, it turned out that many people were enthusiastic about the capacity of entertaining and deep knowledge of the guide

and the total “immersion” in this specific area that looks like if it was from outer space.* Others, instead, were more pleased of hearing information about the ladies in the windows. Last but not least, some also enjoyed the visit to the current drug center (Amsterdam Underground’s tour).

The least favourite aspects of the tour regarded the busyness of the area it self for which it was kind of hard sometimes to hear the guide. The interviewed also did not like visiting the area with people who were not really open-minded. The majority of the people, however, couldn’t find any negative aspects of the tour.

First impressions

In this second paragraph, I would like to analyze other foreigners’ first impressions and compare it with mine. I collected these opinions through observations made in the area, by interviews and by submitting a simple question to some of my italian and not-italian friends that have been visiting Amsterdam. I think it the way people focus on different things is really peculiar, and should be taken into consideration for the touristic market.

By randomly walking in the Red Light Area I noticed that mostly young guys were interested in both sex shops and windows. They kind of tried to show-off with their friends while in a all-male group. I could hear them saying things like “Ohh, if my girlfriend was here, she would be so jealous!” Or “Ooh! Look at that chick she’s so hot!” And many other sentences of ‘appreciation’ for the girls’ bodies.

Even though tourists knew they couldn’t take pictures of the prostitutes, they still took photos of everything else they could take a photo of. I guess it is because it’s kind of a clichée and it is something they could use to show-off with their friends back in their home countries. Most of the people love taking pictures on the bridge close to the Old Church.

The majority of the people in the area belonged to this kind of tourists: curious and for some aspects exaggeratedly interested. Many of them pretended not to be as interested as others (especially girls) but still they had a look at the prostitutes whenever they could. Then, also people that did not care at all about the prostitutes

can be found but I guess they are mostly locals. Some group of guys actually have the courage to go and talk to the prostitutes but I had the feeling that such guys would have never really done it, especially really young ones. Couples also look interested at the girls the same way and the girl usually did not look jealous. Instead many of the girls I have seen looked even more interested than their male partner. When tourists enter the narrow streets where the prostitutes are, one can see their heads moving left and right very fast, I guess because they want to see them all but without giving the impression of observing too much and spending too much time in front of the windows. Even people passing by with the bike or the moped always gave a look! I have noticed many guys entering the windows to negotiate, but not so many actually entering the windows. I have seen also a couple (male and female) asking the prostitutes for a ménage-à-trois but they eventually came out because the price was too high.

Now I will report entirely some of the interviewed's opinion, nationality, gender and age. All factors that could contribute to make them have a different perspective on the Red Light District.

For me it was very weird to see these women behind the windows. I thought it must be very boring. But at the same time I was wondering if some of them actually like their jobs. What I seriously recognized was that a few women were actually really hot! But as I am a woman, for me it was really interesting to see prostitutes for the first time in my life (as you're not allowed to go to into the brothels in Germany). The atmosphere was not uncomfortable. – Woman, 27, Germany

I didn't expect to see the women so out in the open for everyone to see. It was strange to me for prostitution to be so open and public, coming from Canada. But I felt it empowered the women and they were now in control of the process, as opposed to in Canada where the women are forced into dangerous areas to do their job. The openness of the Red light district made the topic of sex less taboo and more acceptable to discuss. It made it easier to address the topic and I felt people in Amsterdam were more comfortable discussing sexual matters. – Man, 26, Canada

I saw it during the day, so I did not experience it as a dangerous area. Before coming to Amsterdam I had always imagined it as some sort of Bronx. I felt kind of bad for the few women I saw in the windows, I could never be able to imagine how they actually feel. Especially because there were a

lot of tourists staring at them with a certain curiosity. As already said, however, I did not feel uncomfortable at all, but again, I guess it was because I visited it during the day. – Man, 60, Italy

At first sight it looks like a normal area, not really different from the rest of the city apart from maybe a couple of signs. I did not know at all that in the middle of the Red Light District there is a church and the fact that so many prostitutes are working really close to a church kind of stroke me. I thought it was a really interesting element. Furthermore, I thought that the area had only to do with prostitution but it's actually remarkable also for many other things which I did not expect. – Man, 21, Italy

I thought the RLD would have been bigger and women there more "loud" when it comes to marketing themselves. It felt bad seeing that those things in that district are real and women really work there to earn their living. It was shocking to see people (men) walk out the district doors. – Woman, 24, Finland

My first experience was accidental, I remember wanting to go visit the red light district by not specifically at the time I first did. I was looking for a coffee shop entrance and ended up going down the super thin alley way and walking through the red light district. I did not expect it to be so similar to the rest of the city itself (if it wasn't for the women behind the windows) – Woman, 20, USA

The first things I wanted to see was how the ladies were dressed. As we also have paid-sex service in Bulgaria, though not legal, I wanted to compare their clothing. I have to say I was positively impressed because they were clean, their make up was done well and they seemed prideful. On the other hand, in Bulgaria you can find those women on the highways and on big roads, but they are dressed in cheap shorts and big overcoats because they can only stay there at night. Moreover, they use fire in huge metal containers to keep warm. My friends and I had fun going around the rooms and it all felt very normal and in place. I found most peculiar the lack of vandalism and feeling of a ghetto, which I expected around this kind of job. However, making it legal and making them pay taxes like any other job in the Netherlands really raises the standards and it does the country and city only good. – Man, 19, Bulgaria

The first impression when visiting the red light district for the first time was shocking. I just didn't expected the girls to be that exposed. I was curious in seeing what they attitude would be like towards the potential clients as well as the reactions of the people passing by. – Woman, 22, Spain

Most of my friends are impressed when they go there, at first find it kind of funny, but then most of them want to leave because it feels depressing. It seems very odd the way people look at it as a touristic attraction. Even tourist families with young teenagers visit the Red Light district. Is odd that you have prostitutes around a church and next to kindergartens. Is odd the way women are

inside windows, waiting to be chosen and that any person can choose to have sexual relationships with them. Is odd that these woman are so young and decide to have this job, while they should have a lot of other opportunities. – Woman, 22, Portugal

I did not expect so many people to casually walk around. Also I found peculiar that the red light district was positioned in the middle of the city center because usually people want to go incognito and is difficult when there are so many people around. Another interesting thing that I noticed is that the girls are actively trying to get you attention by hitting their heels in the windows or staring at you. There is a lot of shady people but police too. – Man, 24, Greece