

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO AMSTERDAM, PART 2: PETER MOSKOS

Simon Sellars

Peter Moskos, along with Toine Rikken, founded the St Nicolaas Boat Club in 1997, a very popular venture that provides an alternative angle on Amsterdam and its waterlogged history. I asked Peter to regale me with his unique perspective.

Favourite area of Amsterdam?

On a boat in the IJ. There's no better place to understand the importance of water and shipping to Amsterdam's history – plus it's beautiful out there.

And your least favourite?

Any big, ugly road with too many cars, although architecturally every place has something interesting and can tell you something about urban planning.

What's the biggest misconception about Amsterdam?

That it's the world's sex capital. It's not – the Dutch just have the sense to put it all out in the open and capitalise on it. And while it may be the world's recreational-drug capital, stop bingeing and enjoy it like you live here year round.

Tell me your favourite 'Amsterdam experience'.

Biking and boating. And Koninginnedag (Queen's Day; p117) – the biggest drunk garage sale in the world.

Least favourite?

The weather – especially the winter weather. Or the winter weather in the summer. And the rain that never stops.

What Amsterdam-specific film or book would you recommend?

The film *Amsterdammed* is fun, with a great high-speed boat chase, but it doesn't depict anything of reality. *Simon* is the best Amsterdam film ever – and maybe the best-ever Dutch movie. Jan-Willem van der Wetering's cop stories are pretty good, but Geert Mak's *Amsterdam* is the single best book about the city.

Your favourite Amsterdam bar and coffeeshop?

Any brown café in the Jordaan is great – get a *jenever* and a beer and talk with the locals. The coffeeshop De Rokerij has a super-cool atmosphere – sort of how I imagine a 19th-century Chinese opium den would have been. And of course my brother's bar at Boom Chicago, because that's the home base for our boats.

What about restaurants?

Semhar on the Marnixstraat – the only Ethiopian restaurant in town that makes its *enjara* bread with *tef*, the traditional Ethiopian flour. Semhar is distinctive in a city that has a great variety of food but very few truly memorable restaurants. I like the herring stands on bridges. A *broodje haaring* is a very cheap lunch – so Dutch, and you just can't get it anywhere else. Eel is also delicious.

What's Amsterdam's best-kept secret?

Co-ed, naked saunas that aren't sleazy. I like Fenomeen out past Vondelpark – essential when the weather is bad.

Favourite local slang or swear words?

I'm trying to get *spetterend* back into the vocab – it's a very uncool way of saying 'cool'. But the Dutch have a shortage of swear words, so they often resort to English.

I once saw a respectable chap bicycling in Amsterdam with a blow-up sex doll strapped to his back. What's your strangest Amsterdam bike story?

A guy wearing a jockstrap on rollerblades. He used to be everywhere, even in the cold weather. He disappeared a couple of years ago. Perhaps he caught pneumonia and passed on.

What annoys you the most about Amsterdam: the dog shit, the service or something else?

Taxis. Avoid them like dog shit. But the dog-shit problem is basically a thing of the past – if you have a problem with it now, you should have seen how it was before. I really have to say the bad service, without a doubt – it's legendary.

How has living in Amsterdam changed you?

It's made me realise that bikes are the best form of urban transit possible. And that, basically, this is a city that works. There's something to be said for literally living on top of each other and in close-knit surroundings. It's given me the opportunity to see how a large city can allow everyone to do their own thing without getting all bent out of shape about it.

Describe the St Nicolaas Boat Club for someone new to it.

We're a friendly entry point to understanding Amsterdam from the greatest perspective of all: the canals. We offer cosy rides with knowledgeable pilots, and all we ask for is a donation at the end.

of candlelight lunch and dinner cruises (adults €25 to €69, children €16 to €45).

Lovers Museum Boat (Map pp88-9; ☎ 530 10 90; www.lovers.nl; Prins Hendrikkade 25-27) Offers a number of night-time cruises, including the candlelight cruise (€24, 8.30pm nightly from spring to December, most nights January to spring) with wine and Dutch cheese.

Rederij Noord-Zuid (Map pp92-3; ☎ 679 13 70; www.canal-cruises.nl; Stadhouderskade 25; 75min canal cruises adult/child €9/5.50; ⚓ every 30min 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, every hr 10am-5pm Nov-Mar) The main tour clocks in at 75 minutes. Evening cruises (adult/child €13.50/9) are offered at least twice per night from April to October, and at 8pm only Thursday to Sunday throughout the rest of the year.

St Nicolaas Boat Club (Map pp92-3; ☎ 423 01 01; www.petermoskos.com/boat; donation €10) If you blanch at the thought of the foggy windows and stale commentary of the big glassed-in canal boats, do yourself a favour and try this not-for-profit venture (see the boxed text, p114), which takes small, old barges out onto the canals. Patrons are allowed to smoke dope and drink beer on board, while the captains amuse with stories about alternative Amsterdam. The trip will definitely show you a different side of the city – everything from the famous Mohawk Duck to the thinnest house in town. Departure times are according to numbers; inquire at Boom Chicago, Leidseplein 12.

Urban Home & Garden Tours (☎ 688 12 43; www.uhgt.nl; per person incl a drink €22.50; ⚓ 10.15am Fri, 11.15am Sat, 12.15pm Sun Apr-Oct) These well-regarded tours (2½ to three hours) look at Amsterdam dwellings from the perspective of home, garden and even gable. Visits include 18th-century, 19th-century and contemporary homes.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

February

Carnaval A Catholic tradition, best enjoyed in the south of the country, although Amsterdammers also don silly costumes and a party 'tude.

Commemoration of the February Strike (25 February) In memory of the 1941 anti-Nazi general strike.

March

Stille Omgang (Silent Procession; Sunday closest to 15 March) Catholics walk along the Holy Way to commemorate the 1345 Miracle of Amsterdam.

April

Koninginnedag (Queen's Day; 30 April) Celebrated countrywide, but especially in Amsterdam (see the boxed text, opposite).

Amsterdam Fantastic Film Festival (www.afff.nl) European and international fantasy, horror and science-fiction movies.

May

Remembrance Day (4 May) For the fallen of WWII. Queen Beatrix lays a wreath on the Dam and the city observes two minutes' silence at 9am.