

## Tobacco Ban vs Amsterdam Coffeeshops

It's been a long time coming, but from 1 July, a smoking ban in bars and restaurants across the Netherlands – including Amsterdam's infamous coffeeshops – comes into effect. And the Dutch capital – famous around the world for its liberal drug laws – is undergoing yet another rather bizarre metamorphosis which has recently seen a third of its "windows" in the Red Light District make way for artists' ateliers, and the controversial closure of its most notorious brothel, Yab Yum. As the city council continues on its quest to clean up the Amsterdam's *enfant terrible* image abroad, even the police haven't been spared. With delicious irony, officers have been firmly warned not to smoke cannabis off-duty, causing quite the stink amongst its ranks. (This is, after all, Amsterdam.) While they, in turn, have produced leaflets aimed at this summer's tourists, warning them that "screaming" in public won't be tolerated, nor will urinating in the street (accompanied by a road sign-style image of a figure relieving himself on an *Amsterdammertje*, one of the city's ubiquitous sidewalk bollards).

As ever with Dutch policy, confusion reigns supreme on the eve of the ban. Coffeeshop owners to stoners have been left in what could be likened to a hash-induced haze by some of the pottier aspects of this law. As the main culprit is tobacco, coffeeshops *will* still be able to openly purvey their wares. However, punters will no longer be able to spliff up inside using tobacco. That is, unless the coffeeshop provides a separate, air-tight "smoking room". While joints mixing hash or weed with tobacco *can* still be smoked outdoors on coffeeshop terraces.

This latest measure – perceived by Amsterdam's laissez-faire lot as yet another attempt to rain on the parade by the ruling right-wing CDA (Christian-Democratic party) – seems, however, to have met with more protest from outside the country. Headlines on international newspapers have screamed seismic shifts in Amsterdam's coffeeshop tourism, while online forums are filled with furious declarations by tourists vowing never to step foot in Amsterdam again.

The mood in the city's coffeeshops is a lot more laid-back. "No, there have been no public protests," says Marc Jacobsen, spokesperson for the BCD (Association of Cannabis Retailers), and owner of Rookies coffeeshop and hotel.

"Ja, all the international newspapers are overreacting saying it's the end for Amsterdam's coffeeshops – but only because it makes a good story. We bring in 400 million euros a year for the tax man and a two billion euro cash flow – the same as public transport. Of course the government aren't going to put an end to coffeeshops or the cannabis trade."

"But the new law *is* ridiculous," he adds. "You go to a bar to drink, a restaurant to eat, and a coffeeshop to smoke! Of course, they should have made an exception for coffeeshops. In fact, I personally asked the Minister of Health, Ab Klink, to do so, but he said he had to draw a line somewhere. However," he chuckles, with a twinkle in his eye. "He told me we could still smoke pure cannabis. Isn't that nice when your Minister of Health gives you permission to smoke a drug?"

"Anyway," he continues. "There's nothing we can do about it now, but be creative". And that renowned Dutch pragmatism has indeed kicked in. Albeit at the eleventh hour. Behind Jacobsen, workers with chunky tool-bags strapped around their waists weave in and out of the customers at Rookies. Wooden frames have been erected the length of the coffeeshop to create a glass-walled smoking room. "The pool table will have to go", Jacobsen sighs. "But we'll have 70 seats; it will be one of the largest smoking rooms in the city."

He admits, however, that he's one of the lucky ones. Many of the city's 230 coffeeshops – notoriously small establishments with no space for separate smoking rooms – may well struggle. "They could end up functioning more like 'drive-ins' and that would be a real shame. Coffeeshops play an essential role in integration; more so than in bars. They're a place where you'll find rich and poor, and all shades of colour and religion. In fact, I think Paris should have coffeeshops. Then they wouldn't have any riots," he laughs.

A quick glance around the room appears to confirm this. At the bar a respectable-looking African-American woman in her fifties is swaying along to Bob Marley's *Jammin'*. At the pool table, a dreadlocked native Dutchman takes his shot: his opponents are Moroccan and Surinamese. And the convivial atmosphere has the buzz of a bar in the early evening. That is, before alcohol is consumed and things turn messy.

Across town, one of the smaller coffeeshops, Any Day, is already prepared for 1 July. Upstairs, at the top of a small spiral staircase, a tiny room gives you the feeling you've just stumbled across the meeting place of some secret society or a mad scientist's laboratory. Four glass vaporizers – an elaborate type of bong, replete with a large conical flask and all manner of tubes, pipes and hoses – have been integrated into customised tables as if artworks. But so far, they remain untouched. (Perhaps because unlike their counterparts across the pond, Europeans aren't used to inhaling their cannabis *au naturel*.) In one corner of the room, a group of Italians talk animatedly as they try to work out how one works, pointing at each part of the complex-looking contraption in turn. In another corner, a Dutch man is huddled up; half-asleep and cradling a joint. When probed about the consequences of the tobacco ban for him, he takes a long draw and slowly rolls his eyes up to the ceiling,

before slurring, "I don't know." Adding emphatically, "And I don't care." But he wouldn't: he's stoned.

Downstairs, a row of savvier customers take turns from vaporizers that line the window counter, looking out over a small alleyway. One offers another a "hit", but he declines. "I'm old skool!" he laughs, holding up his tobacco-filled joint. "Well, what are you going to do on the first of July?" comes the inevitable reaction. And it soon becomes apparent that this jovial middle-aged character – and coffeeshop regular – is clueless about the imminent ban. "You're joking!" he growls in a thick Dutch accent. "You mean, I can smoke marijuana in here, but as soon as I add tobacco it's illegal? No, that's never going to happen," he announces to everyone. "I mean, who's going to enforce it? The government?" he says, before dissolving into fits of deep-bellied laughter. "It's true," another customer chips in. But he doesn't believe it.

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