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‘Do not come to Amsterdam’: Residents join campaign against the city's nuisance visitors

With the Dutch capital preparing to welcome back tourists, its message is clear: if you plan to booze and misbehave, look elsewhere

By Senay Boztas

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It's an unusual tourist campaign but Amsterdam has dared say it: "Visitors who treat our residents and heritage with disrespect are not welcome," according to a [statement](#) issued by the city council. "The message we have for them is: don't come to Amsterdam."

Thanks to its soft drugs policy, legal prostitution and vibrant nightlife, the Dutch capital has long had a reputation for lost weekends. But by 2019, the pressure for change had become explosive, with residents complaining that ‘Disneyfication’ had [made their city unliveable](#). Meanwhile, the pandemic and two lockdowns revealed that the beautiful Red Light District, devoid of tourists gawping at prostitutes in windows, was almost empty of local life.

But now there are hopes that trips to Amsterdam could be green-listed in time for summer, with new infections of less than 1,000 per day (around five per 100,000 people), plus expectations of a European vaccination passport. So the pressure is on to ensure that, [unlike in Venice](#), nuisance tourism does not return.

“I’d like to say goodbye to the image that any kind of boundless behaviour is okay here,” the city’s mayor, Femke Halsema, told The Telegraph. “Amsterdam remains an exciting and free city, but especially in the centre we want less dominance of cheap entertainment. We need a better balance between the needs of residents and visitors... We’ve had too much nuisance from tourists who misbehave. You’re welcome, as long as you are respectful.”

So this summer, Amsterdam council is increasing enforcement action, putting into place a ‘sleeper team’ to check people are not sleeping in their cars, and issuing on-the-spot fines to those that are. There will be crowd patrols in busy areas and waterways will be policed for “noise pollution and sailing speed”. Holiday rentals, limited to 30 days per year, will be monitored more intensely and the city council is investigating a potential ban on laughing gas, restricting alcohol sales and prohibiting outdoor drinking in the Red Light District.

In the longer term, meanwhile, the council is trying to shift the prostitution industry elsewhere, and is considering the impact of [banning foreign tourists from coffeeshops](#), where cannabis is sold. This is, in fact, already a Dutch law but Amsterdam has simply not enforced it – something the mayor and a wide alliance of businesses and residents want to change (with a particular eye on British tourists, a third of whom say it’s their main reason for travel).

The city council is exploring the impact of banning tourists from coffeeshops | CREDIT: Getty

At the same time, though, tourism is needed. The total economic value of the tourism sector in 2019 was €18.6 billion, representing 10 per cent of employment (including more than 70,000 direct jobs). That same year, tourist tax raised €133.6 million for Amsterdam council. This is why the promotion body amsterdam&partners has now launched a tourism campaign to target certain groups to promote desired behaviour. Geerte Udo, chief executive, told The Telegraph: “The campaign is aimed at visitors with an interest in culture in the broadest sense of the word. It is extremely important right now to support the sector and bring the city back to life by attracting visitors who bring something to the city themselves.”

The reception has been cautiously positive. Robbert Overmeer, a bar owner and chairman of the business association Utrechtsestraat, has campaigned to ban drug tourists from coffeeshops and promote a different image of the city. “[We need] an awareness campaign saying that if you come to Amsterdam, you should behave” he said. “But that’s not enough. The first thing you need to have is a residents-only policy [for coffeeshops], which I believe is coming.

“The first visitors who came back were the drugs tourists. They go to the supermarket, eat and drink on the street, sleep in their cars... and they finance their little holiday with the extra amounts they buy here, to sell in their home country.”

He argues that these low-spending groups contribute very little and leave behind litter and even human waste. “The message should be, for [badly-behaved] people who come, from England, for example, that there’s a big chance that you’ll be spoken to or fined,” he added. “Amsterdam will not accept it any more.”

Some hotels also believe that they have an important role to ensure tourism benefits residents and visitors alike. Marco Lemmers, chief executive of the eco-friendly chain Conscious Hotels, points out that every 10 hotels typically provide the city with 15 extra restaurants and 12 bars. “Amsterdam has an image of stag parties where you can smoke dope and do crazy things,” he said. “Amsterdam hasn’t managed that very well: we need another profile. I think travel will come back, because the younger generation is less interested in things and more in experiences. But you need to have the city in balance.”

Rob Hofland, a city councillor for D66, summed it up nicely for Britons thinking of wild weekends in Amsterdam: “It’s only a matter of time before we turn green for travellers and people all over the world will find us again en masse,” he said. “But if your intention is to booze, misbehave and dressed in phallic costumes, look elsewhere!”

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