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Transportation: Bicycles in Amsterdam

There is a saying amongst travelers that the best way, the only way, to see Amsterdam, is on a bike. Amsterdam is a city known around the world for its extremely green lifestyle and its alternatives to automobile transportation. The city of Amsterdam has made a significant effort to encourage green development and discourage the use of automobiles. The government and citizens of the Netherlands are generally supportive of alternative methods of transportation. The local government in Amsterdam is open to trying different methods, such as bike and car sharing, secure bike parking, and dedicated bike paths, and is not discouraged by mixed success.

Dutch development stresses a spatial connectedness between the center of the city and the outlying suburbs, which are built more densely than American Suburbs. The Dutch government is very supportive of alternative methods of transportation (Skirkis), with a reliable train system, and by enacting “Master Plan Bicycle” (Osberg and Stiles, 9) and the Second Structure Scheme for Traffic and Transportation (Beatley, 168- 169). The Second Structure Scheme calls for a 30% increase in bicycle use by 2010. Former Prime Minister Wim Kok commuted to work nearly every day on a bicycle (Osberg and Stiles, 9). There are 20,000 km of bike trails compared to 110,000 km of roads in the Netherlands, and 17,000 bikes in the Netherlands. With the bicycle occupying such a prominent place in Dutch policy and culture, it is little wonder that the capital and largest city would promote two-wheeled transport so effusively.

Through the 1950's the bicycle was a popular and primary form of transportation for Dutch citizens. However, during the late 1960's through the mid 70's, as in most places in Europe, the automobile experienced a resurgence (Skirkis). Then the OPEC embargo occurred and turned the transportation tide back to bicycling instead of the private auto (Osberg and Stiles). Government support for bicycling helped bikes become a popular primary mode of transportation in Amsterdam and the Netherlands again.

In 1993, 26% of trips within the city of Amsterdam were made by bike (Skirkis); by 2009 nearly 50% of transport in the city center was by bike (Pate). There were several policies and initiatives that aided in boosting bicycle usage such a significant amount during that time period. According to safety researchers Osberg and Stiles, authorities in Amsterdam have made bicycling very safe for residents by employing, “thoughtful road architecture, bicycle lanes, and by extensive education of cyclists and car drivers about the rules of the road.” These rules include the Dutch concept of a woonerf zone, a “protected residential environment with street space shared equally among pedestrians, cyclists, and cars ‘proceeding at a walking pace’ . (Ossberg and Stiles, 10)”



A bike Lane in Amsterdam, from http://www.ski-epic.com/amsterdam_bicycles/

The Bike Lanes in Amsterdam are designed to maximize safety and convenience for bicycle riders in the city. The lanes are separated from cars by space and physical barriers, even around traffic circles in city centers. Bike lanes also have their own signaling, separate from cars (Beatley, 168). There is a high frequency of bicycle and

pedestrian paths in the suburbs, connected by bikeways to the city center. This sort of integrated planning has been employed for 20-30 years in the Netherlands (Beatley, 169). By giving bicyclists their own lanes, signals, and the motor vehicle status as “vulnerable users”(Osberg and Stiles, 10) bike riders are given an increased sense of security and feel more comfortable riding more often. One downside to this comfort level is the lack of helmet use, only 0.1% of the Dutch observed in the Osberg Stiles study wore helmets (2).

Bike sharing is another concept that authorities in Amsterdam tried to utilize to promote bike travel, with more mixed success. Environmentalist Luud Schimmelpennink first attempted to institute a bike sharing program in the 1960’s, and then tried to revive the idea thirty years later. The fees for the most recent attempt were very minimal to downright free, depending on the length of the trip taken and the number of bikes at the destination depot. There were problems with theft of the bikes during both attempts and while other European cities have found ways to improve the security of the shared bicycles, the idea has never taken hold in Amsterdam (Beatley, 178-180). This hasn’t discouraged Dutch planners, who are always looking for new and innovative ways to encourage alternate transport.



"White Bikes" from hiptravelguide.com

Providing ample bicycle parking is another way that the Dutch have made bike riding more accessible and convenient for their citizens. In the city of Tillburg, a new facility was constructed underground that provides a secure parking area with a capacity

of up to 3,000 bikes for 50 cents a day, or 40 guilders (\$20 US) a year. In Groningen residents could pay a yearly fee of 25 guilders to park at any of twenty facilities located around the city (Beatley, 169).



Bike Parking, somethinglikethis.net/2008/02/18/bicycle-love/, http://www.ski-epic.com/amsterdam_bicycles/

Amsterdam has more than earned its reputation as a haven for bicycles and bicyclists. The Dutch government has gone to great lengths to promote and protect the safety of cyclists, perhaps somewhat to the detriment of helmet wearing. The local government of Amsterdam has instituted policies to provide ample paths and secure parking for cyclists in the city. Other ideas, such as bike sharing have been met with mixed success, but have not deterred efforts to further promote cycling in the city. In general the Dutch love their bikes, and utilize them to their full potential as a sustainable method of transportation.

Sources:

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The White Bicycles.

<http://www.hiptravelguide.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=115&site=1>