Gerber’s Excellent Amsterdam Adventure

Here's a travelogue of my first trip to Europe, where I participated in a conference in Amsterdam, Netherlands from July 5-10, 2009. The groups, meeting jointly, were IAML (International Association of Music Libraries and Archives) and IMS (International Musicological Society).
This is Amsterdam's CENTRAAL STATION, a huge terminal in the heart of the city where trains, buses, trams (streetcars), and ferry boats (which cross the IJ River to north Amsterdam) meet. The train ride from Schiphol airport (outside a southern suburb) was about 20 minutes. Temperatures during the week were mid-70s during the day, low-60s at night, quite humid most of the time (from those canals, of course), but also quite breezy. It rained lightly for a bit on most days, and I had one very rainy/windy afternoon which blew out my umbrella.
About three blocks from the train station is the digs where I stayed: Delta Hotel, with its Delta Terras restaurant. This was not one of the IAML conference's "recommended" hotels. Being a low-budget traveler, I found it on the Internet. It is on Damrak, central Amsterdam's busiest street, sometimes almost as crowded as Times Square. Not so when I took this shot, ca. 9 am on a sleepy Sunday morning.
Although Delta calls itself a "three-star" hotel, my room was actually more like those austere, spartan, overnight-rental rooms in old-time YMCAs. It was about 6 feet wide and 12 feet long, an EENPERSONSKAMMER (single-person-room) adequate for my needs but definitely not luxurious or even comfortable ("monastic" might be the polite term). At least it had its own tiny, recently-upgraded bathroom! The restaurant, on the other hand, was superb, and its free breakfast buffet (ONTBIJT INCLUSIEF, ("breakfast included") was good. All the juice, coffee, scrambled/boiled eggs, bacon, cheese, and fruit cocktail that I wanted. There was also a variety of carbohydrates: breads, hot and cold cereals, and- would you believe- baked beans. No Dutch pastry, :-(

Euros come in coins from 1 Eurocent up to EU 2,00, and in notes from EU 5,00 to EU 500,00. The banknotes are shorter but wider than American bills. You can bring American money to Netherlands and change it into Euros at a GELDWISSELKANTOOR (money exchange), where you will always lose money due to fees and commissions, or you can use your standard Visa/Master bank card at one of many outdoor GELDAUTOMATEN (ATMs), which give the best rate with low (or no) fee. Everything in shops and eateries seemed quite expensive, perhaps because I was trapped in the heart of the tourist district.
I walked every day to the conference site, about a mile from my hotel, at the CONSERVATORIUM VAN AMSTERDAM (Amsterdam Conservatory, the building on the right) and at the OPENBARE BIBLIOTHEEK AMSTERDAM next door (Amsterdam Public Library, on the left). These are both brand-new, eight-story buildings- the state-of-the-art library opened late in 2007 and the conservatory opened last September. There is a tremendous amount of demolition and new construction going on in this area, OOSTERDOKSEILAND (Eastern Docks Island), which used to be part of the Port of Amsterdam but is now being redeveloped with waterfront hotels, shopping centers, and entertainment venues.
The opening-night event included a concert by Fugimundi, a world-music, jazz-fusion trio consisting of two Dutchmen on trumpet and piano and an Icelander playing bass. They were terrific. If there had been a CD for sale I would have purchased it. Amsterdam is one of Europe's most important cities for jazz, even though Rotterdam (60 miles to the south) is the city that produces the annual North Sea Jazz Festival (largest jazz gathering in the world). A few days later I gave a conference presentation in this very auditorium- entitled "Drive-By, Drop-In Musicology." In English, of course. 80% of the conference was in English; the other official languages were German and French.
After the jazz concert, the 550 or so conference participants had a reception in the library's top-floor restaurant; here's a bird's-eye view from its outdoor patio. The canal directly below is very wide compared to most in Amsterdam, in keeping with its previous character as a harbor next to a major river and deep-sea canal leading to the Atlantic.
Down the block from the Delta Hotel is the KONINKLIJK PALEIS (Royal Palace), a large 17th-century building, once the residence of kings and queens, but now in desperate need of removal of centuries' worth of grime. It contains a museum of royal treasures and Dutch history, which I did not get a chance to visit. Here's a close-up of its Baroque tower and dome.
The most striking thing to me about Amsterdam (besides the network of canals, of course) was the prevalence of bicycles. There are thousands of them and bicycling appears to be the primary mode of transport for people of all ages in the city. And the bikes tend more to be sturdy, old-fashioned, slightly beaten-up models rather than chic 15-speeds with hand brakes. It is not unusual to see two, three, or even four people on one bike (e.g. a mom with two smiling toddlers in plastic seats mounted to the front axle and an 8-year-old sitting behind), pedalling behind a guy in a business suit cell-phoning while riding. I saw NO ONE in spandex! There are many designated bike lanes in which bike traffic moves quite swiftly, and everywhere you look, bicycles by the dozens or hundreds are parked and chained. The conservatory has no automobile parking at all, but DOES have an underground bike parking ramp! I understand that the Amsterdam city council is considering banning cars in the central area altogether. For non-bikers, there are plenty of streetcars.
I loved those historic, picturesque canals. This one was colorful, quiet, and peaceful. Central Amsterdam lies within a semicircular ring of five major canals, criss-crossed by dozens of smaller ones; 65 miles' worth of waterways in the central city alone. Although back in the 1990s the city built low rails along almost every canal to prevent cars from falling in when drivers park alongside, a fellow told me that an average of one per week ends up in the drink anyway.
Here's a shot looking down a canal from one of the 1,200 bridges, new and old, that span them.
In one of the wider canals here you see docked glass-topped canal excursion boats, which are a tourist favorite. A canal excursion on one of these is called a RONDVAART (literally "round trip"). A canal is GRACHT in Dutch, and a street that parallels a canal is also called a GRACHT. Here you can see a blue-and-white streetcar on the far gracht (street), beyond the canal boats in the foreground gracht (canal).
Of course, I eagerly shelled out a reasonable EU 8,50 (= $12 American) for a one-hour RONDVAART myself. Here's the pilot getting ready to pull away from the dock.
While some canals have streets on either side, others have buildings built right up to the water. I'm not sure whether to consider this the front door or the back door!
The pilot stopped the boat at a unique spot where we could look straight down a long canal and count seven arched bridges before the canal veers off in another direction (they don't all show up in this photo).
Here's the l-o-n-g line outside the Anne Frankhuis (Anne Frank House) and Museum at Prinsengracht 263 (263 Princes' Canal), where her father owned a spices and cooking powders factory, to which he had added a back annex. This WWII Jewish family and some Jewish friends hid from the Nazis on the secret upper floors of the annex from summer 1942 until betrayal in summer 1944. As you probably know, teenager Anne, who died in a concentration camp one month before liberation, left behind a poignant diary. This is the most-visited tourist site in Netherlands, open 12 hours a day in the summer. The one-hour wait in this line was well worth it. A very affecting experience. I have a lump in my throat as I remember it. We must never forget the Holocaust- 6 million Jews and 5 million Gentiles exterminated.
Lots of KAASWINKELEN (cheese shops). This one tops even the old Wisconsin Cheese Man store on the top level of Minneapolis’s Mall of America (in the old days- he’s gone now). There are also plenty of PANNENKOEKENHUIZEN (pancakes houses). One day I had a pancake MET APPEL EN ROZIJNEN (with apple and raisins). They are pretty good sized, a tasty hybrid somewhere between an American-style pancake and a non-folded French omelet; mine was from the "sweet" side of the menu but there is also a "savory" side featuring, for example, pancake MET KAAS EN SPEK (with cheese and bacon). I also tried HUTSPUT (hotch-potch), a kind of stew made from mashed potatoes, carrots, and onions with gravy and a nice chunk of beef, baked in a pie dish. Dutch comfort food, I imagine.
Just wandering along through the cobblestone streets and tiny bricked alleyways looking for pictures. This fresh vegetable-and-fruit stall caught my eye. I must have been hungry...
...but not THIS hungry. Dutch apparently love herring treats, but this was not my dad's all-American, sweet-pickled herring in a jar that I snacked on sometimes as a kid! Tried a piece of Dutch herring as an hors d'oeuvres at a reception, didn't like it—too raw, mushy, salty. Not what I expected.
Here's the smallest street-corner hotdog vendor I have ever seen, built over the bed of a tiny one-person, three-wheel pickup. When you do see cars in central, old-town Amsterdam, they tend to be pretty small. The "smartcar" size is even allowed in bike lanes.
On my hike back from visiting the Van Gogh Museum, I walked through a small square where an intent group was watching these two guys play chess with varsity-size chess pieces. A thoughtful spectator sport, definitely not as rowdy as soccer (which the Dutch call VOETBALL).
I went on a backstage tour, top-to-bottom, of the CONCERTGEBOUW (concert building), the 125-year-old home of Amsterdam's even-older philharmonic orchestra and which allegedly features the finest musical acoustics in the world (many world-class orchestras come here to record). My photos of the orchestra hall itself did not turn out well, but this shows the building's more intimate recital hall for chamber music, and hints at the elegance of the place. Wish I could have heard some actual music here!
Originally, houseboats were used as dwellings only by the poor, but a couple of centuries ago, during a population boom that led to a major housing crisis, they became desirable to middle class people who could not find or build houses or apartments otherwise. Now many people proudly live in small houseboats parked permanently in canals. The "legal" ones have water, gas, and electricity, as well as postal addresses.
More houseboats. If I were to return to Amsterdam someday on a photographic field trip and concentrate on shooting a couple of visual themes, one would be houseboats and the other would be... bicycles. They both made that much of an impression. On the other hand, there probably are dozens of “artsy: photo treatments of these two typical Amsterdam subjects already! I never did see ANY windmills. No windmills in the old city. But lots of gift shops for souvenir windmills, and souvenir tulips, and souvenir wooden shoes...
If you look closely you can see that the door to this houseboat on Prinsengracht has an address number and a mail slot, as well as "landscaping"- young trees planted in old car tires. Someone's residence address on Prinsengracht could refer to a building on either of the streets on each side of the gracht, OR to a houseboat actually floating in the gracht itself, like this one.
As novel, picturesque, and GEZELLIG (cozy) as those houseboats are, here's where I would rather live! This is the mansion of some wealthy family near the museum district- a large, 19th-century, Queen-Anne-style home with an actual yard and not one, but two watercraft– one for leisurely excursions, the other for quick trips. And it's a corner lot at the intersection of two canals! Sign me up for Holland's version of Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes.