

SUMMER OF LOVE

This summer, the city celebrates 20 years of Amsterdam Pride by hosting EuroPride, the colossal, two-week-long, pan-European event dedicated to LGBT rights and culture.

EUROPRIDE 2016: JOIN OUR FREEDOM

The first EuroPride took place in London in 1992, helmed by the European Pride Organisers Association (EPOA), backed by the belief that there is strength in numbers. Hosted in a different European city every year since, EuroPride unites international forces to promote LGBT pride on a pan-European level, lobbying for equal rights while facilitating networking and skill sharing. And of course, bringing throngs of supporters together for monumental celebrations: attendance has grown from 100,000 visitors in its first edition to several millions today. This year it's a 16-day affair, with the theme 'Join Our Freedom', boasting a gargantuan programme of events, from parades and parties to conferences and remembrance vigils. Returning to Amsterdam after their first visit in 1994, the EuroPride organisers will open an information HQ on Rembrandtplein from 22 July to 7 August (11:00-22:00), with friendly staff ready to answer all questions. Amsterdam's own Pink Point kiosk on Westermarkt is also a good source of information on the city's LGBT scene (daily 10:30-18:00). Get ready to feel free.

EuroPride
23 July-7 August
www.pride.amsterdam



Coming a few short weeks after the Orlando shooting, Pride offers the opportunity to examine why the activist celebration remains as relevant today as when it flaunted its first pink boas two decades ago.

text Marie-Charlotte Pezé and Leda Georgiades

LIBERTY CENTRAL

Amsterdam has long been hailed as a leading champion of LGBT rights – not only in the law but also in spirit. ‘We considered many places, but in the end Amsterdam won our hearts, and its stance on gay rights definitely played a big part,’ say Al Strachan and Aled Davies of their decision to move to Amsterdam from the UK six years ago. ‘You’re just more comfortable as a gay man here,’ adds Strachan. ‘There is less bother with what people do,’ explains Davies.

The city’s love affair with tolerance began as far back as 1811, when homosexuality was decriminalised under Napoleonic law. A hundred years later, one of the world’s first openly gay bars, The Empire, was already serving cosmos in Amsterdam; and the COC, the official Dutch LGBT organisation, was founded in 1946. While New York holds the badge of honour for throwing the first gay-pride event in 1969, the Dutch launched their own Pink Saturday shortly thereafter, in 1977. Still hosted in a different city every year, Pink Saturday’s mission is geared towards activism. It was in 1996, with an eye towards celebrating freedom and diversity in its signature merry way, that Amsterdam also

started throwing its now world-famous Pride bash, which culminates in the boisterous and colourful Canal Parade. To commemorate this 20th edition of Amsterdam Pride, Amsterdam was invited to host EuroPride from 23 July to 7 August, featuring a programme jammed with parties, cultural and sporting events, and more serious endeavours such as discussion panels and remembrance happenings.

LIVE AND LET LIVE

2016 also marks the 15th anniversary of another important milestone for the city: it is here that, on 1 April 2001, the world’s first same-gender weddings were consecrated by (then) Mayor Job Cohen. Anne Marie Thus and Helene Faasen were one of the couples that tied the knot at midnight that day – officially, the first lesbian wives in the world. ‘We love each other; we wanted to commit and take care of each other. We weren’t the first to do all the work, but we were the lucky ones. It made us want to pay it forward,’ says Thus, a registered nurse who kept her word by founding Meer Dan Gewenst (‘More than Desired’), an organisation that supports LGBT parenting rights throughout Europe.



THE FIRST LGBT WEDDING

Four couples (three gay and one lesbian) were picked to be the first to have their unions sealed on 1 April 2001 under the new law, the first of its kind in the world. 'We saw an ad in the (now defunct) Gay Krant looking for gay couples who wanted to marry,' recalls Anne Marie Thus. 'In just three weeks, the city took care of organising everything for us, including the flowers and the cake.'

After a few initial meetings, the four couples agreed. 'We were okay with getting married alongside each other because this was not about the eight of us, but about all LGBT couples in the world. We actually grew very close: Helene and I always say that we had six grooms,' she adds with a warm smile. Mayor Job Cohen was so moved by the momentous event that he finished his speech 10 minutes before midnight rang in the new law. 'We had to wait and the tension was palpable. But then something extraordinary happened: everyone in the room started clapping. And they all applauded until midnight, until we could finally get married.'



EUROPRIDE: DANCE & PARTY EVENTS

A call to disco dummies everywhere! Party options are varied and plentiful: Caribbean rhythms at the Reality Bar, glitzy camp classics at Danserette's 10th anniversary at Paradiso or kinky sauna parties where the music isn't necessarily the focus. Meet your future best friends at street events at the Homomonument, on the gay-oriented Reguliersdwarsstraat and along the Amstel (to name a few), or don your leather chaps for the XXXLeather Sunday dance party on 24 July – if that's not too much for a school night. The most riotous happenings follow the Canal Parade on 6 August, and let's not forget the official closing ceremony at Rembrandtplein the following day, where the line-up of international DJs will bring EuroPride 2016 to a writhing, pumping, delirious end.

Gay marriage has made strides worldwide since that first wedding, but the Netherlands remains one of the only countries where equal rights have come this far. Discrimination has been illegal since 1983; blood-donation restrictions for gay men are being lifted, slowly but surely; and adoption laws came as part of the marriage package in 2001, ensuring that non-biological parents would have the same parental rights as their partner. While there are still detractors, the local mentality seems to be in step with the law: the latest polls show a whopping 91% national support for LGBT marriage equality. 'At work, nobody cares that I am gay,' says a relieved Strachan, who is employed by an internet non-profit. 'It's not that clear cut in a corporate environment, but it's definitely easier here,' adds Davies, explaining that the Dutch mentality can be summarised by 'do whatever you like, as long as I don't have to take part'. This unwavering spirit of liberalism, added to the city's landmark statutory achievements, beg the question: is Pride still relevant in Amsterdam?

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

'I don't attend Pride anymore,' claims Antonio Rondilla, 51. 'We got what we wanted, so I don't see the point.' But Anne Marie Thus disagrees: 'We got complacent, but the fight is

not over.' She speaks of the older generations having to go back into the closet when they move to care homes, where they might otherwise face abuse, gossip and loneliness. While there is a special network of nurses that caters specifically to the LGBT community, a lifesaver for many, the mere existence of these networks proves that discrimination is alive and well. It sheds a new (and more palatable) light on the construction of condos reserved for gay and lesbian couples (such as the Roze Hallen in the Oud-West neighbourhood), which at first view are disturbingly reminiscent of another intolerant era's segregationist housing. The younger generations are not spared either: in spite of the COC's excellent sex-ed programmes, which include comprehensive classes on diversity as early as primary school, official studies show dismal statistics on LGBT youth integration. Almost half of these children have had suicidal thoughts, and 12% have attempted suicide – four to five times the rate of heterosexual children. Children with same-gender parents also face bullying, adds Thus, and what the acceptance of homosexuality still severely lacks is simply the perception of normalcy. 'My kids still have to explain at length that they have two mothers,' she laments. 'And what child on Earth wants to talk about their parents' sexuality?'



ROZE IN BLAUW

An Amsterdam-born initiative of the police department, Roze in Blauw ('Pink in Blue') is now a national network representing the interests of the LGBT community within and outside the Dutch police force. In addition to devoting special units to the investigation of infractions and crimes against gay and transgender individuals, the Pink team also dedicates their crucial efforts to building strong ties with and between communities. They promote tolerance not only through educational programmes but also by personally reaching out to the public, encouraging victims to report even verbal assaults and fostering greater sensitivity amongst offenders via 'community liaison' officers. Their dedicated 24-hour hotline can be reached at +31 (0)20 559 5385.



EUROPRIDE: PINK SATURDAY

Pink Saturday was founded in Amsterdam in 1977, when LGBT rights were in dire need of meaningful activism and mass political support, and it has since been hosted in a different city every year. It comes home for EuroPride, kicking off the fortnight-plus of events on Saturday 23 July with the annual Pride Walk. Absolutely everyone can join in to show their support for global equality and human rights. The walk will start at Vondelpark and end up at the central point of the first EuroPride weekend: the Dam Square. The Dam Square will also host the Human Rights Concert on 24 July. The concert will include international performers accompanied by the New Amsterdam Orchestra.

EUROPRIDE: CANAL PARADE

The Canal Parade is all about the right to freedom of self-expression, and it never disappoints on that front! 2016's Parade will be the most memorable to date: 80 colourful floats, each carrying dozens of exuberant, costumed and dancing passengers, will overtake the Prinsengracht and Amstel River on Saturday 6 August to the delight of millions of revellers and onlookers (including families with children) cheering from the streets and bridges along the route. Representing LGBTI organisations from all over the world and across the entire spectrum, from the corporate world, the armed forces and police, the sporting world and even minority communities (there has been a Turkish boat since 2012, and a Moroccan float since 2014), the Amsterdam Canal Parade delivers a fun but powerful message of national and international tolerance.



What of the recent reports of a rise in discrimination? Laurens Buijs, sociologist at the University of Amsterdam, explains these – at least in part – with a two-prong theory: ‘Tolerance has become part of the national myth, and it’s being instrumentalised by the right-wing party and the media. So nowadays you’ll hear a lot more about incidents between Muslim youths and gays because it serves the anti-immigration discourse. But it’s also because the LGBT arm of the Dutch police, the Roze in Blauw (‘Pink in Blue’), has done a fabulous job at fostering a trusting relationship with the community.’ Ellie Lust, representative of Roze in Blauw, agrees: ‘We have lowered the threshold of tolerance for discrimination, and victims now come to us to report even verbal attacks. This definitely affects the statistics.’

ROLE MODEL

Nonetheless, there is an evident backlash against the LGBT-rights movement worldwide at the moment. While countries such as Italy are climbing aboard the marriage-equality bandwagon, the United States is currently at the centre of a controversy on transgender bathroom usage. ‘The US is very influential, and the intolerance will spread,’ worries Anne Marie Thus. In her collaborations with other international foundations, Thus says she feels honoured that she can speak

on behalf of people who fight for their rights, especially in oppressive regimes. ‘We take care of each other worldwide, because we face the same things.’ Unfortunately, the Orlando mass shooting demonstrates that senseless intolerance and brutality are also a reality of the Western world; but, thankfully, solidarity too.

Thus emphasises as well that LGBT rights offer protection beyond the LGBT community. For example, it’s important to strengthen and expand related national laws, such as those on commercial surrogacy (which is still illegal in the Netherlands), to thwart the potential exploitation of women, especially in developing countries. LGBT rights are about human rights in general. With floats representing gay Moroccans, LGBT Jews and the police force, Amsterdam Pride offers fringe communities within the LGBT whole open representation, casting a light on countries and cultures where repression is still the law. There is no doubt that the celebration still has a vital role to play – not only nationally, where (even here) intolerance is still a daily plight, but also as a model to the rest of the world. That message is broadcast loud and clear with this year’s theme: ‘Join Our Freedom.’ ‘We’re showing what we’re proud of: our lack of censorship, our freedom. Be who you are!’ exclaims Thus.

A truly Amsterdam motto, if ever there was one.



EUROPRIDE: FILM & CULTURE

EuroPride’s programme is full of films, documentaries, exhibitions, plays and poetry events, but for many, the highlight of the fortnight will be the *Homage to Marlene Dietrich Gala* at the architectural landmark Tuschinski Theatre on 29 July. The audience will be whisked back in time to an era when Dietrich’s iconic smouldering stares seduced everyone they landed on. This is but one of EuroPride’s film events, which include documentaries and feature films at an open-air cinema on Nieuwmarkt throughout the festivities.

If giggling is more your thing, Bianca del Rio (branded by *The New York Times* as ‘The Joan Rivers of the drag world’) is returning to Theater Amsterdam with her new comedy show ‘Not Today Satan’, sure to be ripe with her signature zinging one-liners. The trans community is also strongly represented throughout EuroPride with events ranging from ‘Transmission’, an exhibition of arresting and challenging photography at the Amsterdam Museum, to an open-mic poetry event. For the literary-inclined, 27 July is the chance to take a cruise and sip Champagne during the ‘pink authors’ meet-and-greet boat tour.



EUROPRIDE: CONFERENCES

Like Ecclesiastes 3 says, ‘There is a time for everything.’ A time to dance, and a time to speak. EuroPride also delves into the more serious side of LGBT issues with a slew of academic events and conferences. The third European Bisexual Conference will take place over 28 and 29 July, with participants ranging from activists, researchers and healthcare professionals to artists, allies and partners of bisexuals. Workshops will span five topics: diversity, health, bi-phobia, representation and the aptly named ‘light & fluffy’ discussions about having fun and meeting new people. The TransPride International Forum on 2 August brings speakers from around the world together to share their experiences of being trans in their respective countries. And the Proud in Europe Conference on 4 and 5 August will trace the development of LGBTI politics throughout Europe from various perspectives and disciplines, encompassing the social and behavioural sciences, the humanities and the law.



'We take care of each other worldwide, because we face the same things'

HOMOMONUMENT

Perched next to and jutting out onto the water from the square behind the Westerkerk, the three large pink granite triangles that form the 'Homomonument' have come to represent the visible centre of gay life in the capital. Designed by Karin Daan in 1987, inspired by the pink triangles gay men were forced to wear in WWII concentration camps, the monument symbolises the long road towards gay emancipation in the Netherlands and abroad. It is at this structure that crowds gather on Remembrance Day to commemorate all those who have been persecuted or murdered for their sexual orientation, including those killed by the Nazis, and the victims of the Orlando shooting at Club Pulse. One of the triangles is engraved with a line from a poem by Dutch Jewish gay poet Jacob Israel de Haan: 'Such an endless desire for friendship'.



THE COC

Formed in 1946, in spite of (or perhaps in response to) Nazi occupiers repealing the tolerance delivered by the Napoleonic Code in 1811, COC has been advocating for LGBTIQ rights (the less familiar I and Q standing for 'intersex' and 'questioning') and pushing for the decriminalisation of sexual orientation in the Netherlands and around the world. They support coalitions between straight and LGBT people to ignite change from within communities and unite against ignorance, discrimination and intolerance.

COC is particularly prominent in the field of education; their volunteers give a total of 1,500 annual talks in schools across the country in an effort to improve acceptance and reduce stigma. Their Gay & Lesbian Switchboard (reachable by phone, email or chat) offers a free, unbiased and confidential helpline.

www.coc.nl

EUROPRIDE: THE DRAG OLYMPICS

On 5 August, the Homomonument will also be the stage for the Drag Olympics, the uproarious sporting extravaganza that includes such athletic competitions as the Handbag Toss, the Stiletto Sprint, Bitch Volley-Ball, a Tango dance-off and a Hula Hoop contest. Competitors flock from all over the world with their fabulous wigs and attires, hoping to take the gold medal home – and to have their name become the year's 'Olympic burger' on famous gay hotspot Get-to's menu. Performances by the crème de la crème of the Dutch drag world complete the event, which begins with the ceremonial lighting of the Olympic flame by Miss Jennifer Hopelezz. If you ask us, these sports should unquestionably be added to the real Olympics.

www.dragqueenolympics.nl



ERWIN OLAF: FIGHTING FIRE WITH KISSES

Olaf is best known around the world for his 'shock photography' of emotional intimacy and, yes, nudity. So nobody flinches when he offers his perspective on Orlando, the day after a 29-year-old man turned a gay nightclub into a hell-scape of death and destruction: 'Listen, if you're having good sex and have a nice social life, you never think of walking into a nightclub and emptying a magazine on a bunch of people. You don't worry yourself with other people's sex lives.'

He's grateful for being born Dutch, noting that 'there are few countries where, as a gay man, the law is so much on your side', but he laments that things have changed here, too, since Amsterdam's wild '90s. 'There are cultural clashes between progressive groups and others who think it's all moving a little too fast.' These days, boyfriends linking arms on the Kinkerstraat can lead to harassment from teens on scooters. A few years ago, Olaf himself was asked by a snack bar on the Hugo de Grootplein to take his cuddling with his boyfriend elsewhere. Two days later, a hundred protestors filled the sidewalk in front of that snack bar with same-sex make-out sessions. Olaf shrugs, 'You need to keep conquering the street.' But you won't see him dancing on the EuroPride boats this August. 'I'm someone who would rather watch from the sidelines. I'd rather be the instigator, the voyeur, than take part myself.' A voyeur with a camera, of course.

www.erwinolaf.com

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 PHOTO: PEGGY KUIPER | CAKE FILM & PHOTOGRAPHY VIA PHENSTER
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 HAIR/MAKE-UP: YOKAW PAT | ANGELIQUE HOORN MANAGEMENT
 (SWEATER H&M, CAMEL COAT-FILIPPA K)