

Party On – Dutch Style!

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By Roger Wheeler

Roger Wheeler attends a party fit for a Queen



The Dutch love their Royal Family possibly more than we love our own. Every year since 1948 they have celebrated their Queen's official birthday on April 30 (or April 29 if it falls on a Sunday) with parties all over the country. It was always known as *Koninginnedag* (*Queen's Day*) and Amsterdam always went slightly crazy, with parties on every canal and in every street. This year **Queen Beatrix** announced that she was going to abdicate in favour of her extremely handsome 46-year-old son **Willem-Alexander**. This was the signal for the biggest party they have ever staged and although we go to Amsterdam every year this was something we were not going to miss!

This endearing if slightly crazed Dutch national holiday marks the birthday of **Beatrix's** mother, **Juliana**, and **Beatrix** chose to celebrate her birthday on the same date. From next year it will be known as King's Day which will be celebrated on April 27, although next year that falls on a Sunday so it will be celebrated on April 26. It is the only day in the year when the Dutch are allowed to sell whatever they like, wherever they like, which essentially means the country becomes one giant street market. That one of world's greatest mercantile nations should choose to celebrate its monarch's birthday by staging a national car boot sale is, somehow, pleasing.

We watched most of it on television; the abdication ceremony itself was very moving, a mother handing over to her son. Then it was the swearing in of the new King, and although they don't crown anyone, they do have a rather nice crown, which is not worn, and so it isn't a coronation although to all intents and purposes that's what it is. It took place in a church

but there was no religious ceremony. In the Netherlands, monarchs are not crowned but invested as heads of state.

Most of the European crowned heads were there, dressed for the occasion. We sent **Charles** alongside **Camilla**, who looked fabulous, almost queenly.



King Willem & Maxima

The new King and his stunning Argentinean wife, **Maxima**, looked every bit the part. The entire country has fallen in love with her, she is regal glamour personified. They have three very young children, all girls, who headed all the formal processions: very touching.

The Royal Family in the Netherlands are related to just about every other monarch in Europe. Through his seven times great-grandfather **Jan Willem Friso**, Prince of Orange, **King Willem-Alexander** is a cousin of **Margrethe II** of Denmark, **Albert II** of the Belgians, the Grand-Duke of Luxembourg, **Harald V** of Norway, **Juan-Carlos** of Spain, **Albert II** of Monaco, and our own **Queen Elizabeth II** making him 889th in line to the British throne, meaning **Charles** and **William** don't have to worry.



Roger and partner Mike

And so after all the formal stuff came the party, and wow what a party. They say about a million people were in the city that day wearing orange as it's the national colour and the Royal Family's name is **Orange-Nassau**. Literally every street had a market and a band and, of course, a bar. We had never experienced anything like it with thousands of people simply enjoying themselves. There were quite a few happy drunks but no problems, no unpleasantness, no republican riots, no fights.

Most people were wearing orange crowns, hats, all sorts of fancy dress or had their faces painted, orange of course. It was just lots of orange joy. There was a huge, mainly free, open air concert on the Museumplein, with approximately 70,000 people watching the show directed and hosted by **Andre Rieu**, the world famous Dutch violinist.

There are plenty of museums and art galleries, and this year was the re-opening of Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum after a ten-year renovation. It's the star in the city's crown but just a glance at the huge queues made us think about visiting in a few years time.

The gay scene is as busy as always. Nowadays we favour the Barderij on Zeedijk, a typical Dutch gay bar with a very mixed, friendly crowd. Opposite is the De Engel Van Amsterdam which attracts a slightly older clientele, but the venues are very close and the evening crowds tend to merge. Don't rely on the internet for up to date information on gay venues, simply go into one of the VVV tourist offices where they all speak English and are always very helpful. The main VVV office is opposite central station

Eating in Amsterdam isn't a problem as there are hundreds of good restaurants. In the centre of the city there is a strong emphasis on oriental cuisine, but for traditional Dutch and excellent international food in an old fashioned setting De Haven van Texel is very hard to

beat. It is right behind the Barderij on Sint Olofsteeg and it shares the same views as the two oldest canals in Amsterdam.

Amsterdam never fails to charm and excite. Don't forget to book early for the first King's Day on April 26, 2014. It will be a ball!