

AMSTERDAM PRIDE

Roger Wheeler visits one of Europe's biggest gay prides



Brighton Pride seemed to live up to all expectations this year but what about the other big gay festivals? Gay Pride in Amsterdam is probably the biggest in Europe. So we went and it rained – hard – but it didn't ruin the parade though of course we got very wet.

It helps, of course, that it takes place on the city's canals which were recently granted Unesco World Heritage Status.

The 80 floats and they really do float, took about two hours to pass the estimated 380,000 people on the canal side. The total investment in Gay Pride is estimated at €2m with €200,000 being given by the City of Amsterdam. They know know the value of this event and officials say that it is worth about €30m in total revenue.

It also raises funds by being heavily supported by commercial sponsorships including the railways, post office, trades unions etc. All their gay staff organise the floats and the companies pay.

This year the theme was **Celebrate** and that we did! Many of the boats had rotating mirror balls, hundreds of pink balloons, smoke machines and long pink feather boas. On the boats were hundreds of reasonably under-dressed boys and girls.

No expense is spared! The floats are fabulous and the costumes quite amazing. There was even a Jewish boat with its occupants wearing pink Kippahs, their slogan was *'We're Jewish and Gay, we are twice blessed'*.



This is the **15th Gay Pride** in Amsterdam and is without a doubt very professionally organised by the local gay rights organisation **COC**.

The entire city takes part and there is very little trouble. You could say it's just one huge party.

There were quite a lot of politically themed floats; one even had members of the European parliament. Of course all the usual suspects were there with Gaydar, the HIV/AIDS Foundation, and an 'Escort' service featuring some of their star staff members not wearing very much.



One of the boats featured dancing African warriors, which drew attention to the plight of homosexuals in countries where it remains illegal. In Sudan, you can be executed if you are gay. In Malawi, you can be jailed for 15 years, there are in fact 37 countries in Africa where homosexuality is illegal. Compare that to The Netherlands; they were the first to legalise gay marriage in 2001, nearly 200 years after they decriminalised homosexuality.

It is a country for grown ups. Thankfully, the health and safety police haven't arrived yet and so they have a very relaxed attitude towards unnecessary rules and regulations. People are treated as adults and so are allowed to have fun and build a great atmosphere.

All the main squares in the centre of the city hold parties with some top name Dutch artists; these go on for most of the weekend ending at about 6pm on Sunday. But everything is cleared and swept away within a very few hours and on Monday morning you would hardly know anything had happened, apart from a few pink balloons and one or two hangovers.

We arrived late the day before so we checked into **Citizen M**, which is a 'hotel of the future' next to the airport.

Built in modules, constructed off-site and bolted together like Lego and ready to go. Everything is completely computerised, from check-in, to the lights, blinds, multi-media tv, air conditioning in the room. I hesitate to call these 'pods' rooms as they have a distinct identity crisis. Everything including the bed, shower, toilet, table and chair all occupy a



HOTEL CITIZEN M

space of about 2.5m x 5.5m, and there are no dividing walls – all curved sliding glass (even the toilet, although the glass is frosted) It is a triumph of design over practicality. But it all works, everything is controlled by a remote – called the 'mood pod' which takes a while to work out. A degree in IT would help but once you've raised and lowered the blinds while trying to turn on the multi channel tv you'll be an expert.

The bed takes up about a third of the space and was wonderfully comfy.

Citizen M is the first of a small chain of Dutch owned concept hotels and at the lowest online advance price of €69 per room is very good value, although one night is really all you would ever want to stay.

We moved on to our favourite Amsterdam hideaway, **The Bridge Hotel**. There are many canals in Amsterdam but **The Amstel** is the only river. Our hotel was right on the river and only about five minutes walk from the centre of the city. We've stayed there many times over the years and always go back. It is not exactly luxurious, has three stars, only does B&B but that it is so friendly and welcoming you can't go wrong. We also discovered one of the best restaurants, **De Kas**, which was an amazing experience, more later.

info

www.amsterdamgaypride.nl

www.citizenm.com

www.restaurantdekas.nl

www.thebridgehotel.nl