



First Impressions!

The Dutch and I get along awesomely on these two for sure:

1. Being absolutely direct in speaking
2. Being absolutely nude while swimming

I had heard about the Dutch directness numerous times. It had preceded my actual visit to the country, as I had met with many Dutch girls in hostels elsewhere. They had shared a hilarious meme that talked of the UK vs. Dutch interpretations, of which I will add a few here...

What the British say	What the British mean	What the Dutch understand
Oh, by the way...	This is the primary purpose of the discussion	This is not very important
I'll bear it in mind	I won't do anything about it	They will use it when appropriate
Perhaps you could give this more thought?	It is a bad idea	It is a good idea, keep developing it
It is all my fault	It is all your fault	It is their fault

As I interacted with folks in the Netherlands, it was so very evident. The Dutch way is kind, but direct. My way! While Americans are direct as well, the Dutch are also direct with negative statements—polite, but to the point. A Turkish expat girl explained to me that here, people can absolutely come into a

meeting, directly ask if anyone has anything to say, and if not, adjourn the meeting within two minutes! No feelings hurt. To which an UK expat girl chimed in and exclaimed that she would not like it any other way, and most definitely not the British way! I said I loved direct styles as well, and all in bullet points please!

An excellent book by Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map*, shares many more examples of cultural styles and interpretations, and I realized that despite being a global executive for more than twenty years of my career, there are yet many nuances that I have not learned.

And as for the Dutch love for swimming in the nude, ahem, I didn't have to go far to find it. There was one beach right on the lake by my host's house. I saw it on my first day of jogging.

The lake was invitingly divine, and I knew that I definitely needed to feel that water on my skin, and if possible, on all of it. I had always reveled in all skin sensations—the showers, the wind, the soft cotton clothes; I loved going around in minimum clothes now that I was in countries outside India.

This would be my first time being nude in public, but it was surprisingly so easy. I just avoided looking at all the misshapen bodies lying comatose, sunning themselves like beached whales, and marched straight to the water's edge, peeled out of my clothes and waded in. Aaah. The cool, silky-smooth water. The deep green depths. The freedom from tight clothing. The sunshine on all of my body. Heaven.



As I got back out of the water, some eyes did look up, but a lot absolutely did not care. I think I would really enjoy adding this kind of swimming to my routine!

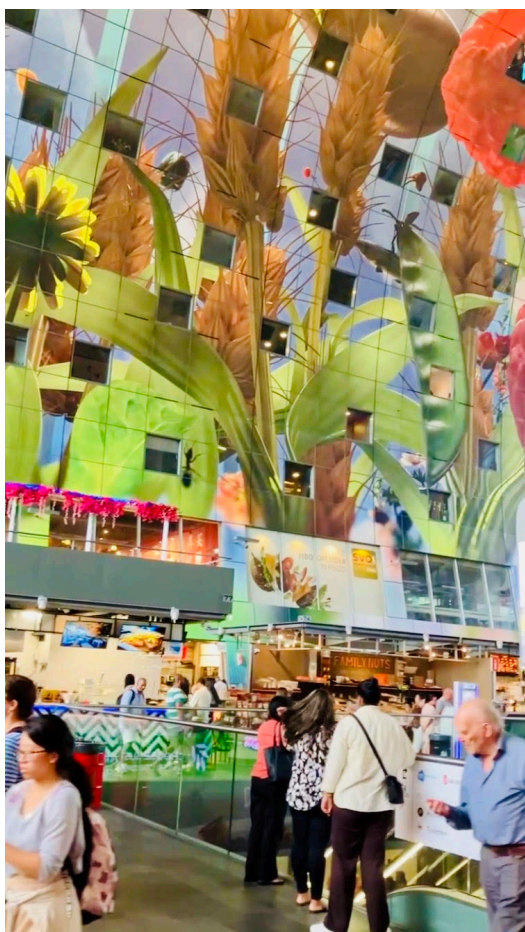
The Great Marijuana Healing Experiment!

I always had a funny feeling there was an important reason I was here, in Helga's house, I just needed to find it. Coincidentally, on the day I discovered the weed stores, that very evening Helga mentioned that she grew marijuana plants on her balcony and made oils from them. I knew then what had brought me here and what I had to try next. Marijuana and then mushrooms to reset the brain!



Alas, the great marijuana experiment was a scary disaster! I took two drops close to bedtime and when nothing happened for three hours, we decided that I should just sleep it off. But then of course it decided to hit me right in my deepest part of sleep and at three a.m. I woke up feeling hot and dizzy and with strange skin sensations and lights in my eyes! I could barely think of one rationale thought and I made it be about drinking water, only I don't know how next I found myself lying on the cold kitchen tiles, yet not having drunk any water, and then again and again, getting up and flopping down, my poor rational brain not able to push through this one thought of drinking water. It was scary. Eventually I drank three glasses and when I stumbled back to a couch, suddenly I felt waves of beautiful feelings and colors float over me and I remember thinking, *This must be the good part* before falling dead. I woke up at eight a.m. the next day with a body that felt like the flu had passed through it; my healer was much worried and said it must be something to do with my weight as another thin person had a similar reaction.

Anyways, no mushrooms for sure; I realized that I love my rational brain a lot!



For my last leg in the Netherlands, I shifted to a hostel in Rotterdam.

Rotterdam is cool. Rotterdam feels like it has a personality. Buildings with funky, wacky designs. Even mundane buildings like hospitals, parking lots, supermarkets and stations are caught up in the architecture euphoria. Colors abound. Shapes are juxtaposed in a medley, squares clashing with triangles and arcs.

A stunning indoor market, Markthal, has a kaleidoscope of gigantic flowers and leaves adorning the soaring walls above the stalls. Mesmerizing.

By this time, I was a pro at staying in hostels! Very professionally, I would ask for a lower bed, check if it had a

charging plug and towels, find the lockers, and slid my luggage in. I also learnt to overcome my shyness and start using the shared kitchen, which saved some costs. Not yet tackled mixed dorms, though, and probably will never.

So many wonderful people I have met in the hostels, so many lovely stories, so many new friends. Girls were backpacking around Europe, having bought the cheap \$200 Euro rail pass, zipping across cities, staying no more than two to three days in each.

A question I had before starting this adventure was whether I would be lonely as a solo traveler, and an older traveler as well—usually at my age, people are in couples. And then specifically whether in hostels I would be able to connect with the other younger girls. Well, it had been a series of beautiful connections. We talked, hiked, traveled, danced together, I never felt alone.

One fine slightly drizzling day, I rented a bike and biked twenty kilometers to Delft. Delft is the home of



the artist Vermeer, one of the few artists I have followed. I had hoped to see some of his work in Amsterdam, but disappointingly all tickets to the Rijksmuseum were sold out for the entire month! I was also hoping to see some of Van Gogh’s work at the same museum (an interesting tidbit: Van Gogh is not pronounced “Van Go”; it is actually pronounced something closer to “Fun Khokh”, of course, in the guttural way of the Dutch language), another nature

painter I appreciated, but missed that too.

And so I had to pay homage to the birthplace at least. The bike ride to Delft was beautiful. I chanced upon a path that went all the way parallel to the Schie canal. Biked by the gorgeous Delft university campus, with its meandering paths and waterways and low, tree-lined academic buildings. Without the students, it would not look like a university at all. Clicked a picture of an interesting department, “Mechanical, Maritime_and Materials Engineering” and sent it to my son—only in the Netherlands would there be an equal focus on Maritime Engineering!

Delft is a beautiful town. The city center with its historical facades and canals reflected a rich history like in many European towns, but here it was graced everywhere by the abundance of Delft Blue everywhere. This traditional ceramic which is recognizable for its deep blue color, originated here in this city - *delf* means a a man-made watercourse we now call a canal.

Alas, there were no original Vermeer paintings here. In fact, there were more of his paintings at the NYC MET! But I was able to see full-size reproductions of all thirty-seven of Vermeer’s paintings and spent many deeply satisfying hours there. I enjoyed not just how he captured light, but also how he captured the minute details. Why is an intricate rug with elaborate brocade always thrown crumpled on the table?

Why is there a painting within a painting? Why do painters challenge themselves thus?

Something can happen to the soul if you can really see. If you can take the time to pause and see. The great design in the petals of a flower or leaves or the clouds, the intricacies of the flourishes in the motifs on the buildings, the weaves in a piece of tapestry, the smooth pottery...

There are different ways to see. My friend, Kenneth, and I had talked about it once. He loved to understand completely everything he saw - not just the names and



details, but also everything that gave it context - its history, its geography. My sister, who is another lover of nature, also takes the time to research and learn every detail about every plant or animal — why the robin cocks his head to listen to the ground, what the name is of the funny animal we saw crossing our path, what is the perfect time of the year to plant cucumbers.

For some reason, I do not feel the urge to ask questions, neither do I remember much information. I feel like I should, but I mostly stand there contemplating the pattern of it, in awe, savoring the beauty of it. Later, I might kick myself for not making more effort. Specially with birds. I would love to learn the names of birds.

One of my favorite books is by the naturalist writer John Burroughs, aptly titled, *The Art of Seeing Things*. He writes,

“The art of seeing things is not something that may be conveyed in rules and precepts; it is a matter vital in the eye and ear, yea, in the mind and soul, of which these are the organs.”

So much to see and appreciate in this Universe.