Amsterdam! My Arrival, and First Impressions

Hello everyone! It’s your pal Ruben here, your friendly Semester in Amsterdam blogger, and in this blog I plan on telling you all about my first few weeks in my new favorite city, Amsterdam! To get everyone relaxed and ready for my latest blog entry I thought I’d share a good old-fashioned Dad Joke with you all. It’s a good one, trust me ;)

(Clearing throat noises: “AHEM AHEM”)

I can’t believe that it has been 4 whole weeks since I flew to Amsterdam!

(Pause for dramatic effect)

And oh boy! My arms are still tired!

(Cue Laughter)

I know I know. You don’t have to say it. I know that I’m hilarious ;)

As I wait for you all to regain your composure after my incredible joke, I would like to take a moment and give a personal shout out to Kelly, Ilin, and Jan from the Semester in Amsterdam
Team. First off, they have been extremely welcoming and helpful in getting us all settled and prepared for life in Amsterdam. Also, they created an exciting and informative 2-week introductory period for all of the Semester in Amsterdam students to enjoy. We laughed, we cried (from laughter of course), and it allowed us to become more comfortable in our new home away from home. As an added bonus, we grew closer together as a group and formed new friendships with one another. So on behalf of myself and the rest of the Semester in Amsterdam students, thank you very much for an amazing two weeks! It was a blast! ;)

Now then! I have been to Amsterdam several times during my life but I never had the opportunity to thoroughly explore the city. So the fact that I have 6 months in this European playground made me shake with anticipation.

You’ve heard me say that the first few weeks in Amsterdam were amazing right? It is almost hard to put into words how wonderful this place truly is. I mean how could it not be? This is Amsterdam after all! An extraordinary city with a rich history, countless diverse cultures, and delicious stroop waffles being sold on every corner! Anything that your mind can imagine, you can do here in Amsterdam. It doesn’t get much better than this!

Due to the amazing introductory weeks set up by the Semester in Amsterdam Team, I was able to experience an amazing amount of Amsterdam. It would be difficult to list everything that I did in this short blog, but I will do my best. In order to better help you understand what I experienced I am going to categorize my first few weeks in Amsterdam into 3 distinct categories.

And the categories are!!!!

1.) Vegetables! AKA The “Boring” Stuff (But VERY Important!)

2.) The Entrée! AKA The Interesting Stuff (So interesting in fact that my brain still hurts!)

3.) Dessert! AKA The Super Amazing Happy Fun Time Stuff (This one is self-explanatory)

I know that you are all itching for me to get to the Super Amazing Happy Fun Times Stuff. I’m even willing to bet that many of you are nerds and may be intrigued by the Interesting Stuff I did. But like my Momma always used to tell me when I was a young lad, “Eat your vegetables, little Ruben, or you won’t get your dessert!” So in that spirit we’ll work through our vegetables (aka the “Boring” Stuff), move on to our Entrée (The Interesting Stuff), and finish strong with some delicious dessert (The Super Amazing Happy Fun Stuff! YAY!).

So plug your nose and open up wide!
A real life 747 airplane in fact. That carried me all the way from Canada, to Amsterdam. When I arrived in Amsterdam, on August 18th, I was very eager to get out there and explore my new city. However, in order to get settled in, there were many practical matters that first needed attending to.

First, I moved into my new home, De Boelelaan Student Housing, located in Amsterdam’s Business District. My housing is also located right next to the Vrije Universiteit and the Amsterdam Zuid train station for added convenience. Furthermore, myself and the other Semester in Amsterdam students set up our Dutch bank accounts, registered with the Amsterdam’s municipality, picked up our bicycles, and applied for health insurance.

Are you still with me? We’re almost there I promise!

We were then gathered into VU’s large auditorium, along with countless other exchange students, for VU’s Welcoming Address. It was a great event with many speakers. VU’s takeaway message was that “here at the VU you can be anything you choose to be.” As the last VU representative delivered their closing speech, we were then set free to go on our way and start exploring Amsterdam.
And just like that we finished our vegetables! Now on to the entrée!

Thanks to the Semester in Amsterdam Team, who organized walking tours, bike tours, canal tours, and museum trips, I was able to get more familiar with my new city. We took a trip to the Amsterdam Museum where we got to learn more about the fascinating history of Amsterdam from its origins to the present day. We explored the dark neon lit alleyways of the Red Light district, as well as the bars of Rembrandtsplein and Leidseplein. We navigated the wild waters of the canals of Amsterdam where we got to see the breathtaking and diverse architecture the city had to offer. Then, lastly, we partook in a scavenger hunt that led us the through the streets of Amsterdam Zuid, through the diverse neighborhood of De Pijp, the hectic Albert Cuyp Marketplace, and ending at the thirst quenching Heineken Experience.
What has stuck with me the most during our various tours was how diverse and unique everything was. From the buildings, the various assorted businesses, the large amounts of cyclists on the roads, to the diversity of its inhabitants. It was one of those times when I was delighted to have my senses overwhelmed with such rich and interesting information.
OK! Here we are finally! Let’s have some dessert shall we?

Perhaps the most exciting items on our itinerary were the social trips organized by the Semester in Amsterdam Team. We were treated to the Heineken Experience where we got a tour of the old Heineken brewery and had beers on a rooftop patio where we could also drink in the view of Amsterdam. Next, we were taken to the Efteling amusement park, a fairy tale themed park located in Kaatsheuvel, Noord Brabant Province. Fun Fact: Efteling was first opened in 1952, making it one of the oldest amusement parks in the world!

Lastly, we were taken to the Northern Dutch province of Friesland where we stayed in the beautiful village of Grou. There we explored our surroundings through Grous’ old cobble stone streets. We also paddled along the Grous’ canal on an EXTREMELY windy day (Kelly, Ilin, and Jan bought us hot chocolate with Baileys afterwards to make up for it. Thanks Guys!). Lastly, we got to enjoy the Grou Carnival where my new friend Amber from Minnesota won me a small soccer ball from the claw machine! I was touched :)

(Photo: Heineken Experience)
While riding on roller coasters and travelling through the Netherlands is extremely exciting, for me one of the best things about my first few weeks in Amsterdam was meeting the other students from the Semester in Amsterdam program. There are 83 of us in total and we come from 18 different countries.
For example, my amazing new flat mates Allie, Zoe, and Will, from the United States, as well as Taashi from India. We immediately connected over our love of drinking too much beer and wine, and sharing embarrassing stories about each other. The hangover the next morning was worth it ;)

In closing, the past few weeks were certainly a superb experience. I was able to meet new and interesting people, visit new and exciting places, and make many great new memories. And it’s only been 4 weeks! School is now officially started and we are all hard at work, but I will definitely treasure my experience of my first month in Amsterdam.

Thanks for reading everybody! I hope that you found this blog to be both delicious and nutritious!

Tot de volgende keer! (Until Next Time!)

P.S. Big thanks to my friend Kei! He is the Semester in Amsterdam Photographer who took these amazing photographs!

(Photo: The Semester In Amsterdam Students outside of the Efteling park entrance)