

Councillor Jim Orr blogs on his Dutch cycling trip

✘ by Councillor Jim Orr, Vice Convener of Transport and Environment

Hello to everybody reading this blog!! As the cycling spokesperson for Edinburgh City Council, I'm delighted to be reporting via The Edinburgh Reporter on my cycling study visit to the Netherlands.

Many thanks to The Edinburgh Reporter for the opportunity, and the Dutch Government who are hosting us till Wednesday. This visit follows the "Love Cycling, Go Dutch" conferences across the UK last year and I'm one of 15 or so representatives from across the UK, of whom more later no doubt. The objective is to learn about the successes of Dutch cycling policies in order to increase cycling rates back home. In Edinburgh our main target is 15% of journeys to work by bike by 2020 and, Scotland-wide, the Scottish Government have set out a shared vision of 10% of all journeys to be by bike by 2020.

We'll be based in Amsterdam but are scheduled to travel widely and my first impression over the last day or so is to liken Amsterdam transportation to a sort of curious "ecosystem" where different species of vehicle get along harmoniously with each other. The following are some examples:-

Trams and bikes get along well with the cyclists having long since adapted to need to always cross the tram lines at an angle, and keep well out of the way of the trams themselves. The tram drivers know this but are patient anyway. This augurs well for the fast-approaching introduction of trams to Edinburgh's streets.

Unlike in Scotland, where cyclists interact mainly with cars

and buses, here they interact at least as much with pedestrians as most of cycling is done on lanes adjacent to the pavement or in various sorts of shared spaces or indeed in parks like the Vondelpark near our hotel which has routes like cycling superhighways going through it at rush hour. Amsterdam pedestrians, cyclists and even their bikes have also adapted to this ecosystem. Since it's so safe almost no cyclists wear helmets (or high visibility gear) and the bikes are mainly single gear machines that can be left in the rain without too much concern.

The simple bikes mean that cycling is done at a fairly leisurely pace that everyone is comfortable with, which reduces the likelihood and impact of accidents. Theft is not big business and so not a big concern. Bells are mandatory and well used. Amsterdam is a very walkable city, but if anything, pedestrians could do with a little more space. If for any reason you can't cycle then space can be limited and progress slow.



Author and bike nut Pete Jordan in front of the central station bike park

Car drivers in Amsterdam know they have to give way to cyclists and pedestrians in most situations, and this is accepted. They've also adapted to significant restrictions in residential parking. I learned a lot from a American resident called Pete Jordan (author of "City of Bikes: The History of the Amsterdam Cyclist") who gave me a tour of the city centre. He said that whenever a multi-storey parking block opens in Amsterdam, that an equivalent number of on-street parking spaces are removed. Parking on cycle lanes (and which is permitted at certain times) is a hot topic in Edinburgh and something we're looking for solutions to.

One increasing common transport species is the motor scooter, and these are generally permitted to share safe lanes with the cyclists. However, they're a little fast and I suspect that the ecosystem will have to adapt again and either slow them down or put them among the cars.



The famous Dutch roundabout shows this ecosystem at its best with cars giving way to pedestrians and cyclists, and everybody giving way to trams. As well as being practical, it's also visually attractive. But these facilities are expensive and the Netherlands didn't get them overnight – they took generations of investment.



Pete took me to Amsterdam's equivalent of Mulders Walk, where fancy shops like Chanel, Tommy Hilfiger and Jimmy Choo all have cycle racks with scruffy bikes outside them. And there seems to be little doubt that some of the busiest semi-residential shopping streets have loads of cyclists, cycling parking and restrictions on car parking.



'Scruffy Bikes'

Generally these are successful because, rather than travelling through them, cars are diverted elsewhere, for example on the internal U-shaped ring road. So this indicates that sensible car parking restrictions, and careful routing of car traffic, combined with the promotion of cycling and walking, can and does boost local retail economies.

Part of the trick seems to be to create people-friendly spaces. This is already Scottish Government policy (see for example the "designing streets" guidance) but putting it into practice is a real challenge, especially when money is tight.



Ali G would definitely get to his favourite shop by bike if he was from the Netherlands

At the end of my tour, Peter took me to the central train station which has a wonderful completely free parking facility

with (I think) space for around 10,000 bikes. There is also a tunnel under construction under the railway so that cyclists getting to the north of the city and the ferrys won't have to cycle miles round the station any more – see photo with Pete Jordan, also in grey hoodie and cap at the cycle parking building.

All in all, a very interesting introduction to cycling policy in the Netherlands. Safe, quiet streets with thriving retail economies, and the famous Dutch tolerance always being extended to other species in their ever-evolving transport eco-system.

