



*Guest Column:* When we arrived in Amsterdam, our must-see sites included a boat ride through the canals and enjoying local food and beers. Also Reichmuseum, Van Gogh Museum, Anne Frank house and the Red Light District.

In De Wallen neighborhood, at the end of a long row of indoor-outdoor restaurants, the Red Light District is a very popular tourist destination. As you walk along the street, you see that the centuries-old buildings have large first-floor windows that are set out several feet, with glass on three sides. They are well lit, and on busy evenings, ladies sit, stand individually and in groups, gesturing and gyrating to passersby.

There are many male customers on busy evenings, but they aren't the only ones on the street. There are also hundreds of tourists, including couples and tour groups, and parents escorting giggling children.

Although I was with my wife, I could hear and see gestures of specific invitations for me to enter houses. One said in perfect English, "Hey, there, big, strong American man ... I promise to be quick, and your wife could wait for you in the parlor and have a cup of tea." We declined politely and were on our way, puzzling about how she knew we were Americans.

Before the tourists began visiting in the 19th and 20th Century, the houses made their money from sailors. After many months at sea, thousands of men swarmed ashore to drink and spend their money on prostitutes. As they still do today, they worked in individual upstairs rooms.

For tourists who come from countries with more restrictive sex laws, whatever their personal opinions, it's obvious that the Netherlands government has a very liberal attitude. Not only about sex, but also for marijuana and other drugs. Taxes on prostitution are high, and licenses are required, along with periodic medical examinations and certification.

There are always about a thousand prostitutes working in the Amsterdam Red Light district. Many are married and have children, and because the income can be high, they continue their careers for decades.

There is a very strong national union of prostitutes and pimps, calling themselves sex workers. Because most do their business in that one protected city location, they're not exposed to many of the dangers faced by streetwalkers and call girls in other parts of the world.