

# BANNING AIRBNB AS A FIRST STEP: AMSTERDAM NO LONGER WANTS TO BE AN AMUSEMENT PARK



Walking through the historic center of Amsterdam during the worst months of the coronavirus pandemic was like visiting a ghost town. Surprisingly, the city wasn't even on a lockdown. The COVID-19 showed that the Dutch do not dare to live in the center of Amsterdam, where most of the houses have become tourist apartments and the usual crowd is made up of foreigners. Now, the city hall wants the pandemic to be the end of mass tourism. Banning Airbnb in three downtown districts is just the first step of an ambitious plan to restructure the area, with fewer souvenirs and parties and less prostitution.

The Dutch capital, where 10% of jobs (about 70,000 people) depend directly on tourism, welcomes around 55,000 visitors a day. **Since mid-March, the tourism industry has reported losses of up to 90% and the hotel occupancy rate has decreased from 81% in March 2019 to 41.2% in the same month of 2020.** The city hall estimates that tourist tax revenue will take a plunge, reducing by 98 million euros this year due to the disappearance of mass tourism. For Amsterdam, a scenario without visitors is simply not possible, so the plan involves coexistence between tourists and citizens. For this, it is necessary to reduce the former and repopulate with the latter, which has been the main discussion in other European tourist hubs, from Prague to Venice and Barcelona.

Femke Halsema, Mayor of Amsterdam, has warned that the city will be "extremely cautious" with the revival of tourism. The city has asked the central government for preventive tools, as some kind of "emergency powers", to be able to shut down accommodation and premises and limit hospitality capacity with the aim of stopping the flow of visitors at any given time, if necessary. The most important measure is the possibility of limiting the availability of overnight accommodations (such as rentals, bed and breakfasts, hostels and hotels) through COVID-19 emergency powers if the public health is in jeopardy.

The city hall already charges three euros per person and night in tourist tax, one of the highest in Europe, to which must be added 7% per room in hotel tax, or eight euros per person for cruise passengers. It has banned guided tours through the Red Light District, stopped licensing new stores that only offer souvenirs, tulip seeds, Belgian waffles and packaged cheese since these do not consider residents' needs. Starting this month, holiday rentals, including Airbnb accommodations, are completely banned in three districts of the capital's historic center, including brothels and sex shops. In the remaining 96 districts, tourists can only rent accommodations for 30 days a year, and with prior authorization from the city council, for which they have to pay 45 euros. Violation of the rule carries a 20,750 euros fine, as it is considered illegal to rent a house without official approval.

The plans include "strict and far-reach" plans. For now, it will start by using existing resources to buy properties in the city with the help of real estate organizations looking to improve the capital. As the owner of these buildings, the city will be able to decide which businesses can occupy them. It also seeks to change the laws to reduce the sale of alcohol in 24-hour stores, which ended up becoming the norm in authentic liquor stores.

Ms. Halsema proposes that shops, bars and restaurants primarily serve the local population, allowing mass tourism and its consequences to no longer overtake the urban landscape. Alongside the new rules are also campaigns, such as the one from the Dutch tourism board NBTC, which promotes tourism outside of Amsterdam and urges tourists to visit other places in the Netherlands.

According to the locals, Amsterdam only has two options: Return to the situation where the city center is mainly for tourists, or focus on a city with a diverse neighborhood economy, where residents are the center and tourists visit a lively city, not an amusement park. Only a combination of tourism and the livability of the city will restore balance, making residents feel at home and tourists welcomed, with a diversity of shops and a center serving as a meeting place for everyone.

**The city welcomed 19 million travelers in 2019, a figure that was expected to increase 50% by 2030, with 4% this year alone, but it remains to be seen given the limitations caused by the pandemic.** Tourists account for more than 6 billion euros in revenue for the city.

The neighborhood plan is to limit tourism to 12 million people a year in the next five years, the same number of overnight stays registered in 2014 when tourism was still manageable. To achieve this, the locals demand a partial or total ban on holiday rentals, a halt on licenses for new hotels or rooms in existing hotels, reallocation of building spaces for value-added themes for Amsterdam residents, and raising the tourist tax every six months.

\*\*\* facebook video \*\*\*

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