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Amsterdam

Sex, shoes and hot dogs — all at the big daddy of rummage sales



photos by MICKY JONES

The international language of barter continues at Amsterdam's giant flea market, which includes tables of china, crystal and knick-knacks.

IF YOU LIKE garage sales, you will enjoy the biggest rummage sale of them all: the flea market at Amsterdam. The slogan of this Dutch city is "Surprising Amsterdam," and some of the things you see will surprise even the chamber of commerce.

A Dutch housewife paws through a pile of shoes for a mate to the red one she holds in her hand. Across the square, a young American buys a fur coat to warm him through the winter. At the pornography stalls, a well-dressed businessman stares at four-color magazine pictures.

There are tables of brass and copper and china, piles of clothes on the cold concrete, a Dutch version of a hot dog stand, and a film-flam man who gives away watches for a quarter of a dollar, or whatever handful of coins that makes in Dutch money.

The goods come in on motorized carts, each sack holding somebody's life. "They" say that every man could write a novel out of his own life, and there it is in a sack opened before a greedy and curious crowd: the pair of baby's shoes, the child's painting, the box of silver spoons and 50 years of ancient clothes.

WHEN A bargainer finds a real prize, bystanders know what to understand the language to know what is going on. Her voice offers, the seller's voice rises, she shouts back in disbelief, and so the international language of barter goes on.

The participants in this drama are working people, women with shopping baskets, young men with long hair and beards, old men in old hats.

A toothless old man with a few things on the ground speaks to me in Dutch and soon we are deep in what might be called conversation about unemployment, the war and the good life.



Iris Jones
contributing
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Mostly we talk with our hands and our feet, but I know a few words of German and he knows a few words of English, so we manage to communicate. When I am ready to move on, he struggles to leave me with a compliment: "You nice lady, you go nice trip airplane. You come back."

I repay him with the only Dutch word I have learned in my brief stay. It sounds like *dankuwel*, and I hope that's what it means.

THERE IS no such conversation at the sex stalls where a few young couples join a silent huddle of dark business suits standing with a rigid casualness before magazine covers showing such exciting things as women being whipped with chains. These shops can be found all over Amsterdam, although there are always more lookers than buyers.

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A smiling fat lady and a harried-looking man sell rolls filled with chicken or fish at a trailer, and when she sees me watching the food hungrily, she waves a roll under my nose.

She understands my "was ist" but she cannot reply in anything but Dutch

so she makes signs to help me understand and we decide on what sounds like "broodje gehakt." It is a hot dog bun with tiny shrimps smothered in pepper and mayonnaise. It is delicious.

AS WE EAT, I see the film-flam man setting up his table in the only cleared space left in that acre of concrete, near the rack where young travelers buy fur coats for the winter.

The table is up in one motion, the stacked trays come out of a suitcase like magic and the people gather one by one to hear his chatter.

They smile in disbelief because they know he is a con man, but it is fun to be near him so they stay, and sooner or later they buy. I cannot understand the words but the meaning is clear enough.

"Who will buy the first watch of the day for a guilder? Old lady, I love you, come here and let me give you this pin. Don't be shy. See how she blushes. Now isn't she the prettiest lady here? What's that? A boy without a pen in his pocket. A gift, a gift."

By now, the one-by-one have made a crowd pressing forward with a special look on each face: "I know you will cheat us, and naturally I am too smart to be cheated, but... well... maybe it is a good buy just this one time."

I DO NOT buy, except for a very small brooch, because I am in the market looking for something else. Memories I brought them all home as gifts to myself, the Dutch farmer, the broodje maker, the film-flam man.

Even when you talk with your hands and your feet, you can really get to know a city at a flea market.



A housewife paws through a pile of shoes, looking for a mate.

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