

THE AMSTERDAM CANALS

THROUGH THE EYES
OF CRIS TOALA OLIVARES

A **MENDO** initiative
mendo.nl

TERRA

INTRODUCTION

A different story every day

A little over eighty thousand residents. Eight thousand official monuments, largely canal buildings. Around fifteen hundred bridges and more than two hundred canals. Ninety kilometres of quayside. Around forty historic churches, albeit sometimes in use as pop concert hall or design studio. Three ship towers, two sluice gates still in operation and just one palace. Those are the facts. They tell the tale of a world-famous city built on water. A city with more canals than Venice and more bridges than Paris.

What Amsterdam does *not* have are majestic avenues or imposing cathedrals to provide grandeur, nor are there any baroque palaces to show off the splendour of wealthy nobility, as we find in Venice. Amsterdam simply has its canals with their high, restrained merchant houses which are, in fact, barely more than warehouses.

However the facts only tell us part of the story of Amsterdam's canals. What they do not tell is how it feels to live in a draughty seventeenth century canal building. Nor do they say how it is to work on a street which is easier to reach by boat than by car. Or how around eighty thousand people cycle across the canals to work every day, then take a refreshing dip in the water when they get home. What these facts do not tell you at all is how it feels to hear the sound of laughter across the calm water on a balmy summer evening, or to kiss your sweetheart under a wooden bascule bridge. Many volumes have been written about this life on the Amsterdam canals, but still the whole story was yet to be told. Cris Toala Olivares has managed to do so. Perhaps the tale is best told with pictures rather than words, which makes this photographer from Ecuador a born storyteller.

Photography is all about watching for just as long as it takes for a story to unfold before being captured by a single press of the button. For Cris

Toala Olivares this meant endless cycling over the canals. Having a chat. Pressing the button. Waiting a short while for the right light. Pressing the button again. Then returning the next day. On and on until he and his trusty Leica camera almost became a tourist attraction themselves. Thanks to his endless talking and observing, the Amsterdam canals surpass their UNESCO World Heritage status and, through his lens, his photos manage to reduce the historical facts to an intimate story of people. The canals are not simply a static monument but the beating heart of a city where people work, reflect, sleep, dance, laugh and love. A place where people live and have done so for more than seven centuries, although it seems they do so now more than ever.

Of course, it is enlightening to know that in around 1300 Amsterdam was still just a small dyke settlement called *Aemstelledam* with scarcely a thousand inhabitants, although it had a thriving maritime trade. In around 1600, the population had grown to fifty thousand meaning the city was literally bursting at the seams, so in 1613 work was started on the greatest urban development project in the world: the construction of the Canal Belt. The construction of the three semi-circular canals, interconnected by an ingenious system of straight transverse canals, enabled the city to expand to five times its size. Almost sixty

years later, when construction of the Canal Belt was finally completed, work was immediately started on a new urban expansion project with even more canals and bridges, until the construction of the Station Island in the nineteenth century gave the Amsterdam canals their current shape. A city that conquered the water.

Knowing that, the stately merchant's house on the Keizergracht, the crowded red roofs of the Jordaan or the grand Westerkerk, once the highest building in Amsterdam, shine even more in Cris Toala Olivares' photographs. But these historic facts - like the innumerable bridges, canals and alleys - are merely scenery against which people play the leading role. No longer is it the monumental warehouse that is so special, but rather the window cleaner who balances ten metres high up a ladder that leans against its facade - and who has a witty comment ready for every tourist looking for the Anne Frank House. It is not the centuries old brick bridge that calls for our admiration, but the cyclist who fearlessly rides over it through the slippery snow. Even the Westertoren fades into the background against a scant piece of roof that has been ingeniously converted into a shady garden. So we never forget that it is people who make the city; not the other way around.

Toala Olivares' photos seem so carefree; sometimes almost snapshots. But they are testament to

an unfailing insight into the story that needs to be told. Feeling exactly the right moment to press the shutter release follows intuitively. Call it mastery. Pressing the button just as there is a flash of genuine pride in the eyes of a canal building occupant. The amazement in the faces of foreign visitors. Click! The happiness of couples in love on the water and the concentration in the face of the restorer. In this book, they create not only a timeless ode but also a document of our own times, because life on the canals continues to change. The first solar-powered boats have already been launched and the street lamps use LEDs. The latest street fashion is flown in from New York today. The traditional “brown pub” offers wireless internet in addition to jenever. Cris Toala Olivares captures this dynamics of modern life in razor-sharp detail for Amsterdam’s locals and visitors alike, but what remains unaltered are the canals and bridges, the silent witnesses to the theatre performance that is played out time and again: everyday life.

Jeroen Junte

Journalist & historian



**HISTORIC FACTS - LIKE THE
INNUMERABLE BRIDGES, CANALS
AND ALLEYS - ARE MERELY
SCENERY AGAINST WHICH PEOPLE
PLAY THE LEADING ROLE.**

FOREWORD

The photography of Cris Toala Olivares

The idea came from Jeroen Junte, a journalist who frequently writes for the Dutch edition of National Geographic. In 2011, he sent me an email suggesting a feature on the Amsterdam canal belt, to mark the four hundredth anniversary of this extraordinary urban phenomenon, which had also only recently been placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. We discussed the idea at our editorial meeting. There was some hesitation. Hasn't that story already been told so many times? Sure, but what if instead of looking back, we write an article about how it is to live and work in a world heritage site? It wouldn't be a historical story but a journalistic article, written from the present. That was the angle of the story that Jeroen Junte could go along with.

At National Geographic, image is the guiding factor. This kind of angle would put exceptional demands on the photography. Worldwide, the Amsterdam canal belt is among the most photographed subjects in the Netherlands. The cliché of the picturesque bridges, Amsterdammers on bicycles and idyllically lit canals is always lurking, which is the reason we decided to hand the assignment to Cris Toala Olivares. Cris was born in Ecuador in 1982 and has been an Amsterdam-based photographer for several years, working for the press agency Reuters, among others. In my opinion, Cris was the right man for the job because, as a photographer with international experience, he was enough of an outsider to be amazed, but enough of an insider to understand the city inside out.

We have known Cris and his work for some time. In 2009, he won two Zilveren Camera Photography awards for a photograph of a tear gas attack in Gaza and for a portrait of a genocide survivor in Rwanda. One day, he came along to National

Geographic and I was impressed by his work. The first assignment he was given was a photo series for our magazine about farmers in Bolivia who grow peanuts in the traditional way high up in the Andes. The story appeared in the August 2012 issue. Afterwards, Cris said, 'I regarded that shoot as my graduation exam. Only since that photo series, have I really dared to call myself a photographer.'

Cris has enormous drive and tremendous determination. When he has got an idea in his head, he almost always manages to get it done with his friendly perseverance and this is how he set about the shoot about Amsterdam. He rang on people's doorbells to ask if he could take photographs inside their houses, he flew over the city in a helicopter and he even called the mayor for permission to visit one particular location. For a year he pedalled his red bicycle through the city, always on the lookout for something extraordinary to capture on camera.

Amsterdam caught hold of him. When the deadline for the assignment had passed and the



magazine was already at the printer's, he kept on bombarding us with new pictures. You can see how driven he is in his work. Cris doesn't just take nice photos for the sake of it; he wants his photography to convey a message. 'I want to make people aware, I want to show them things that they would otherwise ignore. Regarding the story about the peanut farmers, I wanted to put faces to the lives of these small farmers from the Andes. In my work about Amsterdam, I want to show the world that this city is more than sex and drugs as is so often suggested in other countries.' His genuine interest and boundless curiosity let him penetrate to the core of his subject - unabashed and without prejudice.

Through his work, Cris has created an original image of Amsterdam. 'My photos are a reflection of who I am,' he says. And his work is gaining an international audience. The story has been printed in a number of other editions of National Geographic, such as the Italian and Russian issues. In 2012, he exhibited his photos in Het Grachtenhuis Museum



WHEN QUIET RETURNS
AT THE END OF A SUMMER'S
DAY, IT IS AS THOUGH
NOTHING HAS CHANGED
IN CENTURIES.

(Museum of the Canals). A selection of his Amsterdam portfolio has appeared in leading magazines such as *Geo*, *Die Zeit* and *Stern* and distributed across the globe through *Reuters World Wide*. And now his images are filling this book. It is a good thing that this photo series of the canal belt can be displayed on a wider stage than a periodical publication allows.

Four hundred years later, the canal belt is still Amsterdam's showpiece and a popular place for the cultural and intellectual elite to live and work. This might be what makes this part of the city so special. Against the historical backdrop of 17th century bourgeois splendour, the canal belt is a haven for creativity and innovation and, despite its metropolitan allure, this part of Amsterdam is in many respects a village, with its narrow streets and alleys, neighbourhood cafés, small sandwich bars and snug houseboats. As Jeroen Junte concludes his article: 'Tourism and environmental pollution are a burden on daily life in the belt. The diversity among residents and shops is giving way to the wealthy and uniform

luxury products, and yet the appreciation and the beauty of this historic residential area is greater than ever. Most of the houses along the canal are in pristine condition and the cultural life is blooming as it did in the seventeenth century. When quiet returns at the end of a summer's day, it is as though nothing has changed in centuries. The warm glow of the evening sun falls on the red brick facades and in the distance, the peal of the Westerkerk bells can be heard over the gentle lapping of the water against the houseboats'.

For many years, I was part of a group of people who are at the heart of Jeroen Junte and Cris Toala Olivares's story. For years I worked on the Herengracht, in a building nestled between the Bible Museum and the then Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD). From my room on the second floor, I had a great view of the Beulingsluis, and when I stretched out of my window, I could see the beginning of what was once the most prestigious part of the canal: the Golden Bend. It is a gorgeous part of Amsterdam because although the canal belt may be

four hundred years old and has been included on the UNESCO World Heritage list since 2010, it is a living area, populated by a motley collection of extraordinary and enterprising people.

Aart Aarsbergen

Editor-in-chief Dutch edition

National Geographic Magazine



DE RUYTENBURGH

RA AM
NOE 1111 1111 1111
Tel: 06 22 101 11









