

Dutch Dames, by Frank Peters



If a city has the safe infrastructure, does that necessarily lead to bringing out more women on bikes?

Because there are few off-road routes here in Southern California, is that why there are so few women pedaling to work?

Is there a correlation? I had to see for myself.



Everyone's sitting upright and most bikes have chain guards.

[Erasmus University](#) in Rotterdam, Netherlands sent me an email invite to an entrepreneur event they were hosting. Would I attend as one of the Champions for their '[Get In The Ring](#)' contest? I always play a little hard to get when these invitations appear, usually 2 or 3 times a year, even if I'm delighted to be asked. Yes, they'd cover my travel expenses; we worked out the terms. Throw in a personal assistant during the day of the big event and I received much more than I expected as the University folks catered to my every whim. One condition: I must arrive several days early to overcome a lifelong debility known as jet lag. No problem. Assistance with ground transportation? They would meet me at Schiphol airport and accompany me to my hotel in Rotterdam. I couldn't think of anything else to ask for. I was in.



News of my involvement spread and a week later I'm getting another invitation, this time from the State Department at the [U.S. Embassy in The Hague](#). They were having an event, too, the very next night. If I agreed, they would coordinate with my University hosts and extend my travel to include a side trip for this more international event celebrating [Global Entrepreneurship Week](#). I have to admit, this pumped my tires, so to speak and I had a hard time playing hard to get.



As I see a single speaking gig expanding to two and the trip extend from 4 days to 5, I think, why not add a couple more to spend in Amsterdam observing what many of us think of as Nirvana of bicycling cities? So I tacked on the weekend and headed off for a delightful, if exhausting, 8-day trip to the Netherlands.



**The U.S. Embassy in The Hague hosted an international event to celebrate Global Entrepreneurship Week.
Photo by Molly Ackerman**

Why was I invited? I'm an entrepreneur turned angel investor, with a bad case of bicycle advocacy. For 7 years I've done audio interviews of the world leaders in early-stage investing, people who make the earliest bets on high tech startups. Glamorous? A little, it's so risky that my audience has become large and loyal as we all learn the best practices, so as to minimize our losses. Then just 3 years ago I got bit by my bicycle infatuation. A family member suggested that riding a bike would be more effective than dieting as I lamented my weight – I took his advice and my world has changed for the better.



Then somewhere along the way, my new bike advocacy pals suggested I do for cycling what I had been doing for angel investing, namely the audio interviews. Wish it had been that obvious to me, so start that I did. Likewise, I would combine a bicycle interview in the Netherlands with these photos to turn this trip into a mirror of my personal interests. What fun.



But I didn't know any Dutch bike advocates and needed help to get connected to the right people. It took me awhile, and now I wonder why, before I asked [Carolyn Szczepanski](#), Director of Communications for the [League of American Bicyclists](#) in Washington, D.C. – they're connected big-time. [Stephanie Noll](#) at Oregon's BTA contributed a lead, too, and in only hours I'm pinging Tom Godefrooij at the [Dutch Cycling Embassy](#) in Utrecht. Soon I'd have my second embassy gig.



Carolyn was a good person to ask, in part because we spent [an hour together](#) recently discussing women-on-bikes and the emphasis she's spearheading to increase their numbers. Of course by now, we all know of the first [Women's Bicycling Summit](#) in Long Beach in September and then there's a full day session the day in front of the League's [National Bike Summit](#) in March, [Women Bike](#).



It's a frequent talking point: men outnumber women when it comes to counting cyclists. Why? Many reasons, including women are more risk-averse and our present infrastructure on too many roadways across America doesn't look safe. After my whirlwind visit to 4 cities in the Netherlands I have seen what safe looks like.



Here's a typical layout: sidewalk, separated bike path, median then car travel lanes.

Jet lag seldom has me popping out of bed in the early morning, but Friday towards the end of my trip I had to travel from The Hague to Amsterdam in time [to meet a friend for lunch](#). Budgeting time for unforeseen delays got me up and out, it turns out, just in time to observe rush hour traffic heading into downtown. Women, children, babes in arms and men, too, were cruising along almost exclusively off-road paths. Me, I was crawling in a taxi wishing for a bike. The trails were parallel to neighborhoods cleverly camouflaged with thick woods; just a few miles from the train station these commuters were dashing along, well protected from traffic and making better time, too.



These bikes aren't used for weekend recreation – everyone's got a utility bike with thick tires, fenders and a rack for groceries, too.

Many Dutch have striking good looks. No, that's not a prejudice; I took a large sample as I people-watched my way across the country. Tall blonds, tall everyone, yet what I don't notice at first is the trim fitness. When it does dawn on me that I'm not visiting Halifax or Prince Edward Island, Canada as I did just a month ago, or New York City in June, or New Hampshire last spring – it's the obesity rates – these Dutch are packing many fewer pounds compared to their North American peers. Could this, too, be because of their preferred mode of travel?



Texting without a helmet

Ok, so they're good looking, tall and fit and due to the much-cooler-than-I'm-used-to temperatures, they all have rosy cheeks, so it's a day or two before I spot the next anomaly: no helmets. I'd heard this before I arrived, but it was just an intellectual factoid I read somewhere; to see it in person, well, chalk it up to another stark distinction that world travel is great for. I never saw a single helmet on any bike rider.



Since mopeds and motorcycles get to share the bike paths, too, it's not till I get back to my hotel room and look at the photos that I see, or I don't see – they're not wearing helmets either! These are not risk-taking Dutch Dames, as the restroom doors label them, they have safe paths to ride, separated from car traffic and when they must share the road, it's typically in the inner city where the roads are so narrow that cars must tip toe along, too. Moms and dads were chaffering their young on their bikes, even babes in arms, yet not a single helmet could be seen.



Dutch women can ride with one hand tied behind their back.

Judging, making a value assessment is hard not to do – one society is obviously crazy, with a skewed view of the risks, but which society is that? Americans can be snobs with a superiority complex, so I've read, and I'm fighting the urge to point out to my new friends this fiendish disregard for child safety. Instead I quietly observe.



Making small talk with my new friends, I tell them of my previous visit 8 years ago when I exhibited my dance photography in an Amsterdam art gallery. That body of work began with frozen stills – poses the students needed for their college applications. Years later I would abandon the still-look to capture dancers in motion; that's when my work gained more attention. Likewise with cycling – these permanently gray skies and short days made for brooding images of cyclists in motion.





Frank Peters is a member of the Newport Beach, CA Citizens Bicycle Safety Committee. He writes for [bikeNewportBeach](#) and romanticizes his bike rides at [cdmCyclist](#). He was a little defensive about titling this piece, “Dutch Dames”, but explains: “Not in a Rat Pack derogatory sense, but this is how women are referred to in the Netherlands.” We’ll take his word for it.





Is that a helmet?