

# WorldPride

6 | BY TOM FLANAGAN

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## Pride & Progress

Thirty years ago, Amsterdam Pride began as a party. But in 2026, as WorldPride arrives in the Dutch capital, can it be something more?

**I**t's 3 August 1996. A fleet of boats glides along Amsterdam's canals. Light catches on the water's surface, forming a glittering reflection of the spectacle above. People lean on bridges and crowds gather along the sides. One of the first boats comes into view—a statuesque drag queen waves to the masses. It's no ordinary day in the Dutch capital. It's the first Amsterdam Pride Canal Parade, organised by Gay Business Amsterdam (GBA), to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community and thank those who embraced them. For Siep de Haan, one of GBA's founding members, the turnout was more than he could have imagined. 'At first I was afraid there would be no

one watching,' says the 68-year-old former school teacher. 'But the people on the first boats called me and said: "Siep, there are already crowds waiting on the bridges." When I saw Dolly Bellefleur singing at the front, I thought: This will be a success.' He was right. Nearly three decades on, the Canal Parade has become one of the world's biggest Pride events, attracting thousands of visitors who come every August for celebration and openness. But as Amsterdam welcomes WorldPride in 2026, the city's status as gay capital is under renewed scrutiny, as is the question of who Pride is really for and what it is meant to achieve. >>

*The city's status as gay capital is under renewed scrutiny*

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## Liberal legacy

Unlike Pride celebrations elsewhere, Amsterdam Pride started as a party, not a protest. Conceived as a prelude to the 1998 Gay Games, it was a way of showing gratitude says De Haan. 'Pride everywhere else in the world started from activism. But here, it was a thank-you – to the city and its inhabitants.' Much of this reflects the Netherlands' long-standing reputation for LGBTQI+ rights. It was the first country to legalise same-sex marriage back in 2001, it's home to the oldest operating LGBTQI+ rights organisation, COC Netherlands, and was one of the first countries to declassify homosexuality as a mental illness back in 1973.

It wasn't always so progressive, however. The Netherlands was once a very religious and conservative country. Jan-Willem Duyvendak, professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam says it wasn't until the counterculture movement of the 1960s that this began to change. Social change in the 1960s was not only enormous for

LGBTQI+ people but for everyone,' he says. 'I don't think there was any other country where so many people lost their faith in such a short period.'

Over the next few decades, the Netherlands became increasingly secularised. Activism existed – from a gay rights protest in 1969 to Roze Zaterdag [Pink Saturday] in 1979 – but by the 1990s, many of those battles appeared, at least on paper, to have been won. Years of social liberalism helped shape Pride into something distinct, says

**Pride in Amsterdam is being asked to celebrate progress as well as account for it.**

Michiel Klaassen, a journalist at *NH Nieuws* and co-author of a book on the history of Pride in Amsterdam. In the 1990s, Amsterdam was firmly on the map as the gay capital of Europe, if not the world,' he says. 'We had progressive coalition gov-



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ernments – the so-called purple cabinets – which secured first registered partnerships for same-sex couples and then same-sex marriage. The immediate need for activism within the gay and lesbian community had, to some extent, faded.'

## Pride for everyone

Amsterdam Pride's celebratory origin, however, is exactly what's now being questioned. After years of organisational changes, Pride in Amsterdam is being asked to celebrate progress as well as account for it. And the arrival of WorldPride puts Amsterdam at the centre of a global moment and under renewed scrutiny. Lucien Spee de Castillo Ruiz, director of Pride Amsterdam and WorldPride Amsterdam 2026, is optimistic they can pull off an event to remember. 'We want to leave a legacy,' he says. 'Pride is a party, but it should not just be a party.' And as former TransPride organiser Yvo Manuel Van Dias puts it: 'Visibility alone is not enough.' Pride has its critics. Many say it still puts too much



Dive into the definitive history of Amsterdam Pride with the book *Tussen feest en protest* (between party and protest; Dutch only), published ahead of WorldPride, by journalists Michiel Klaassen and Menno Seda. [nieuwansterdam.nl](http://nieuwansterdam.nl)

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## Jet Nugter (34)

I believe above all in Pride as a form of protest. Celebrations and parties are part of it too, but there are so many people who have fought to be visible as queer people in the first place. There are still people who work tirelessly every day to resist the ever-growing fear and hostility towards the LGBTQI+ community

in our society. That's why it's so frustrating to see that some people view (World)Pride merely as a sort of 'Pink King's Day', yet have absolutely no understanding of what it stands for. Amsterdam is more queer-friendly than many other places in the country. But it really depends on where you are in the city: in a queer-friendly club, café or sports club, you know you're always welcome just as you are and where you can feel a sense of euphoria about your gender and/or sexual orientation. But we need more of those places and spread more widely across the city.'



Prinsengracht, Gay Pride 1997

## Anniversaries

This year is special for Amsterdam in many ways when it comes to the LGBTQI+ community. It marks 25 years since the Netherlands legalised same-sex marriage – the first in the world to do so – as well as 80 years of COC Netherlands, the world's oldest political organisation an LGBTQI+ rights. It's also 125 years of GGD Amsterdam, the Public Health Service, a major player in reducing HIV transmission in Amsterdam to near zero.



AmPride, 2019

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## Pride Parties

### WorldPride Music Festival

A two-night celebration of music, unity and pride that brings together global headliners, cutting-edge DJs and thousands of people from around the world. 31 JULY-1 AUGUST, [WORLDPRIDEFEST.COM](http://WORLDPRIDEFEST.COM)



### Pon Di Pride Festival

Amsterdam's longest-running Black LGBTQI+ Caribbean club night goes bigger with markets, a conference and music outdoors. 4-5 AUGUST, [INSTAGRAM.COM/PON.DIPRIDE](http://INSTAGRAM.COM/PON.DIPRIDE)

### Pamela x Waterkant

This annual party by the water hosted by Pamela is queer joy encapsulated, with DJs from across the community and musical spectrum providing the best post-parade party. 3 AUGUST, [WATERKANTAMSTERDAM.NL](http://WATERKANTAMSTERDAM.NL)

### Transpodium

Trans artists take to the stage, from singing and spoken word to instrumental music and other forms of performance 8-9 AUGUST, [CONCERTGEBOUW.NL](http://CONCERTGEBOUW.NL)



they let their voices be heard – literally and figuratively. 8 AUGUST, [PARADISO.NL](http://PARADISO.NL)

### Black Queer Voices + Opus Ball



Black voices team up with The Concertgebouw for two major events – one spotlighting Black queer singers on 1 August and another a week later, where classical music and ballroom meet. 18-7 AUGUST, [CONCERTGEBOUW.NL](http://CONCERTGEBOUW.NL)

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**Roze in Blauw** are Amsterdam's dedicated police unit for the LGBTQI+ community, while the **Pink Point** at the Homomonument is the official LGBTQI+ information kiosk.

POLITIE.NL/ONDERWERPEN/ROZE-IN-BLAUW  
PINKPOINT.NL

## Pablo Torrecillas (31)

'From the beginning, I've felt more like myself in Amsterdam. It's hard to define, but I think it's the sense of freedom. Even as a tourist, you feel it. And when you live here, it becomes part of everyday life; it's kind of ingrained in the culture. The city, and especially the



people I met, gave me the space to explore who I really am. My relationship with my family in Brazil is difficult. My dad hasn't spoken to me since I came out in 2019. So building a life here, with people who accept me, has been really important. I've found my community here. It feels like a chosen family. Personally, I feel safe here, but I also recognise that comes from privilege from the way I look. I have close friends who've experienced the opposite. What am I looking forward to during Pride? I'd love to join the Pride March. But honestly, I'm most excited about spending time with friends.'



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## Anne Stoof (29)

'[Amsterdam] says 'we're a safe space', but for who exactly? If you want to promote yourself as a safe haven city, you need to do a little bit more than just say it. A safe space is about accountability. You go to a club and they state, "We don't accept transphobia or racism and discrimination" in the house rules, but then you come to the bouncer and they want to pat you down and say, "Are you a man or a woman?"...[And so] you limit yourself – what bars you go to, what spaces feel safe. With my own changing identity from lesbian to transgender man, I see that there are marginalised voices within our community that aren't being heard. And often those people are being silenced. They're told: "Now is the time to celebrate, don't criticise everything." What we need is safe housing, healthcare, destigmatisation and education. What we don't need is a Booking.com boat. If they want to give money to the event, great. But why do they need to be centre stage? Then it's just performative. When we talk about unity, I don't know if it's really unity. We're very fragmented as a community, there isn't enough space for the actual community if corporations are still front and centre.'



focus on celebration and commercial visibility at the expense of the community and real issues faced within it. Others point to it being too white, too male and too geared towards the gay community, over queer and trans people. Spee de Castillo Ruiz acknowledges both parts but says there are reasons. 'We have Trans Pride, Black Pride, Religious Pride, Youth Pride, Senior Pride, and we pay for those with the money we earn from the Canal Parade, which is the milk cow. But we are mostly white people.' Naomie Pieter, the founder of Black Pride NL, knows this well. But after years of organising to get black, queer and trans voices heard, she believes progress has been made through the Queer Amsterdam movement which challenged who gets to organise Pride. 'We broke the monopoly of Pride,' she says. 'With Queer Amsterdam, we created an alternative Pride. Before we started, only one organisation could effectively organise Pride. After two years, >>>

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See our **What's On** section from page 33 for highlights of the Pride-related programming.

## What's on?

Our pick of the best on the agenda during WorldPride

### WORLDPRIDE HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE

Four main themes take centre stage – Rights & Governance, Health & Wellbeing, Heritage & Culture, Resources & Leadership – at this conference organised and attended by Pride organisations and activists from across the world.

6-7 AUGUST, PRIDE AMSTERDAM

### LOVE ON THE CANALS – 30 YEARS OF CANAL PARADE



Discover how the Canal Parade grew into an international symbol of visibility and inclusion through photographs, personal stories and art at the Grachtenmuseum's latest exhibition.

3 JULY - 27 SEPTEMBER, GRACHTEN MUSEUM

### PRIDE MARCH & TRANS PRIDE WALK

Pride March, now in its 14th edition, takes you through Amsterdam in a walk advocating for LGBTQI+ rights. A week later, walk in solidarity with the trans community and their rights during the Trans Pride Walk.

25 JULY & 1 AUGUST, PRIDE AMSTERDAM

### CANAL PARADE

This year sees around 80 decorated boats, including from the AIDS Fund and European Medicines Agency, cruise the canals and a 10,000-seat stadium on the Prinsengracht.

1 AUGUST, 12-6 PM

### H'ART MUSEUM X COC: HIGH HEELS HURRAY!

A hub for the queer community, H'art Museum will play host to a variety of art forms that looks to give queer and trans individuals a safe stage in the Pride programme.

22 JULY ONWARDS, PRIDE AMSTERDAM



Check out the full WorldPride programme via [Pride Amsterdam](#) or [everything else](#) going on from page 33.



the municipality changed the policy, now anyone can apply for funding and organise [their] Pride.'

### A safe haven?

WorldPride arrives as reported hate crimes towards LGBTQI+ people in the Netherlands are rising sharply. According to a report conducted by the Dutch government in 2022, one third of all discrimination reports related to sexual orientation. Meanwhile, a recent monitor by the Public Health Service of Amsterdam (GGD) found that less than half of young people accept same-sex relationships, compared to two years earlier, when 63% considered it normal.

Philip Tijms, a spokesperson for COC Nederland, says it paints a worrying picture. While the rise in reports is due to im-

### Our strength is in solidarity and respect

proved reporting methods, he says it also reflects a broader trend. 'There has been a huge increase in hatred towards LGBTQI+ people. We used to see a 3-6% growth year on year in reports – now it's 30-40%.' He says it's an issue that affects trans people in particular. Whether WorldPride can address all the issues the community faces is one thing – whether it should, is another. And while Amsterdam remains at the forefront of LGBTQI+ progress, whether it can stay there is an open question. De Haan, one of the organisers of the first Canal Parade, believes the city is capable of meeting the moment, as it has before. 'Society has become more divided,' he says. 'But we have to find new ways to be in solidarity. Our strength is in solidarity and respect. And I think Amsterdam still has that power.'

Pride in Amsterdam may not have been born from protest. But in 2026, it may be forced to reckon with it.



Nieuwe Kerk is hosting the exhibition, *Queer Amsterdam, the Pink City*, a biography of Amsterdam's LGBTQI+ community that celebrates the 25th anniversary of open civil marriage in the Netherlands.

9 JULY-4 APRIL 2027, NIEUWEKERK.NL

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### Ruben Dingemans (50)

I'm Dutch-Indonesian, having lived in Friesland and The Hague, and moved to Amsterdam in 1998, the year of the Gay Games. The whole city felt different. Everywhere you looked, people were showing affection openly, holding hands. I remember thinking: this is nice. It felt almost unreal. That was a beautiful way to arrive

in the city. For a long time, I didn't want to be defined by my sexuality or my ethnicity. But those things are part of who you are. Amsterdam gave me a sense of safety. It helped me understand that being gay was not something separate from the rest of me. People criticise the Canal Parade for being too commercial, and I understand that. But I also think look at the bigger picture. Everybody has a role to play. A friend had just moved here and said he was really moved by the Canal Parade because it meant he could finally just be himself. And that really struck me. I realised how much we sometimes take it for granted here.'



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### WorldPride

WorldPride is the world's biggest LGBTQI+ event, usually held every two years in a different city around the world. It aims to promote awareness, inclusivity and LGBTQI+ rights. This year, it is hosted by Amsterdam – one of the world's most diverse cities (home to 180+ nationalities) – for the first time, under the theme of Unity. It's a two-week programme, spanning culture, parties and conferences. 'We're building a huge 10,000-seat stadium on Prinsengracht,' says Lucien Spee de Castillo Ruiz, director of Pride Amsterdam and WorldPride 2026. 'And we're going to have an international human rights conference in the Bours van Borlag. We want to show it can be a community thing.'

25 JULY-4 AUGUST, PRIDE AMSTERDAM



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