



Hotels are looking forward to the Grand Départ

‘Utrecht wants to hold on to the energy of the Tour’

The countdown to 4 July has started. On that day, the streets of the city of Utrecht will be the background for the first stage of the Tour de France, an individual time trial of 13.7 kilometers. According to Leo Hollman the energy that is generated by the Grand Départ will give the regional economy a long-year boost. “The Tour start is a means, not an objective.”

Leo Hollman, director of Grand Hotel Karel V and chairman of Hotel Overleg Stad en Schil Utrecht (HOST) does not mince matters: “For the Utrecht hotels, the Grand Départ is the dreamed public event. We obviously depend on the destination. The choice for a hotel follows only when the visitors opt for Utrecht. That is why the start of the Tour is an ideal opportunity to promote the city and our efforts.”

The period in which the cycling event takes place is also convenient for the Utrecht entrepreneur. “Most of the hotels focus on the corporate guests. Of course, during the

summer months their bookings decline. July and August are our quiet months; then, the number of personnel and the room rates are the lowest. If you manage to attract a world-size event in this period, you hit the jackpot.”

Covert

HOST unites 23 hotels, located in the city of Utrecht as well as in nearby cities like Zeist, Nieuwegein and Houten. “Most of the hotels are members of HOST. Jointly, the members can supply 1,800 rooms, where the entire area counts some 2,250 rooms.”

The hotel collective has put a lot of effort in Utrecht’s long-lasting lobby to attract the Tour start. It was an exciting period. “For our hotel as well. Several times, the Karel V was the ‘covert host venue’ when the Tour management paid another visit to the city.” Before the formal announcement, the rumours were getting stronger and stronger that Utrecht would be the winner. Hollman was already sure: “Conclusive was the request from the A.S.O. to quote rates and availability. The Tour organizer wanted to book in time, before the official announcement. We knew then what would happen.”

Higher interest

The Tour coming to Utrecht is made possible thanks to a joint effort of local governments and the city’s business



community. “The hotels also take their responsibility. We are ten per cent from the basic room turnover of all bookings made through the central site of Toerisme Utrecht.” It was easy to convince the hotels to make this contribution. “The Grand Départ’s higher interest is recognized by all.”

Not the first prize

The wildest tales are told about the rates the Utrecht hotels charge for their rooms during the period of the Tour start. Hollman is not exactly pleased by this. “A few exceptions are getting a lot of attention, whereas the exact opposite is true. The majority of the rooms of the hotels united in HOST is offered with only a slightly increased rate.” Of course no agreements were allowed, but the members were asked to keep their room rates as low as possible. “The Tour start is a unique opportunity to present Utrecht

as an attractive venue to a public counting billions. The suggestion that hotels here demand excessive rates for the rooms, is completely wrong. Now a dime, later a quarter. Nearly all hotels understand this and keep their rates reasonable. Some colleagues, however, think they can win first prize. They think they can profit from the scarcity. I think that is unwise, but everyone is free to choose a strategy.”

No pop-up

To facilitate the expected rush for hotel rooms, a number of hotel owners explored the possibility to realize pop-up hotels. “Such a temporary facility entails quite a few issues. Even if the council is co-operative, the safety regulations are strict. And only after the fire safety check just before the opening by the fire department it will become clear whether all regulations are complied with. Considering

that you have only a few days to get a return on that investment, the risk is simply too big.”

Rooms available

Hollman wishes to correct the suggestion that all Utrecht hotels are already booked full. “When it became clear that the Tour would start in Utrecht, big bookers reserved many rooms. It now appears that not all these rooms are actually taken. These will now be put on the market. At this moment – late April, ed. – there are still rooms available in the hotels in the city and the region. The big flow of reservations at the temporary camping sites has also yet to come. You see that many people only decide at the very last moment to come to Utrecht and to witness the Tour start live.”

By the collar

What is the inheritance the Tour caravan will leave behind in Utrecht when, during the second stage, it will cross the municipal borders and head for the province of Zeeland? “In order to be able to organize a large public event like this, collaboration between council and business community is essential. For all participants this was a learning process, and there were occasions that we had to take each other by the

collar. But as we went along, an understanding was created for each other’s interests. We now have a partnership and mutual trust. That is extremely valuable for future projects.”

Long-year stimulant

The energy generated by the Tour start is already showing results. “Among other profitable aspects, it has contributed to the fact that, led by EBU, the councils of Utrecht and Amersfoort, as well as Universiteit Utrecht, Jaarbeurs, Provincie Utrecht, De Marienhof, De Flint and HOST have established a fund that is used to attract knowledge events. For this, together they grant over three hundred thousand euros annually to the Utrecht Convention Bureau.”

An other example is the continuation of the Business Peloton Utrecht (BPU). “This corporate network co-ordinates the economic activation around the Tour start,” says Hollman, also BPU board member. “We want to hold on to the present energy under an other name and convert this into new initiatives after the Tour. This once again stresses the fact that for Utrecht, the Grand Départ as such is not an objective. It is an instrument, a catalyst that supplies the city’s and region’s economy with a long-year stimulant.” ■

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