

## The Perfect Fit: Searching the World for Extra-Tall Jeans by China Martens

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Roughly one percent of U.S. women are 6 feet tall or taller. At 6’3, I’m statistically taller than 99.997% of the women in the U.S. I rarely, if ever, see another woman my height in person.

I’m still extremely tall for a woman in the Netherlands—the country with the tallest people in the world— but my percentile expands like a pair of stretch jeans, to the comfy 99.88 percentile, meaning my odds have at least doubled. The average height for men here is nearly six feet. I will not be towering over everyone, something I’ve never experienced in my adult life before. *What will it be like to go Jean shopping in thrift stores in Amsterdam?*

The thing is, in my research, I learned that Amsterdam is a fashion capital, with things like “denim week,” and a denim school, it’s up there in the top three cities internationally for jeans fashion. Add that to there being so many tall people and I figure certainly some cool brands would filter down to thrift stores—it would be fun to hunt for them, to get a deal.

Yes, these days it’s quite a bit better for tall women than it once was. I can actually get jeans long enough when I order online. In the ’80s and ’90s I would order men’s Levis from the store—they never had my measurements in stock— and that worked. Only recently in my middle age have my options blossomed. Still, in person it’s still extremely difficult to find pants that fit off the rack. I thought going to the country with the tallest people, and it being so near where my paternal grandparents came from in Northern Germany, would be a chance to explore my tall genes.

Visually, I felt a difference starting in the Iceland airport, with my connecting flight as we were hurrying to make the connecting flight to Amsterdam. I noticed a young woman, near my height, my height?? Certainly taller than six foot. Maybe she was 6’1 or 6’2. And maybe it was already the travel and jet lag kicking in, because I did not expect to feel so emotional! I started to tear up seeing a young woman with a body similar to mine, chatting with her friend, with an air that was so—to borrow a word from the black community that I don’t think I have a right to take as a white woman (since my struggles are full of white privilege and are nowhere near racial oppression.) but—the perfect word, the only word I know that came to mind was: *Unbothered*. She was so tall and so unbothered and it was so beautiful.

Just a tall woman walking around, laughing, that’s all. Nothing to see here. No kind of air of self-consciousness or others turning their head to see her. I was going somewhere where there would be more tallness, and I was here on the edge of this experience. And thinking. If there are a lot more tall people in Amsterdam, I really may not want to come back home again.

## EXTRA LEGROOM

My aunt told me a few years ago that I had been hypersensitive about my height as a teenager, and that was no way for a person to be. She had a certain look on her face, blaming me for the ordeal. Certainly, we are taught we must be proud of ourselves and push back. But she doesn't know what it was like to grow up, rapidly, past others, with a skinny undeveloped body in the '80s when thin was not yet in fashion, and be made fun of, to be made aware of my difference everywhere I went, in so many ways, to be pushed again and again, into otherness, where I wasn't expecting it. Yet again.

Even getting my passport was an issue. When I went to get my picture taken, the people at the first shop didn't know how to deal with my height—*Who knew that my height would impact picture-taking and passport regulations?* An older woman said to an older man, "Have her sit on a chair." She was trying to be helpful. But they were flummoxed about how to take a photo of me straight onto my face. I did sit on the chair, although it felt weird, and I got the unflattering photo of myself, no glasses, at a weird angle.

I took the photo to the post office to complete the procedure, scary as that was to put a check in for rushing it—as you can only do in the mail now, not go to the DC office—with all my paperwork and the knowledge if it wasn't correct, I would miss my trip. I asked out of sheer desperation—the Hampden Post office is not known for being very helpful—if this photo looked right to her. "Oh, it's straight in the face, but what I'm concerned about is this shadow under your chin. The regulations say no shadows. This might not pass. You can go to photo store on Falls Road to get your photo retaken."

"Oh!" I said, so relieved to be helped and saved. I knew where that was. At the professional photographer store, the also-shorter man knew exactly what to do. Professionally, he grabbed his step ladder, pulled it out, and climbed up to be able to shoot the photo of my face straight on. I was relieved. I did not feel ashamed. I was an older weirdo getting the job done. I was not, however, unbothered. I had never been unbothered. I have gotten used to being different, but I'm still always surprised about all the ways that it affects me. That I am reminded I am different. As I am, of course, just a person existing, normal to myself, with my own anxieties over getting this passport and getting ready for my trip, not really thinking that even in picture-taking, I will stick out as different and that others—or even myself—may not know what to do about it. It felt good to be handled professionally, without shame, and to go on with my day, still not loving my photo, a hair astray, so weird looking without glasses—actually, I looked Scandinavian! A lot like my paternal grandmother. A look I rarely see on my face but see it as I age. I'm not round like my

maternal side. I'm long and lean, with an older long face, I saw an older woman in it I had not seen before.

Being singled out as different, or greeted by strangers for them asking me how tall I am is, if not always triggering, unpleasant. Sometimes pleasant. Yes, sometimes it can be. Like when my daughter's friend gave me the tall girl discount at the falafel stand she was working at (just piled some more food on.) But honestly, I don't really enjoy people calling out to me from their cars, even if it's another tall woman excited to see me.

I had many shaming experiences growing up. But that is an article for another time. This is my background of being different. I'm not supermodel tall. I'm too tall to be a supermodel tall. And that's a hard experience on the street, even today.

I want to embrace my height. One is told it's a bad look for tall girls to hunch over. But the fact is it's hard to hear people below. You naturally want to get closer to them. When you slouch, you bend your hip and knee—you can lower your face by many inches to be in closer for eye contact and hearing. It feels like you're not sticking out, you're part of the group more, even if, looking at yourself in photos, it looks horrible! And then there's the fact that if I sat up straight in a car, with my long torso, my head often would crash into the roof! It's a surprising fact even to myself, as I've trained myself to fit into this smaller world for so long, I don't even notice it. So I can't always sit straight. And my knee is permanently bent now from slouching. There is a tall girl tax. I want to work on my posture and my body more, but also it's hard in this world. I grew up not fitting in, feeling that I was a freak.

My opinion has changed with Instagram, seeing for the first time extra tall representation from all over the world. Also with basketball stars these days, they look better than I remember them looking in my youth. And representation changing in movies and society. Again another article I want to write about all these things! But for now, I want to write about the physical experience of being in a taller country, where I will not stick out the same way, where some things, like a simple pair of jeans, might possibly fit me. This physical experience. Experienced in physical reality. Not online.

I am in search of the perfect pair of jeans, at a discount price, preferably. Amsterdam is all wheels, wheels, wheels. And my delirium from traveling overnight doesn't help. I find the quickly-changing pedestrian signal lights challenging. And how to tell the difference between bike lanes and sidewalk? Bikes are everywhere, as well as the ringing of little bells, reminding me not to walk in the bike lane. I keep jumping. My natural Baltimore jaywalking instincts did not prepare me for this. Friends and family cycle side by side with carts of all shapes, dogs in the cart or running behind, carts with children of all ages, musical instruments strapped to the back of riders, infants sitting in seats on the handlebar—everyone is in fast motion all gliding by each other, happily, a kind of cacophony of ease. I don't notice as much height differences as I just

notice the bike party plus the natural and big open spaces. Bodies in motion I notice more than height differences. And a casual but fun, festive park feel. While still speeding, everyone speeding, in every direction.

I like it very much. Although I must remain vigilant to not get hit by a bike.

What I do notice eventually, is that there are a lot more tall men than tall women. I also notice the great fashion pose of stopping at a red light, one leg bent and one leg down.

On the airplane over, I had bought extra leg room for the first time. What surprised me about that, sitting behind the first class drinking their champagne, is that the armrest and window felt too low to me. If one thing fits do you just wish more things fit? And that the friendly woman sitting next to me didn't seem that tall to me.

### *THE DENIM HUNT*

No one looks *so* tall to me. Some, mostly men, are my height. It's surprising to look them in the eye. But sometimes women strike me as tall. Or I notice long legs on a bike, as they stand at a light.

I don't think I necessarily stick out here—while I still do retain my extra tallness. I'm extra tall even in Amsterdam.

It's not a cat call city. (liberating)

And I don't know if I have middle age invisibility here. I don't know how people see me. But I feel comfortable, amazingly comfortable, in my body. I see many other bodies here similar to mine. I don't know if all bodies are comfortable here. I see fewer larger, wider bodies, for example. It's all new and exciting.

Tall people also remind me of family and how it felt to walk in the woods during the holidays in Chapel Hill, with my brother, his daughters, my daughter, and my parents all being tall around me. I haven't seen anyone of my brother's height yet. (He was 6'10"-6'11".)

Even today, rested now, I still feel like crying when I just think of the tall women I've seen on my trip, the increase of a tiny percent makes a difference. I realize it's because of my internalized

tall phobia—that I didn't even really know I had, until today. Seeing other tall people live their ordinary unfreakish lives makes me realize I've always thought of being this tall as ungainly.

But the tall woman I saw so far had been young and attractive. I want to see all versions of tall.

I have a list of stores. I figure I will start first with one of the chain vintage stores—Episode—that's said to have lots of denim. I'm surprised to find out that all the vintage brands are American! There is a lot of denim but it's all crowded together in no particular order.

Me: Is it hard for a 6'3" woman to get pants in the Netherlands?

Store Man: Ahh, yes. I would say so. I have a friend who is two meters tall and he has problems getting clothes. It's easier than the rest of Europe but it's still difficult here.

Me: Growing up, it was impossible for me to get pants, when I was tall and skinny.

He: I can imagine.

Me: Are there any local designers in your store?

He: No, not really.

I take a quick look around, eyeballing the bottoms of the jeans to see if any hang longer than the rest, and I find a pair of Wranglers. I've never worn Wranglers in my life, but why not? Wranglers will be my perfect jeans by default. They are a little tight in the waist, but I've gained weight recently. I know it's not a good way to think but If I walk for a week or more they will fit just right eventually. Better to nab them. After all, they're the first pair of jeans I've tried on and they practically fit!

I'm interested in the local brands. I bet they'll be expensive. I'm also interested in what it's like to have jeans made to fit. I want to nail everything down for my essay and spend the rest of the trip trying to find Picasso's Bird or leisurely going around looking in the rest of the stores on my list.

I've decided it's great to inhabit my rare and only option of a body. I decide that I love it and will be happy in my height for the rest of my life. I may not always be tall. I may start losing height to age—or perhaps to something else. I will enjoy—enjoy, today!

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Everywhere I walk, I notice these hooks at the top of these ancient narrow tall buildings. The hooks were built to pull up furniture and when the houses are being worked on, they are also much in use. Somehow it hits me, seeing this over and over again, and walking by a long ladder in use with a machine that is helping to pull up housing material, to, well, somehow identify with these tall houses. The houses need adjustments made for them. They do not stand in sadness that their steps are too narrow. The people use the tools that work for them. There is nothing shameful about using modifications to get what you need. Like if you need a ladder, use a ladder.

I think back to when I was 13 years old on a trip to New Mexico. My feathered hair was keeping its curl better than at home. I was feeling kind of cool visiting Santa Fe. I had made a new friend there, too, with perfectly feathered hair as well. There was a local boy I liked. He drove an El Camino. But I overheard his friends talking and laughing about me. He told them, *How could I ever kiss her? I would need a ladder!* This shame really shut me down and put me back in my uncool at-home pre-trip position. I kept it to myself and didn't talk about it. I think about that. And I think about that movie they made, *Tall Girl*—the first movie I had ever seen on this topic. There was some pre-release talk of the privilege of this white, thin, tall girl thinking she was oppressed was really stupid. The trailers were worse than the movie in that department. But a goofy part in the film was when a shorter guy who liked the tall girl pulled out a step ladder and climbed up to kiss her. And damn—goofy or not, I thought, *Yes. Yes. Use a ladder if that's what you got to do! Use a ladder, OK?*

Making adjustments, making something work for you—personally—is OK! We don't have to fit any “standard.” We all make adjustments—in some ways, at some time—What's wrong with adjustments, and tailoring to fit? It's superb. Not inferior.

## TALL IN AMSTERDAM

The men as tall as me look like Alexander Skarsgård, whose latest role was in *Succession*, and who acted in *Tru Blood* too. He's 6'3". The men taller than me, like around 6'6" or 6'7", maybe 6'9" also look like Alexander Skarsgård. I notice one man on a bike—that even on the bike his head is up where my head is—and he wears a long elegant coat. His bike is very big. The tall men don't really look like Nicholas Braun, for whatever reason (6'7" Greg on *Succession*, who in an interview said he would lie about his height not to freak producers out to get jobs.) One striking, long-legged boy had green hair and whizzed by on a bike with a matching green backpack—you could say he looked like a thinner young Dennis Rodman (6'7"). And there was a tall man at the museum who made me think of my brother. And a teenager at the beach, who had that tall, gangly, young, growing body like I had. I pointed her out to Ariel, and at that

moment she was playing with a younger sibling, bending over and walking in a monster kind of walk, making herself look even more gangly.

I notice a tall couple walking in front of me. The way his arm is around her neck, and her arm around his waste. Their arms are a little stiff, like they're dancing a waltz, like the bicyclists who put out a stiff arm on each other's shoulders when they bike next to each other at the same pace. It's a thing they do here in Amsterdam.

I have seen some big legs and big butts, it's not all thinness (although mostly). Some women I see are round and big and have larger bodies—I love it. Bodies taking up space.

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I do keep trying to visit the stores on my list, but not as many thrift stores as I would like. They are hard to find. I peek in stores to check out cost and length and wind up talking to a few shop clerks.

Laura at We are Vintage on Kinkerstraat says the older Levis are better made. And that she has a tall friend who has a hard time finding pants long enough, too.

J at Kilostore, also on Kinkerstraat, says they're not into gendered fashion.

I ask J how tall they are, and they try to figure out their height in feet and inches for me.

“Why aren't measurements standard? 184cm comes out to be ....” J. shows me their phone, the long decimal translation—

“Oh yes, so like 6-foot and a half,” I say. I had guessed you were 6'1.”

“6'1 I like better,” J says.

“Well you know, your shoes, your hair, adds height.”

“Yes yes.”

“I feel like there is more body positivity now than when I was growing up,” I say. “I think it's easier now...?” My statement turns into a question.

“Well for me, in the queer, in the gay community, it’s still hard. They like thin or muscular, but also I’m learning, curvy. I walk into a club, it’s a celebration. But sometimes I do feel—Ah, I wish I was skinny. And growing up, Black in Amsterdam, I was different in my community, big booty, big hips, I had to order the plus sizes.”

We talk about fashion and I’m feeling that it’s really enjoyable to talk and explore fashion. What works for each person.

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Thirty minutes before I have to be in writing class, I pop into Denim City to find out about the local designers and the denim school, and about their sustainable practices.

It’s surprisingly cool, with all the different things they made out of denim scraps, and sewing machines and students working in the back. I see a table where some jeans are laid out with words and designs on them that look pretty neat. The jeans with the swirly designs on them look really lean and long. I think I should try on a pair. “Do you have a larger size?” I ask, thinking they might be a bit small.

“No, this is the only one like it!” Said Zaïn Hoever, who helped me, and took the picture when I came out of the dressing room because, to my surprise, they fit me like a glove! So soft and comfortable, stretchy and long. They were priced at 70 Euros, which is pricey but not pricey for what they are—a one-of-a-kind student-made design.

Perry Nkrumah told me, “Everyone who comes here finds the perfect jeans” and that I was not alone in my experience of jeans never fitting me. He said they make jeans for all different kinds of bodies. I even found out the name of the student who lasered the jeans: Vince Hale.

I wore my jeans right out of the store and to class. These definitely were the true magic jeans!

<https://readingandtraveling.net/the-perfect-fit-searching-the-world-for-extra-tall-jeans/>