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**W**elcome, expat, to the Netherlands! We are proud to present you this sixteenth edition of *The Holland Handbook*, which we hope will prove to be as good a friend to you during your stay in the Netherlands as it has been to numerous other expats over the past fifteen years.

This book has been compiled for a very mixed group of readers who have one thing in common and that is that they want to find their way in the Netherlands: the expat employee, the expat partner, foreign entrepreneurs, and the many foreign students who come to the Netherlands to train or study. Also for those involved in expatriate affairs who want to keep abreast of the latest developments in their various areas of interest, this book has proven to be a very welcome source of information. Last but not least, this book is a wonderful reminder, including beautiful photographs, of life in the Netherlands for those who are moving on to their next posting – or back home.

*The Holland Handbook* is the result of the enthusiastic efforts of more than 20 authors, organizations and proofreaders of various nationalities and with very different backgrounds. Most of them are specialists who work for international companies and organizations and who have an impressive amount of know-how when it comes to providing expatriates with information.

The diversity of the editorial team makes reading this book a journey in itself. You will find technical information on practical subjects interspersed with personal experiences, background information and columns – all written in each contributor's personal style. With so many topics to cover, *The Holland Handbook* may at times take an unexpected turn – however, as this book is primarily meant as a reference book and not as a book to be read in one go, you can simply select the topic you want to read up on, even if you only have a few minutes to spare.

Though *The Holland Handbook* contains a wealth of information, we do not have the illusion that it is at all complete. It is meant as an introduction, or orientation if you will, into the various subjects that can be of interest to you. By referring you to the relevant literature, addresses and websites, we have provided you with as many sources of additional and/or more in-depth information as we can think of. Undoubtedly we have forgotten a few subjects, websites or books. If you feel that we have left out something that should not have been missed, we would greatly appreciate it if you let us know about this, for instance by sending an e-mail to [editor@xpat.nl](mailto:editor@xpat.nl).

We hope you have a pleasant, enriching and successful stay in the Netherlands.

Bert van Essen and Gerjan de Waard  
Publishers



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A landscape photograph of a polder in the Netherlands. In the foreground, a low stone wall made of dark, irregular stones runs across the frame, with green grass growing between the stones. Beyond the wall is a vast, flat green field. In the distance, a line of trees marks the horizon. The sky is filled with large, white and grey clouds, with a hint of blue at the top.

# **THE HOLLAND HANDBOOK**

**YOUR GUIDE  
TO LIVING IN  
THE NETHERLANDS**



# INTRODUCTION

Art, music, architecture, folklore, foods and dress, our roles and relationships, body language, gestures, greetings and partings, all weave together to form a rich cultural diversity. Every culture is the outcome of centuries of social interaction, a shared history, religious norms and experience – however, it is only when we are among people of a different culture that we really become aware of how much we are the product of those shared elements ourselves. It is just as important to realize that the majority of the people in our host culture are also not aware of how their shared background influences their own behavior – and of how unfamiliar and uncomfortable this behavior may be for us (or perhaps, how reassuringly similar!). When attempting to understand and survive in another culture, there are many areas where we need to pause and consider how our own culture and the host culture differ. This takes time, patience, and some sense of adventure. The first step in achieving this is realizing that neither way of living is wrong or right – it's just... different.





# A New Life in the Netherlands

## Adapting to a New Country and a New Culture

BY DIANE LEMIEUX

So you decided to come live in the Netherlands. You may have been tantalized by the idea of exploring old-world Europe with its architecture and museums. Or maybe it was the possibility of viewing kilometers of flower beds and sand dunes from the seat of a bicycle that attracted you to this country. Perhaps the adventure of undertaking something new, something different is what tipped the balance for you. Whatever it was that made you say yes to a move to the Netherlands, here you are and the country is just outside your door, waiting to be discovered.

But now, instead of having time to visit, like a tourist on an extended trip, you are faced with the task of undertaking all of life's daily chores in an entirely new environment. Whereas at home you did most of these things without thinking, you must now spend time and energy discovering where to buy milk and how to pay the phone bill. The climate is different, you need to get used to the types of products that you can and cannot find at your local grocers', and you have to orient yourself using street signs and product labels you do not understand. You suddenly discover that English is used far less than you had expected, and that Dutch is far harder to learn than you had hoped.

This is the process of adaptation, of creating a new home in this foreign country. Eventually you will be settled in a new house, and will have established routines that make life seem more normal; you will have identified a favorite grocery store or market, know where to purchase your home-language newspaper, and may even have discovered a favorite café for your usual Sunday morning breakfasts. This book will help you with this process of adapting to this country you have adopted, however briefly, as your home.

But this book also has a different focus; to describe the culture of the people who live here, as well as the practicalities of life in the Netherlands. The word 'culture' as it is used here is not about the artistic and historic expressions of culture you find in museums. It is about everyday behavior, the glue that binds communities, the norms and values that regulate social life. The Dutch culture is expressed through language, through social structures and habits, through the way people communicate with each other. This culture is subtle and you will discover it slowly over time, as you increasingly deal with the 'locals'. It is something you will piece together as you interact with your neighbors, as you watch your colleagues at work, from the way you are treated in the shops or when taking the train.

The Dutch, of course, are not explicitly aware of their culture, just as we are not aware of our own. It is only because we are here as foreigners, observing another culture, that we become aware of the differences between the way members of the host culture react, and our own expectations of how one 'should' act. We came, expecting certain patterns of behavior from our hosts: the stereotypes typify the Dutch as being tolerant, frugal and hardworking. From the stories of the red light district you may expect a very liberal society and, knowing of the reputation the country has as a leader in graphic design and architecture, you may expect an innovative attitude to life and work. And yet you will also find conservative attitudes and behaviors.

Dutch society is a highly complex, multi-cultural mix of historic and modern influences, whose daily practice and social behavior may not live up to the values and etiquette that you are accustomed to. Your daily chores bring you into a series of intercultural encounters with the Dutch which sometimes leave you wondering 'what just happened?' It is this process of accumulated 'incidents' that we call 'culture shock' and that is blamed for much of the strife associated with expatriate living.

It is popularly understood that culture shock is a process, containing a set of phases which will all pass, eventually leading you to return to your normal, happy state as a well-adjusted individual. What is not often explained is that culture shock is experienced differently by every individual, depending on their own culture, attitudes, expectations, and previous international experience. Furthermore, moments of frustration and anger may occur at any time during a stay in a foreign country and are a normal part of adjustment. However, culture shock is also a process which can be controlled and minimized.

The advice given by most intercultural or adaptation specialists is to get to know your host culture. Understanding the underlying reasons for the behavior of the Dutch helps to see them as individuals and not as a global 'them'. *The Holland Handbook* has been written by both Dutch individuals and expatriates with years of experience in living with and explaining the Dutch to foreigners. They describe the historic and cultural aspects that influence the behavior you observe, making it more comprehensible and logical. You don't have to like everything about the Dutch culture or adapt to every aspect of it either. But with a bit of understanding and good will you will most probably come to find at least a few friends in this society, people who will make the experience of having lived in the Netherlands a memorable one.

## YOU HAVE ARRIVED IN THE NETHERLANDS BY HAN VAN DER HORST

What does it mean to be in the Netherlands? You crawl ahead on the highway behind laboring windshield wipers, watching the ragged horizon of apartment buildings go by as the gray clouds are chased along by a strong south-western wind.

As the slowly moving traffic jams come to another halt, you have the chance to focus on your fellow drivers. Your first conclusion is obvious: you are in a wealthy country. This is evident from the newness of the cars and the fact that, despite the economic crisis, the number of traffic jams has remained daunting. So much so that radio announcers have long since stopped listing all of them and simply recite the longest – and their total length, which often exceeds 90 kilometers. No wonder this country is awaiting the registration of its 8 millionth car. Meanwhile, as you will surely notice, the government is working hard on widening the highways, or laying new ones – a cause of considerable temporary inconvenience. Though the government decided, in 2012, to reduce the budget for road construction / improvement, it is still considerable. Currently, for instance, they are working on laying the finishing touches on an addition to the A4, which connects The Hague and Rotterdam. When they are done, these two cities – which are only 20 kilometers apart – will be linked by two highways instead of one. They will also soon be starting on the construction of a new tunnel underneath the Nieuwe Waterweg, west of Rotterdam, as well as tackling the bottlenecks around Utrecht.

Stuck among the traffic are many trucks, which are well-kept and loaded with valuable goods. These goods are seldom raw materials, but rather finished industrial goods. The prominent phone numbers and e-mail addresses that can be found on the sides of the trucks are testimony to the fact that this country has a good network of electronic communication and that the electronic highway is fully operational. You can't see this from behind your steering wheel, but these past years the chances that the trucks are carrying products that have been manufactured in the Netherlands are small. Already at the start of this century, the Dutch government decided that this country is a post-industrial services economy. The throughput of goods – entering and leaving the country through harbors such as Rotterdam as well as the airports – has become an important sector of the Dutch industry.

At the same time, the Netherlands is among the top four food exporters in the world, not to mention being a top exporter of plants and flowers. You can also see an interesting new development: Eastern European URLs on the sides of trucks bearing Eastern European license plates (from Poland, Hungary and Rumania). The wages in these countries are lower, so that these transportation companies can offer their services at lower rates, forcing more and more Dutch transportation companies to move their business to Eastern Europe. A similar step to what the shipping companies ended up doing during the second half of the former century when their ships started bearing Panamanian and Liberian flags.

Yet, there is an apparent contradiction to the perceived wealth, if you look around you: the cars are far from luxurious. You are surrounded by middle-class cars, and you can see how strongly the Asian market is represented on the European car market as, these past few years, the Dutch have embraced smaller, more economic cars – due to the crisis and the accompanying tight pockets, but also thanks to the temporary introduction of fiscal measures aimed at stimulating the purchase of environmentally-friendly cars. (When, in 2014, the fiscal incentives for buying partially electric cars were so high that the purchase price enjoyed a 70% subsidy, these measures were terminated.) And, trust the Dutch merchant mentality, which motivated some to buy these relatively cheap electric cars locally and sell them at an attractive price abroad. But, where are the Rolls Royces, Cadillacs, Daimlers and Jaguars? In the Netherlands, if you want to see one of these cars, you will have to visit a dealer's showroom. On the road, the most expensive cars you will see are the standard Mercedes, Audis and BMWs and the occasional secondhand Jaguar. And, should you actually spot a Rolls Royce trying to make its way through traffic, you will notice that it does not really command any respect. To the contrary. It will even seem as if the middle class cars think it inappropriate for such a showpiece to be on the road and will want to prove, by the way they drive, that they are worth just as much as the fellow in the Rolls.

The overall picture, however, becomes a quite different when you look at the distribution of wealth. The richest 1% of the population



## SELF-DRIVING CARS

Traffic experts in the Netherlands insist that tackling bottlenecks and other issues will never be enough to rid this country of its traffic jams, because there are still simply too many cars. Which is why the Dutch Minister of Traffic and Water Affairs, Melanie Schultz van der Hagen, is such a fan of self-driving cars. If these niftily computerized vehicles manage to maintain a steady speed at a fixed distance from the cars around them, then the Dutch roadways will prove to have sufficient capacity. She has taken legal measures to make experiments on the Dutch roads possible and hopes that the Netherlands will be a forerunner in this area.



## TRAFFIC FINES

Your fellow drivers, incidentally, appear to be talking to themselves. You can see that they are keeping it short. Probably they are telling someone that they will be late, due to traffic. In the past, they would have reached for their mobile phones, but they don't do that anymore – it is no longer allowed. Nowadays, you are expected to use a hands-free system, or else the police will redirect you to a road stop, where they will present you with a hefty fine after having courteously introduced themselves and shaken your hand. It must be noted, incidentally, that recently they have been clamping down on a variety of activities that could cause you to drive without exercising due care – such as eating a sandwich while driving...

Failing to drive hands-free can prove to be expensive for another reason, as well. Before you know it, you might have missed a speed limit reduction. On many parts of the highway, you can now drive 130 kilometers an hour – but these have proven to be limited. Every 15 minutes or so, there will be a sign reducing the maximum velocity for some or other reason – to, for instance, 120, 100, 80 or even 70 kilometers an hour. And everywhere, there are cameras ready to snap a picture of a 'traffic-sinner'. Who is sure to receive a considerable fine. In 2014, almost 10 million fines were paid, yielding the nation's coffers € 627 million. In 2010, this had been € 525 million. It should come as no surprise therefore, if you run into a disgruntled Dutchman who is expressing his suspicion that the fines have nothing to do with enforcing safety but rather with reinforcing the nation's wallet.



owns 25% of the nation's wealth, which, in 2014, amounted 1.116 billion euros. Yet, trust the Dutch: this concentration of wealth in the bank accounts of just a few was just not right, according to the majority, and they immediately started to plead for a raising of the wealth tax. Die-hard socialists? One of them was a card-carrying Liberalist.

Five years after being hit quite hard by the oil crises in 1974 and 1979, the Netherlands resumed its growth – which was only interrupted by the dotcom crisis in 2001 and then again by the credit crisis in 2008. Already in the first months of the crisis, the government appointed a great number of commissions whose task it was to determine how – wherever possible – government expenditures could be reduced by 20%, for when the time comes that the economy recovers and the mile-high bill for the emergency measures is due. For, when push comes to shove, the Netherlands is a country that wants to make sure that its household budget is balance. For instance, the cabinet that was formed in 2010, expressed plans to reduce government spending by € 18 billion. At first, it seemed that this measure would be sufficient to tackle the country's economic challenges, but in 2011 the economy took another nosedive, requiring the government to cut expenditures by another € 12 billion, in order to reduce the 4.5% financial deficit to 3% – the maximum for members of the European Union. The Dutch government had no choice but to do this as it had taken a strict line vis-à-vis the upholding of this limitation when the southern European countries – particularly Greece – were facing the possibility of bankruptcy. When it became clear that this would not be

enough, the government did not even hesitate to cut another € 18 billion, plus schedule another € 4 billion cut for the year 2014.

The Dutch population accuses the government of making sweeping cuts that are damaging to the economy, but the answer of the government is short, based on an expression they feel the Dutch might have forgotten: frugality and hard work make houses like castles. If we pay the price now, says the country's liberal Prime Minister Rutte, then "the crisis will have made us stronger". "And more social," adds Diederik Samsom, leader of Rutte's coalition party, the social-democratic Labor Party. At the start of 2014, it seemed as if they might be proven right. The economy showed a slight upswing and the asking prices of houses started going up – after having gone down 20% over the past years. In 2015, this upswing appeared to be here to stay, though politicians, professors and representatives of the various industries warned that the recovery is and remains fragile. One should keep in mind that, in Europe, a growth percentage of 1.5-2% is already considered quite positive.

Han van der Horst (1949) is an historian. He worked for the Communications Directorate of Nuffic, the Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in higher education. He is a prolific author on Dutch history and culture. Among expatriates, his best-known book is *'The Low Sky – Understanding the Dutch'*.

## MONEY GRABBERS

The 2008 financial crisis had its repercussions not only for the banks, but also for the housing corporations and project developers that had been created out of the privatized associations and foundations for affordable living in the '90s of the previous century. These corporations and project developers had grossly exceeded their limits by going into office real estate, the construction of villas and even activities abroad. When this went wrong, it turned out that the managing directors of these corporations – just like their colleagues at the banks – had awarded themselves generous salaries. In order to answer the public indignation that followed, the government decided that persons in (semi) public office may never earn more than the Prime Minister (€ 180,000 a year). Anyone who does, public office or not, is quickly accused of being a money-grabber. The Dutch do, however, distinguish between entrepreneurs who bear their own (considerable) risk and those who don't and who therefore are 'merely' employees. Unless proven otherwise, the latter are automatically labeled money-grabbers.

This is what happened to the members of the Board of Directors of the ABNAmro Bank, which had been saved and nationalized in 2008. In March 2015, these members (with the exception of the president)

awarded themselves a raise of € 100,000 a year to compensate them for the fact the government had abolished the system of bonuses – which it had done for the purpose of curtailing irresponsible speculation and risk-taking.

The dismay among politicians and the people was so great that the Directors paid the raise back – thus avoiding the beginning of a run on the bank. Their colleagues with the competitor, ING, which has paid off all its state support, awarded themselves an even greater raise – which they kept. More than ever before, bankers are perceived as incorrigible money grabbers. Should this come up at a party, there will undoubtedly be someone who will point out the fact that all the other employees of the banks haven't received a raise in years, while the members of the Boards of Directors initiated one series of dismissals after the other. This policy of reducing the number of employees is seen as anti-social in the Netherlands, unless there is absolutely no other way to stop a company from going under. Talk of terms of employment in keeping with the rest of the labor market for all levels of a company are dismissed summarily by people who, by American standards, would be considered very conservative.

## URBANIZED CENTER

The Randstad, in the provinces of North-Holland, South-Holland, Utrecht and Flevoland, is strongly urbanized. There are no real metropolises with millions of people in Holland. The largest city, Amsterdam, does not have more than about 823,000 inhabitants. Still, Holland is a highly urbanized country. Every few kilometers, there is an exit to one, two or three municipalities that have a couple of thousand to not many more than 100,000 inhabitants. These cities and towns all have their own character and are all equally picturesque. In the urban areas you will find neither hovels nor palaces. What you will find are primarily middle class houses. Even Wassenaar, Aerdenhout or Rozendaal, the Dutch equivalents of Miami Beach and Beverly Hills, look comparatively modest. There is an undeniable air of wealth, but none of the glitter of excessive opulence.

Particularly the cities of the Randstad – Rotterdam, Delft, The Hague, Leiden Haarlem, Amsterdam, Hilversum, Utrecht, and Gouda – are an almost continuous circle or half-moon. The Dutch call this a 'rand', or 'edge', hence the name Randstad. In this middle lays a green

area, with small and medium-sized villages. Together with the South-eastern area of Brabant, this area is the country's economic powerhouse, where the majority of companies are located, money is made and culture is generated.

You will also not find harbors filled with expensive yachts. Those who buy a pleasure yacht in the Netherlands will have a hard time finding a spot for it, as the harbors are all filled. Not with luxurious threemasters and a regular crew, however, but rather with motor and sail boats of all shapes and sizes. And should there be one that sticks out above the rest, chances are it is flying a foreign flag.

You would almost think that socialism reigns here, even more so than in the countries of the former East Bloc. A conclusion several conservative as well as liberal bloggers would be happy to support. However, economic statistics show the opposite. When it comes to per capita income, the Netherlands is securely situated towards the top of the European Union. After all, the wage system is pretty balanced and there are no extreme differences.









## THE NETHERLANDS





One of my first observations about the Netherlands was how tall the Dutch are. Actually, tall doesn't do them justice. They are really tall. Damn tall. I am not used to thinking of myself as short; I'm above the average, adult-male height in my native land. But after a few introductions, where I looked up and found myself staring the person in the throat, the point hit home.

According to the statisticians, the Dutch are currently the second tallest people on the planet (the status of tallest was attained just last year by the Swedes). The average height for men is 6 foot, 0.4 inches (1.84 meters); the women come in at a respectable 5 foot, 7.2 inches (1.71 meters). Cold averages, however, don't convey the entire picture. Connoisseurs of numbers know to look at the tails of a distribution. There are quite a few Dutch men, and even a few women, who are over seven feet tall (2.10 meters). This poses some interesting problems. For example, they are taller than the height of many doorways in the Netherlands; I have no doubt that the risk of accidental concussions is now a painful reality. On the other hand, size does offer some advantages: the Dutch are already a volleyball powerhouse, and if basketball ever catches on in the somehow misnamed Low Countries, they'll give the Michael Jordans of this world a run for their money.

What is truly remarkable is that the Dutch are getting taller. While the average height in all first-world countries increased dramatically over the last century, this growth spurt has slowed down of late and seems to be leveling off. The increase in the average height of the Dutch, however, shows no sign of abating. In the last decade alone, the average height of 18 to 39-year-old men and women has increased by 0.9 inches (2.3 centimeters) and almost 0.7 inches (1.7 centimeters), respectively. It is in this context that height has taken on an interesting significance in Dutch society. Enhancing one's stature has become surprisingly important. Techniques range from the large hats Dutch policewomen wear – it makes them appear taller – to surgery.

The Dutch are often critical – and rightly so – of cosmetic surgery, such as face-lifts, tummy-tucks and breast implants. That stated, every once in a while a particularly short Dutch man or woman (typically, shorter than five feet tall or some 1.5 meters) undergoes a fairly radical surgery called the Ilizarov procedure, in which a patient's femurs are broken and the bone ends are separated using a metal frame. Over time, the bones grow together and fuse, thereby increasing the patient's height. Aside from the pain and the risk of infection, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the procedure and the patients usually seem pleased with the results. A similar technique is used in other countries, but it is reserved for cases of exceptional dwarfism. What defines that, I suppose, is a question of perspective.

Male tourists will encounter this quote-unquote difference in perspective the first time they go into a public bathroom. The urinals are mounted sufficiently high on the walls to make it almost impossible to use them, unless you stand on your tiptoes. Unfortunately, there are no boxes or phone books in the bathrooms to level the porcelain playing field and to give foreigners a much-needed leg up! As a consequence, I always enjoy the look of shock on the faces of many male visitors in the Netherlands as they return from the wc (the Dutch phrase for toilet).

An exchange I once had with a Dutch friend is also illustrative. She was reading a Dutch magazine when I suddenly heard "Tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk." (A sound the Dutch like to make. In this case it conveyed sympathy.) "That's terrible," she said. I asked her what was wrong. "There's a letter here from a mother whose daughter is only twelve years old and is already 183," she replied. That seemed unremarkable, so I asked, "Pounds or kilograms?" A bewildered look crossed her face and her head recoiled in shock. It took a few seconds for what I had said to sink in. Finally, she blurted out, "No, centimeters!" (While there is nothing inherently wrong with being very tall, the Dutch mother was concerned that her daughter might be teased or could encounter other social problems.)

That conversation also emphasizes the fact that, no matter how hard you try, you remain a product of your country of origin. People in many countries (in particular, Americans), even if they don't have the problem personally, are obsessed with weight. The Dutch are plagued by their size, although they seem to deal with their affliction better than most. As an aside, the Dutch still don't really have a weight problem. While there are overweight people in the Netherlands (the overall trend mirrors that found in other countries), obesity is less prevalent, and frankly, is never carried to the extremes that occur in places like the United States. How is this possible? Simple: they don't eat as much and what they do eat contains a lot less sugar and fat. If anything, some of the Dutch have the opposite problem with regard to weight. I know a few Dutch women, and even a few men, who are not anorexic, but do have an odd problem: they can't gain weight. They eat lots of junk food and still can't gain weight. What do you say to someone who tells you, with complete sincerity, that they have always wanted to know what it feels like to go on a diet? Welcome to a different world.

Aside from the general improvement in the standard of living over the last half-century and the more even distribution of wealth in Dutch society, the best explanation I've come across for the remarkable growth spurt in the Netherlands is their diet. Specifically, the infant diet. In a laudable program, the government-subsidized *Consultatiebureau* provides regular advice to parents about their children's health and nutrition through four years of age. The objective is to improve the well-being of newborns. It has been an admirable success. The hypothesized impact on the height of the general population is apparently unintended. Alternatively, in a new twist to the age-old, survival of the fittest argument, a few British colleagues once proposed a theory over a couple of beers in a pub. "It's all a simple matter of natural selection," they said. "How's that?" I asked. To which they answered: "What with all of those floods, only the tall could survive."

Steven Stupp is the American author of the book *Beneden de zeespiegel* (literally translated: Underneath the Sea Level). He resided in the Netherlands for several years, and in this book he tells us, with characteristic dry humor, about the cultural shock of living here, while sharing what he got to know about the country and her inhabitants.

# CHAPTER 1

The windmills of your mind are not playing tricks on you. You have (or your Dearly Beloved has) accepted that job in the Netherlands. The dust, created by the whirlwind consequences of this decision, has started to settle and you are beginning to wonder what type of country you have come to. Having read about culture shock in the preceding introduction, you now know that the best step towards familiarizing yourself with this new culture is knowing more about it. First off, relax in the knowledge that the Netherlands has one of the highest standards of living in the world. But what about their government and politics, economy, the climate, and their religion? This chapter will tell you about how history and living below sea level helped shape the politics of this nation.





# The Netherlands in a Nutshell

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS STEPHANIE DIJKSTRA AND HAN VAN DER HORST

## HISTORY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE DUTCH OF TODAY

In the Middle Ages, there were many countships and the occasional duchies on the territory of the Netherlands, which for the larger part coincide with the current provinces. By way of a long historic process, the King of Spain inherited all of these in the second half of the 16th century. However, his hands were tied by the many privileges that the cities and rural districts had acquired in the time of the counts and dukes. These had to do with autonomy and other regulations, as a result of which the King was obligated to appoint the local governors from a predetermined select group of persons, recommended by the prominent local families.

Philip II's intention was to end these privileges. For his day and age, he was a modern ruler who believed in a powerful central authority that maintained the same procedures everywhere, and who based his decisions on the ethical and ideological principles of one sole religion, that of the Roman Catholic Church. However, in the Netherlands, there was much sympathy for Protestantism, especially that of John Calvin.

Philip II's ideas were therefore not met with much enthusiasm. There was a successful uprising – in which a central role was played by William of Orange, the patriarch of the Dutch royal family. William of Orange was a stadtholder – a representative of the king – in several of these countships, including Holland, and he found he could not agree with the loss of the existing privileges nor with the persecution of the Protestants, which was a central element in the royal politics.

The uprising against Philip II resulted in the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, in which the old privileges and local autonomy remained of central importance. This republic could be seen as a union of states, something like the European Union, in which the independent states worked together closely without relinquishing their sovereignty. In this system, no one could muster enough power to conquer a position of dominance in this republic and, if one was too much of a braggart or made too much of a show of wealth and power, one only succeeded in creating enemies. A politically high-ranking position could only be based on influence and not on power. Even the stadtholders, who were always recruited from the House of William of Orange – and who managed to make their position a hereditary one – were unable to acquire very much power. Though they might have had the authority vested in them by Philip II, this was subject to the many constraints that also came with the system of privileges and old rights.

To get something done in the old Republic required the formation of coalitions with others, while also making sure not to

unnecessarily offend one's opponents. Central conditions to being successful were: respect for others, a modest life style, a willingness to listen and the capacity to restrain oneself. Calvinism, the source of this philosophy, was embraced in a liberal way by a majority of the elite, and was very influential.

The Netherlands is no longer a union of states, but instead a democratic state whose unity is symbolized by the King – a descendant of William of Orange's older brother Jan. However, the mentality of the Dutch has remained the same. Even though Dutch society has become strongly secularized, it is still greatly influenced by Calvinistic philosophies. Still evident today is the strong Protestant work ethic characterized by overtones of moderation in all aspects of life, decision-making by consensus, and the stymieing of individualism. The Netherlands is a country where ostentatiousness and boastfulness are akin to sinfulness, and where orderliness and cleanliness are next to godliness. Showing off your wealth is still considered equal to showing a lack of respect, and secretiveness is looked upon with suspicion – hence the open curtains after dark, serving a triple purpose: to demonstrate a lack of ostentatiousness, the evidence of orderliness and to show that there are no secrets. The Protestant work ethic is further reflected in the way in which the country is run, a system generally referred to as the 'Poldermodel'.

## POLDERMODEL

A piece of land that is completely surrounded by a dike for the purpose of protecting it against high waters is called a polder in Dutch. You can find them in all shapes and sizes. The largest in the Netherlands, Flevoland (large enough to have become the Netherlands' youngest province), measures 48,000 hectares. The management of such a polder requires a tight cooperation between the users. The smallest mistake can result in disaster, as a dike is only as strong as its weakest point.

Life behind the dikes has influenced the Dutch culture. It might be going too far to say that it is solely responsible for making the Dutch a democratic people, however, it is clear that they are partial to detailed agreements, to which they must strictly adhere – for all are responsible for 'their part of the dike'. Foreigners never fail to notice the large degree of organization and planning in Dutch society.

This coming together to reach a consensus, this give and take in all the various areas, all characterize Dutch society and Dutch politics. It has resulted in, for instance, the downward adjustment of wage demands, the tolerance of drugs and the legalization of prostitution. This attitude can be summarized in a 'new' word, invented by the British press in 1997: poldermodel.

## THE NETHERLANDS WITHOUT DIKS

The Netherlands literally means Low Lands: 40% of this nation's land lies below sea level. Dunes, dikes, dams and delta works protect us against the water of the sea and the rivers. Without these barriers, the Netherlands would become largely immersed under water.



This poldermodel has not been consistently popular, however. During the first years of the 21st century, the Dutch themselves started to have their doubts about it – led by the suddenly very popular newcomer Pim Fortuyn, who appeared almost as if out of nowhere in the political arena, but was shot to death on May 6, 2002 – before he could truly embark on a political career. Fortuyn and his followers were of the opinion that all this poldermodel-consulting and searching for consensus only distracted people from the real problems in society and was keeping them from making important decisions that were long overdue. The economic recession, the increasing unemployment, and the reduction in income of the average Dutch citizen further fed the criticism of the poldermodel and the subsequent cabinets, led by CDA-Christian Democrat Jan Peter Balkenende, were strongly influenced by this train of thought. However, more than 10 years later, setting aside Dutch nature in favor of a different approach has proven to be less easy than initially anticipated and the Dutch appear to have re-embraced their old tradition of consultation and detailed agreements (you can read more about this in *And the Dutch Politicians Plod On* on page 24).

## THE DUTCH POLITICAL SYSTEM IN BRIEF

### THE GOVERNMENT

The Dutch government is what one calls a 'monarchical government', meaning that it is not only comprised of the ministers and

the state secretaries, but also the monarch, King Willem-Alexander. Another term for describing this is: a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system, whereby the constitution has determined how the powers are divided between the monarch and the other institutions of the government. For instance, the Parliament has been given certain rights allowing them to check the power of the government (listed further on in this chapter). Notably, though the ministers are accountable to Parliament, the King, who has no political responsibility, is not. In fact, since 1848, the person of the king is inviolable. The ministers are responsible for everything he does or says. This puts him in a delicate position; the King, the Queen and their princesses cannot make any public statements without consulting with the Prime Minister first.

### THE CABINET

The cabinet's responsibilities are: preparing and implementing legislation, overseeing the local government, carrying out the day-to-day business of government and maintaining international relations. The observant follower of Dutch politics will notice that the number of ministers tends to change from one cabinet to the next. This can be due to the introduction of a new post that resorts under an existing ministry, but that is considered sufficiently important under the current circumstances to warrant its own minister. Sometimes, the reason behind the addition to, or reduction in, the number of ministers or state secretaries is merely a political one. The numeric distribution of the members of the cabinet must reflect the representation of the coalition partners in the



Parliament as closely as it can. Otherwise one of the coalition partners might feel sold short, which could eventually lead to the fall of the cabinet.

### THE PARLIAMENT

The Netherlands has a representative democracy and its Parliament (*Staten Generaal*) is made up of two chambers: the Upper House (*Eerste Kamer*), whose 75 members are elected by the members of the provincial councils; and the Lower House (*Tweede Kamer*, or Second Chamber), whose 150 members are elected directly by the people.

The two Houses of Parliament have been given four rights: the right to set a budget; the right of interpellation; the right to put questions before ministers and state secretaries; and the right of inquiry. The Lower House has been given two further rights: the right of amendment and the right to propose legislation.

Until 1917, the Netherlands made use of the district system for elections. This was then replaced by proportional representation, making the country, province or municipality one single borough. And then there is the quota; if you divide the total number of votes collected by the number of seats in the representative body, you have a quota. In order to win a seat, you must attain this quota. For instance, the Lower House has 150 seats; in order to win a seat, one has to have won 1/150 of all votes. In this system, voters vote for a party that submits a list of candidates. It is possible, however, to vote for a particular candidate. Though this will always count as a vote for the party, those who receive more than 25% of the party's quota for a seat are guaranteed a seat in the Parliament. The other seats are divided according to the order in which the party candidates appear on the list. Prime Minister Mark Rutte would like to reduce the number of parliamentary members to 100, in order to

cut costs. However, this requires an amendment to the Constitution. And this takes time – and requires a two-thirds majority in parliament.

The elections for the Second Chamber (by the people) and the Upper House (by the members of the Provincial States) do not take place simultaneously. In fact, they are separated by a number of years. This means that a government can have a majority in the Second Chamber, without having one in the First. This is the case for the second Rutte Cabinet, as a consequence of which the ministers find themselves in a position that they have to make concessions in order to garner the support of the members of the Upper House that are in the opposition – thus muddying the waters a bit. Yet in 2013, the cabinet managed to build up a reasonably stable relationship with the opposition parties D66, ChristenUnie and SGP. In return for a number of concessions they helped the Parliament secure a majority in the Upper House. Finance Minister Dijsselbloem even arranged to consult the leaders of these parties when drawing up the budget. These three parties have since earned the name 'favorite opposition parties' in the Dutch world of politics, while the other opposition parties are finding themselves sitting it out in the dugout. Not everyone is in agreement with the actions of the Upper House. They feel that the senators should limit themselves to judging the quality of the legislation, maintaining a largely un-political stance. However, there is nothing in the Dutch constitution to support the demands for this more modest role.

All in all, the election of the Provincial States in 2015 had plenty of political significance. The outcome would determine the composition of the First Chamber. No one talked about province-related issues. The focus was solely on the Cabinet's policy, about which the party leaders – none of whom was a candidate in these elections – debated on television. The outcome of the elections was



## AND THE DUTCH POLITICIANS PLOD ON

Those who visit the restaurants and cafés surrounding Binnenhof, the nerve center of Dutch politics in The Hague, are quite likely to stumble across Prime Minister Mark Rutte – usually in a lively discussion with one of his many acquaintances. This does not surprise anyone.

In a country in which the main social rule is ‘act normal, and you will be acting crazy enough’, this type of behavior is greatly appreciated. Grandstanding is generally frowned upon. Even when Willem-Alexander’s inauguration was approaching, the Prime Minister immediately declared that we were going to have a great, albeit *sober*, party.

‘Sober’ has become a key issue in Dutch politics. Former State Secretary Teeven of Justice wants to make the jail facilities more ‘sober’. His colleague Jetta Klijnsma, of Social Affairs, wants to cut down on a number of benefits, such as the one for widows. These are tough times, which means there is not enough money to fund generous provisions. An important characteristic of the Dutch word ‘sober’ is that it has a certain element of ‘precisely enough’. Anything more would constitute unnecessary luxury.

Already in 1991 the founders of the euro – including the Netherlands – agreed that they would not tolerate a government budget deficit that exceeded 3% and that the ultimate goal would be a budget surplus. This would allow them to shore up the value of the new currency.

And that is what is making things difficult now. Until the 2008 credit crisis, the budgets of the European countries appeared reasonably solid. However, rescuing the banks cost so many billions of euros that the deficits shot

up. Plus there was the reduction in tax revenues due to the shrinking economy.

Yet the European governments are holding on to the 3%-principle. In this respect, Germany and the Netherlands have been the strictest and the firmest these past years. Whenever a country started floundering, the EU was willing to help avoid immediate bankruptcy by means of billion-euro loans (not gifts), under the condition of severe cut-backs in government expenditures – even if this impacted the economy in steps of full percentages.

Consequently, the rich countries of the north cannot morally afford to disregard the 3%-rule – which proved a problem for the Netherlands as it was having trouble keeping its budget within these limitations.

In October 2010, Mark Rutte’s first cabinet took over at the helm. It was a coalition of the conservative-liberal VVD and the Christian Democrat CDA. As this coalition did not yet represent a parliamentary majority, Rutte entered into an agreement with Geert Wilders, the leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV) – which hates immigrants (particularly Muslims), the European Union, and what they refer to as ‘the leftist elite’. In return for a number of concessions, Wilders promised not to trip up the cabinet. These concessions included a very strict immigration policy and cuts in what he calls the ‘hobbies’ of the leftist elite: art, culture and developmental aid. And the environment.

The Rutte cabinet expected to be able to keep the Netherlands under the 3%-limit by structurally cutting back €18 billion of government expenditures. The citizens of the Netherlands felt this in their wallets when

the health insurance deductible went up, the pensionable age was raised, etc. Also the arts suffered greatly – to the joy of the PVV.

However, in 2012, it became apparent that the state coffers were not filling quickly enough so that the deficit, instead of going down, went up to 4.5%. Rutte got together with Geert Wilders and Sybrand Buma (of the CDA) to negotiate a new series of cuts. Three weeks later, Wilders left the negotiating table in a huff.

Rutte tendered the resignation of his cabinet and new elections were scheduled for September 2012. In the interim, the Prime Minister reached an agreement with the progressive liberal D66, GroenLinks and the ChristenUnie in order to collect the €12.4 billion necessary to stop the gap. This was achieved, among others, through an increase in taxes and a raising of the pensionable age.

The outcome of the September 2012 elections was a political landslide in favor of the VVD and the Social Democratic PvdA. Accompanied by loud applause, the second Rutte cabinet entered the political arena, made up of ministers supplied by these two parties.

The aim of this coalition of liberals and social democrats was to cut back €18 billion in hopes of reaching that mythical 3%-limit. By March 2013, it became clear that these measures would not be enough to achieve this. Partly because the Minister of Finance, Dijsselbloem, had found himself forced to nationalize the SNS-bank in order to avoid a ‘Cypriote’ situation, but also because the Dutch economy was still shrinking. So they decided to cut back another €4 billion – at the expense of facilities for the elderly, mort-

not positive for the Cabinet: at the time this edition of *The Holland Handbook* went to press, it looked as if it had lost its majority in the First Chamber, even taking into account the so-called favorite opposition parties. However, it could also go the other way if the government succeeds in winning over the regional one-issue parties, which are represented in the States of some of the provinces, to its side. For instance, by promising to meet some of their demands regarding provincial matters.

#### THE POLITICAL PARTIES

The Dutch Lower House of Parliament is elected by proportional representation and currently there are 16 political parties in the

Lower House. Traditionally, the three largest are the PvdA (or Labor Party), a social democratic party that has its roots in the trade union movement; the CDA (Christian Democrats), a merger of three confessional parties that bases its ideas on religious principles; and the VVD, a liberal party. However, as of the most recent election, the three largest parties are VVD, the PvdA, and instead of the CDA; the PVV and the SP.

As noted earlier, there are also several other parties, whose popularity waxes and wanes in accordance with the political climate in the country, and some of which last only a few years, while others have been around for decades. An example of the latter is the D66, a progressive liberal party that was founded in 1966 and



gage options, unemployment support and the widows' benefit.

This all goes very much against the grain of the Dutch tradition, which built an extensive welfare state during the second half of the 20th century. The motto used to be: "We take care of you, from the cradle to the grave". And they did. Parents received a Child Benefit. The unemployment benefit made sure that the loss of a job did not lead to immediate financial disaster. And the Disability Act paid out a benefit to all those who for health reasons were no longer able to work. And then there was the Exceptional Medical Expenses Act which ensured that the elderly did not have to worry about their exceptional expenses in connection with health care. An act that the government is currently trying to trim.

In 2013, the impact of these plans started to become increasingly clear and the government's popularity reached an all-new low. The polls showed that, in particular, the PvdA's social-democrats were losing their support. The rightist-liberal vvd had already been known for its impatience with the country's status as a welfare state, but this attitude was costing the PvdA – the protector of the weak – its voters. In the polls, it saw itself reduced to 10 or 11 seats, while the vvd – though not terribly popular itself – still retained its 21 seats. The fact that the parties' constituents were serious became evident during the recent municipal and provincial elections: the PvdA and the vvd were given a clobbering. At the same time, very few people went to the voting booth; increasingly, they seem to be tired of politics altogether – something that in the long term could prove a threat to democracy.



So the question arises as to whether the Dutch population will be willing to go along with the government's 'sobriety' for very long. Will it tolerate the fact that both of Rutte's cabinets are using the financial crisis to convert the Netherlands from a country with protective (social) measures into a society in which individuals have to take responsibility for their own welfare, requiring them to make their own buffers to help them cope with the whims of mercy? This would require not only a new political mind-set, but a new social-cultural one as well.

These new economic measures have not only come under sharp criticism from the 'usual suspects' – leftist interest groups and unions – but also from the corporate world. In April 2013, the unions and the employee organizations came up with a wide 'social plan' – full of proposals on how to postpone or even foil the plans of the government by means of their own measures.

A first, it seemed as if the Cabinet had no choice but to reach an agreement with the social partners – the name given to the organizations of employers and employees in the Netherlands – but as time passed, the ministers became more adept at playing the Hague political game, and they found their allies. As

mentioned earlier, the government has a generous majority in the Lower House, but not so in the Upper House; in order to attain a majority there, they had to reach an agreement with the opposition – at a price. The machinations surrounding the new pension plans was an excellent illustration of what happened if they failed to do this – relying instead on their ability to convince. The majority in the Upper House was so opposed to the plans that the Lower House chose to withdraw their proposal rather than suffer defeat. Instead, they entered into negotiations with the opposition and proved their willingness to make adjustments. Thanks to the support of the aforementioned 'favorite opposition parties' – D66, ChristenUnie and SGP – the Cabinet eluded the grip of the unions and employer organizations, and was also able to see its budget passed. This situation was almost identical to that of the first Rutte-Cabinet – only with a different 'favored' opposition.

Interestingly enough, these 'favorite opposition parties' seem immune to the current Cabinet's unpopularity; they are doing well in the polls and booked great – D66 even spectacular – success in the recent municipal and provincial elections.

which has fruitlessly been campaigning for the introduction of the district system and the election of mayors. Having gone from three to ten seats between 2006 and 2010, it appears to have regained the confidence of the voters. The other smaller parties that can be found in Parliament are Groen Links, the fundamentalist protestant parties SGP and ChristenUnie, and the Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD, or Party for Animals).

#### THE SMALLER PARTIES

The SGP, which has had two or three seats in the Parliament since 1920, is part of national folklore. Its constituents are among the most orthodox protestants of the country; many of them still reject

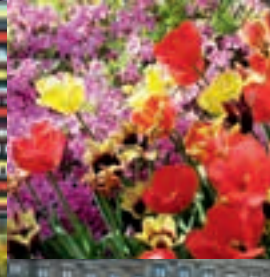
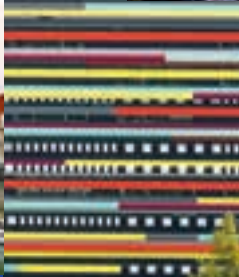
television and consider the taking out of insurance as an unlawful way of escaping God's hand. Until recently, the SGP also still rejected female suffrage. This past decade, the party and its principles have been under fire, as some of its views are considered inappropriately close to Muslim fundamentalism – a globally hot topic at the moment. Still, its members appear to be loosening up somewhat; recently its parliamentary members even appeared in political tv programs – something that until very recently would have been seen as akin to consorting with the devil.

GroenLinks started out as a merger of several parties that represented a combination of greens, pacifists and communists. Its popularity was at its highest in 1998, when it won 11 seats in the











elections. Its focus is on environmental issues, and a just division of power, knowledge, property, labor and income and is best summarized as leftist-liberal. After the last elections, in 2012, it saw itself reduced to four parliamentary seats.

The ChristenUnie was founded in 2000, and is a merger between two religious parties. It wants to balance the tendency towards materialism and individualism, by focusing on a joint responsibility within society for each other.

The Netherlands is the only country in the world with a Party for the Animals; Partij voor de Dieren. The party has two seats in the government and its two parliamentary members focus on supporting animal rights, fighting the inhumane treatment of animals in the bio-industry, and creating an ecologically-based policy. They are professional politicians who are taken seriously by their colleagues and who have ensured that animal well-being is a recognized action item for the Dutch government.

The Party for Freedom (pvv) revolves around the dissident vvd-member of Parliament Geert Wilders, who, at the start of 2004, was forced to leave his party when he refused to accept his party's policy on non-Dutch nationals and their support for the admission of Turkey to the European Union. Wilders started a new, rightist, political party aimed at enticing Pim Fortuyn-voters (see further on), and his propaganda mainly focuses on his rejection of Islam; he wants to close the borders to newcomers, particularly those of Muslim conviction. He has since received so many threats, that he currently lives under strict personal protection. The party's other policies include a rejection of bureaucracy and a system of social provisions that does not show a lot of common sense. It is still quite successful, too. In 2010 it won 23 seats, which were reduced to 15 after it supported Rutte's unpopular cabinet, but went back up to 30 seats, at least in the polls.

In 2012, a new party, 50 Plus, also managed to win two seats in the Dutch Parliament. Many of the older generation are furious about the lowering of the pensions and fear that they are the ones who are going to end up paying the price for the economic crisis.

To explain the term 'Pim Fortuyn-voters' (under pvv): in the 2002 elections, newcomer Pim Fortuyn's party – Pim Fortuyn himself was murdered by an environmental activist just days before the elections took place – emerged as the great victor with 26 seats. The LPF, as this party was called, booked a lot of success with its rightist-populist program, which greatly focused on traditional Dutch 'norms and values'. However, within just a few months, the party fell apart due to personal infighting. When new elections were held towards the end of 2002, the party was brought back to just eight seats, and no longer held any political clout. Now, the LPF is no longer represented in the Parliament at all. Political polls show that the voters have indeed turned towards Geert Wilders.

The number of parties in the current Second Chamber has risen to 16, due to the fact several rebel members of parliament have left (or been forced to leave) their original parties and start a new one. Which is permitted in the Netherlands. A notable example of this is Geert Wilders' pvv, but also the vvd and the PvdA have lost a few members this way.

#### FORMING A CABINET

Because there are so many political parties in the Netherlands, there are numerous coalition possibilities. Consequently, several

months generally pass after the elections, during which, after extensive deliberation, a cabinet is formed with a program to which the majority of the members of Parliament can give their approval. In the meantime, the Prime Minister tenders the resignation of the entire cabinet – which the King 'answers' by requesting the cabinet to stay on until there is a new one.

Does this mean that the Netherlands does not have a government in the interim? Of course not. After the cabinet's resignation, the incumbent ministers continue to run the country – until the new cabinet is formed. However, decisions that might lead to extensive discussions in Parliament are delayed until the new cabinet is in power.

Any policies that the Parliament approved before the elections are continued, but this seldom gives rise to any problems. In fact, it has often happened that the government that was on the way out approved a new budget, though more often than not this has proved to be a colorless document, meant to be 'colored in' when the 'real' cabinet then entered into power. (The entering into power of the new cabinet, incidentally, happens from one day to the next, making it seem as if the 'old' ministers have but a morning to clear out their desks.)

#### THE THREE LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

The Netherlands not only has a central government, but also provincial and municipal governments and the water boards. The central government occupies itself with matters of national interest. The provincial governments concern themselves with social work, cultural affairs, environmental management, spatial planning, energy and sports. The municipal governments occupy themselves with traffic, housing, social services, health care, sports, culture, the water supply, public schooling and recreation. In order to help fund these activities, the provinces and municipalities receive government funding and levy their own local taxes. You can read more about the local taxes that may affect you on page 95. The last elections for the water boards took place this year, at the same time as the elections for the Provincial States – they yielded no major shifts.

#### VOTING AND STANDING FOR ELECTION AS A NON DUTCH NATIONAL

##### *Voting*

If you are an EU citizen, you are allowed to vote in municipal elections under the same conditions as Dutch nationals. This means that you must be at least 18 years of age on the day of the election and you must be a resident of a particular municipality on the day on which the candidates are nominated. If you are a non-EU national, you may vote under the same conditions; however, you must also have been a legal resident of the Netherlands for a continuous period of at least five years. To vote for the water boards, you must be living in a 'watership', at least 18 years of age, and have Dutch/EU nationality or – if you are of another nationality – a legal resident of the Netherlands. Only those of Dutch nationality may vote in the Provincial States-elections. For more information on whether you can be considered a legal resident for voting purposes, you can call the Ministry of Home Affairs (see the end of the chapter).

If you are a member of consular or diplomatic staff, you are not allowed to vote in the Netherlands, nor is your spouse/partner or children (if they are members of your household).



## LEAN YEARS

**2013** was a bad year. Unemployment went up and the economy continued its slump, causing critics to feel confirmed in their criticism. However, towards the end of the year, things started to improve; there was a slight upswing in the economy which continued on into the start of this year, while the Central Bureau of Statistics showed that the budget deficit had gone down to 2.5% – well below the 3%-limit set by the EU for its members. And not only that; even the housing market started to show recovery – causing politicians to carefully suggest that the worst of the crisis was over. In 2015, the signs were even more positive. The Netherlands profited from the growth that occurred most of Europe, strongly boosted by interest rates that were rapidly approaching 0% and had not been this low since the 16th century (!). Furthermore, the European Central Bank started stimulating the economy by, on a large scale, purchasing obligations. However, the money came into the hands of banks that did not appear eager to lend it to investors or companies. Yet the threat of deflation appeared to have been countered by the spring of this year. It was not hard for the Minister of Finance, Jeroen Dijsselbloem of the Social Democrats, to present budgets with a deficit easily under 3%. In the meantime, the stock markets went up. In April of this year, the Dutch AEX exceeded 500 points. This had not happened since 2007 and was a doubling of where it had been at its lowest point since the 2008 crisis. There were nonetheless plenty of people who were afraid that this was merely a new bubble, while the positive development did not much affect the number of jobs on the market.

Let's keep in mind what the Dutch would say: "One swallow does not a summer make". The fact that seven lean years have gone by does not mean that we are now entering seven fat years.

If you are an EU citizen, and a resident of the Netherlands, you are allowed to vote in elections for the *European Parliament* provided you do not vote in the same election in your home country, are 18 years of age or older, and are not disqualified from voting in the Netherlands or your home country.

Only Dutch nationals may vote in elections for the Second Chamber of the Parliament (the members of the First Parliament are elected by the members of the Provincial States) and the Provincial States.

#### *Standing for Election*

You can stand for election to municipal councils under the same conditions as stated above for voting. The only difference is that you must satisfy these conditions not on the day of nomination, but on the day you are admitted to the municipal council. You can also stand for election in Dutch elections to the European Parliament, provided you do not stand for election elsewhere.

Only Dutch nationals may stand for election for the First and Second Chamber of the Parliament, as well as for the Provincial States.

## ECONOMY

The Netherlands is in the world's top ten in export volume and it ranks in the world's top twenty for GNP, even though, in terms of square kilometers, it is one of the smallest countries of the world. Though it is true that, in population density, it is on a par with countries such as India and Japan, nonetheless this only amounts to a population of almost 16.8 million.

#### GATEWAY TO EUROPE

The Netherlands owes its favorable ranking, among others, to its advanced transportation infrastructure, with, at its hub, both the port of Rotterdam (fourth largest seaport in the world in terms of container activity) and Schiphol Airport (the fourth largest airport in Europe). Also the country's advanced telecom infrastructure and its extensive (hi-speed) railway network help support the Netherlands' position as 'the gateway to Europe'.

Traditionally, the Netherlands has been a country that other countries are eager to invest in, which has been reflected by the huge investments made in the Dutch economy and Dutch companies over the years. This willingness to invest in the Dutch economy is largely due to the country's stable and flexible work environment (thanks to the Poldermodel), its central geographic location, its well-educated multilingual work force and the amount of know-how available here.

Individuals, often enticed while traveling here to stay and find a job, are as motivated as companies are to settle in the Netherlands, particularly since the opening of the frontiers within the European Union. The Dutch government, recognizing the value of top-notch specialists who contribute to the knowledge pool and economy of the Netherlands, has also introduced a number of tax measures aimed at making it more attractive for non-Dutch nationals to come and work here (you can read more about this in chapter 3). Also the bureaucratic red tape has been simplified, reducing the number of hoops employers and employees have to jump through to obtain the necessary papers.

#### RANDSTAD

After Paris, London and Milan, the Randstad (the area including, and between, Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht) is the largest economic urban area in the EU, measured in terms of gross domestic product. This is largely due to the strong presence of financial and commercial services; which happens to be one of the motors of Dutch economy.

#### SECTORS

Though the economy of the Netherlands is relatively resilient, it is nonetheless dependent – as a country of trade, which accounts for 60% of the country's GNP – on the economy of the rest of the world. It might not drop as quickly as the overall economy, but it will not bounce back as quickly either, due to the relatively high costs of labor (wages and pension premiums). The most important trade commodities for the Netherlands are machinery and transportation equipment, followed by chemical and mineral products.



As the 'gateway to Europe', the Netherlands' most dominant sector is the services sector, accounting for approximately two-thirds of both its GNP and its work force. Another dominant sector is that of mineral extraction, particularly the production of natural gas. Other sectors that consistently contribute to the Dutch economy are the restaurant, trade, and repair services sector, and the health care and related services sector. A final important sector is the agricultural and food sector; it generates approximately 10% of the GNP; 75% of the agricultural produce is exported.

The Dutch economy benefits greatly from the fact that the world's largest chemical companies are based here, while the Netherlands is one of Europe's largest suppliers of high-tech goods for both the industrial and the consumer market. As mentioned earlier, this country is also Europe's largest producer of natural gas, as witnessed by its reserves in the north of the country, while Rotterdam imports and refines huge amounts of crude oil that is shipped to the rest of western Europe. Thanks to these offshore installations and refineries, the Netherlands has many activities in the oil and gas industries, including a strong research and development technology and a specialized construction industry.

A little aside: in confirmation of the country's reputation as the nation of tulips, the Netherlands exports 4 billion flower bulbs a year, mostly tulips. 60% of these go to Germany, the UK, France and Japan, though the U.S. is their top destination, with 900 million bulbs making their way across the Atlantic.

#### WELFARE

All in all, this makes the Netherlands a wealthy country, with a high per capita GDP boosted by social security measures guaranteeing a minimum income, health care and education.

#### THE YEAR 2014

The second economic slump that hit the Netherlands in 2011 appears to be coming to an end: in 2014, the housing market went up again, as did employment, exports and overall market activity. Not only that, consumption and investments went up, along with consumer and producer confidence, while a further boost was given by the drop in oil prices and the devaluation of the euro, which helped stimulate exports. And while consumer confidence may still have been at -7 last year, it is worth comparing this to previous years: -39 in 2012 and -17 in 2013, while confidence in the economic climate was even more illustrative: -4 last year, versus -64 in 2012 and -14 in 2013.

In 2014, the Dutch economy grew 0.9% – going down only in the first quarter due to the mild winter and the consequences thereof for production of natural gas. The growth in consumption, a modest 0.1%, was largely thanks to the purchase of durable consumer goods, such as electronics, and increased spending in the hospitality industry. But not cars or trucks: the sale of vehicles had experienced an upswing in 2013 in anticipation of fiscal changes in 2014 that would make them more expensive. As mentioned earlier, investments went up over 2014 – by 3.4% – which went into almost all categories: machines, software and real estate (until December 2014, tax-free gifts could be made of up to € 100,000 for the purchase of real estate – a measure that was clearly effective in giving the market a boost as sales went up significantly, modestly bumping up house prices along the way). Almost 154,000 houses were sold in 2014, compared to 110,000 the previous year; in fact, the greatest increase in sales was in free-standing houses – going up by 45% – generally the most expensive category of houses.

There were 17,000 fewer jobs in 2014 than in 2013 – only a slight



decrease compared to the previous years that is the outcome of 37,000 fewer jobs in employment and 20,000 more in self-employment, bringing the percentage of those in self-employment to 21%. Already for several years now, the construction sector has been feeling the pinch and it continues to do so – since last year, also the care sector has had fewer jobs to offer. The commercial services sector has started climbing out of its dip, primarily in the area of temp jobs, but the financial services sector is still experiencing a downturn. On a positive note, the number of job openings went up over last year, even in the construction industry and regular industry. Particularly in the areas of trade, transportation and the hospitality industry, there were more job openings – and more jobs filled: 65,000 in total, including all areas of employment. What has changed, in the area of unemployment, is type of unemployment: the number of short-term unemployed persons went down, but the number of long-term unemployed has gone up.

Inflation was at an historic low in 2014: on average, 1%. The price of services did not go up as quickly as in previous years, while the price of goods actually went down, in some cases – a modesty in movement unrivaled over the past 25 years. The service in which there was the greatest increase in prices was in the rent sector, while the greatest decrease was in – no surprise here – the energy sector.

Exports increased by 4% last year, as always encompassing re-exports, but also the export of locally-produced goods. While the effect, over the past few years, of the level of exports had been to keep the economic slump somewhat in check, over 2014, it actually *contributed* to the year's economic growth. The only industry that experienced a decrease in exports was the oil and gas industry, thanks to the decrease in oil prices and the mild winter. Whereas, over the past 15 years, exports to the BRIC-countries constituted the greatest growth in exports, their own disappointing growth percentages had a negative impact on this development, with the exception of Brazil, which is number two on the list of fastest risers of Dutch exports, flanked by Iran, Hong Kong and Bulgaria. Also exports to Africa are experiencing an upswing. The countries that experienced the greatest decrease in exports from the Netherlands were Taiwan, Latvia, Argentina and Indonesia. Iran also features on the list of countries that experienced a *decrease* of exports TO the Netherlands, along with Malta, India and Algeria. Countries from which imports increased the most were Lithuania, Bulgaria, Thailand and China.

What are the predictions for 2015? Due to the positive development of the Dutch economy over 2014, unemployment is expected to do down – though it will remain at a relative high for the Netherlands: 6.5%. As for the housing market: though the amount that people will be able to borrow to finance a house is being reduced incrementally, and the tax-free gift towards buying real estate has been abolished, both of which will have a somewhat discouraging effect on the housing market, it is nonetheless expected to go up modestly. This will be thanks to the continuing low interest rate on mortgages and the fact that those who have put off selling their house these past few years are expected to carefully start putting their houses on the market again. Thanks to the boost to the housing market and labor market, consumer expenditures are expected to go up over 2015 – the greatest increases being in wholesale, business services, industry and transportation – while exports and imports are expected to go up; by 5.25% and 5% respectively.

## CLIMATE

### BORING!

Unfortunately, the Netherlands simply does not have the most exciting of climates. Granted, there are magnificent winter and glorious summer days but, sadly, not very many. This can be very hard to take for those who have not grown up here (and even for those who have!). Many expats comment on how the gray and dreary skies and constant rainfall make it all that much harder to be motivated to get out of bed in the morning and that the only thing that makes it even harder in the winter is that the sun comes up so late. So, what are the facts and how do you get through this?

### WINTER

Let's take December. During the last three decades of the 20th century, the average temperature during the month of December was 4° C – hardly North Pole conditions. The last very cold December days of that century were in 1995, when the average temperature was -0.9° C (also not very shocking). Of course, when it does decide to dip below zero, it goes way down below: in the winter of 2001-02 and the next, the temperature somewhere in Groningen did go down to a whopping -17° C...

And how about January? January is known as the month of ice – but does it deserve this name? Not according to the Dutch Weather Institute (KNMI); only the occasional January has been good and cold – notably in 1996 and 1997, giving the Netherlands its last Elfstedentocht (11-town ice-skating tour that only takes place when the water freezes over on all the lakes and canals in Friesland solidly enough to support thousands of ice-skaters and spectators).

In fact, it can be concluded that Dutch winters have been heating up over the course of the 20th century. This is blamed on the uncommon strength of the western winds, which allow the warm temperatures of the seas (7° C) to influence the winter temperature, rather than the winds that come in from the north-east. Unfortunately, this also means more precipitation, which, in combination with mild winters, amounts to an awful lot of rain. Hence the dreary, bleak, rainy, wimpy winters.

### SUMMERS

And the summers? The Netherlands is known for its wishy-washy summers in two senses; warm and dry one year, cool and wet the next – or warm and dry this *week*, cool and wet the next. Whether or not you can pack up your tent and enjoy the local vacation spots depends entirely on your luck. A note: though cool and wet summers immediately spark the global climate change discussion, Dutch summers have been this way since before the Middle Ages, the KNMI (Dutch Meteorological Institute) assures us.

On a positive note; 2003's summer was so sunny that it broke all records since 1901, while 2005 is on a shared fifth place on this list! Also the '90s saw a couple of record-breaking, top-of-the-list summers, while, in fact, during the 21st century so far, the average annual temperature has exceeded the 300-year history of the Dutch weather institute's recordings, so let's enjoy this upswing while it lasts ...

### SURVIVING

So, how do you survive? Step one is to simply accept the facts, rather than fight them or hope for anything else. As for the summers,

you simply make a choice: either you go find a place where the sun is guaranteed to shine (home?) or you decide you want to see more of the country and will take the weather as it comes. As for the winters; December is easy. This is the month of lights and candles for the holiday season – and they will presumably brighten your spirits considerably. And January, February and March? If you are not off skiing or vacationing, this is a good time to light the fire in the fireplace (if you have one) and settle down for some good reading. Get together often with friends, eat good hearty meals, turn on all the lights, and splash a bit of color on your walls to liven things up. In short, go in search of, or create some of your own, *gezelligheid*. (For things to do with kids, check out chapter 8). And spend a lot of time by the window. Though this will unfortunately expose you to the gray winter skies, it will also expose you to whatever sunlight there is to be had – an absolutely necessary ingredient in combating the winter blues.

And whenever the sun comes out: go for it!

#### 2014

Imagine this: 2014 was the warmest year since they officially started registering the Dutch weather conditions in 1706! All months were warmer than average – except for the month of August, but oh well... Eight of last year's months ended in their category's top ten warmest and some areas had neither snow nor frost, the entire winter. The Betuwe-region, home to many of the nation's orchards, was quite worried when, in March, the trees started to flower; what if the frost returned and ruined their yield? In retrospect, they need not have worried as this was the sunniest March in over 100 years, and a month that gently morphed into a lovely – if somewhat temperamental, what with the occasional hail storms and frequent thunderstorms – month of April. Then, though the previous two months had been unusually dry, May delivered enough rain to bring the average rainfall for the season back up to par. June was warm and dry, and also July unusually warm, leading everyone to believe that this was going to be an exceptionally pleasant summer. However August changed its mind about the whole deal and brought us cool temperatures and lots of precipitation, to the dismay of those who, based on expectations raised by the previous months, had booked a local vacation. Then came a gentle fall, with a sunny September, dry October, and a month of November that started out like a (Dutch) summer, reaching temperatures of more than 20° C in some places, but quickly dipping to night frost by the end of the month. Also December started out warm, but finally surrendered to winter conditions just in time for Christmas.

And now, our usual overview of numbers:

- 0 day of ice (maximum temperature < 0° C) (13 in 2013)
- 27 days of frost (minimum temperature < 0° C) (64 in 2013)
- 110 warm days (maximum temperature > 20° C) (82 in 2013)
- 23 summer days (maximum temperature > 25° C) (27 in 2013)
- 2 tropical days (maximum temperature > 30° C) (7 in 2013)

## RELIGION

Although modern Dutch society is very secular, and not many Dutch people identify with an organized religion, you will see plenty of churches and other places of worship, and you will have plenty of opportunity to practice your own religion if you wish.

#### THE CHURCHES YOU SEE

Before the Protestant Reformation, most Dutch people were Roman Catholics. Churches were built as Catholic churches; full of altars, images and decoration.

The religious reforms of the 16th century took place in the Low Countries against a background of resistance against Spanish domination. The Spanish were militant Catholics, and their persecution of Protestant 'heretics' sharpened the economic and political conflict. It also sharpened the fury with which the Dutch reformers stripped their churches of all the trappings of the Catholic Church. All statues and decorations were removed, and altars were either removed or replaced by burial monuments for leading citizens. Only the pulpits were left standing. These more sober and democratically furnished interiors suited the beliefs of the Calvinists better. Today most of the churches built before the Reformation are still Protestant and sober, having been stripped of their Catholic 'frills'. Only in the southern provinces, where Catholics accounted for a larger percentage of the population, did they succeed in regaining control of the old churches.

The people who remained Catholic after the Protestant Reformation were never systematically persecuted in the Netherlands, but they were discriminated against and hindered in the practice of their religion. For centuries they kept a low profile, getting together for services in hidden, or semi-hidden churches. They were called Papists (*Papen*), and even today you see traces of their neighborhoods reflected in the names of streets and towns. Only in the middle of the 19th century, with the start of the industrial revolution, did the Catholics have enough confidence and resources to start building their own large churches again. Most of these were built in neo-Gothic style. Their newer-looking, machine-made bricks distinguish them from the older churches.

Except for Maastricht and other cities in the south, nearly all large churches you see in Dutch city centers fall into one of these two categories: Protestant and dating from between the 13th and 16th centuries, or Catholic and dating from the 19th century. Churches that date from the 17th, 18th or 20th centuries were usually built on a modest scale.

#### DUTCH DENOMINATIONS

The southern provinces of Brabant and Limburg are predominantly Catholic, and the other provinces are predominantly Protestant. Of the Dutch people who nowadays claim church affiliation, only about 5% of the population attends services regularly, and though there are more registered members of the Roman Catholic Church (4.2 million) than of the Protestant Church (1.7 million), only 6.3% of the Catholics go to church regularly, while 22% of the Protestants do.

#### PROTESTANTS

At the time of the Reformation, some Dutch Protestants followed the teachings of Martin Luther, but most followed the more radical John Calvin, of France. The main feature of Calvinism, in addition to its sobriety, was its belief in predestination – the belief that some people are destined for a place in heaven and others are not. These ideas have evolved, and different streams and communities have developed throughout the years.

The two main categories of Protestantism in the Netherlands today are *Nederlands Hervormd* (Dutch Reformed) and *Gerefor-*