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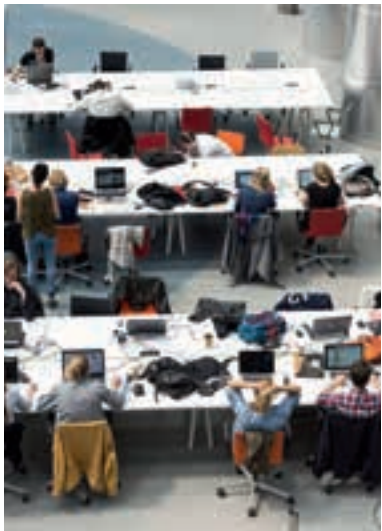
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About The Holland Handbook

Welcome, expat, to the Netherlands! We are proud to present you this nineteenth 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 eighteen 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.

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

Bert van Essen and Gerjan de Waard
Publishers



www.facebook.com/XPatMedia

A wide-angle photograph of a frozen canal in a Dutch winter landscape. The canal is covered in a layer of ice, and the long, dark shadows of a row of bare trees on the opposite bank are cast across its surface. Two small figures of people are visible in the distance, skating on the ice. The sky is a pale, overcast blue.

The Holland Handbook

Your Guide
to Living in
the Netherlands

A New Life in the Netherlands

Adapting to a New Country and a New Culture

BY DIANE LEMIEUX

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.

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. Like all cultures, 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 number of traffic jams. So much so that radio announcers have long since stopped listing all of them and simply recite the longest. No wonder, as this country welcomed its 8 millionth car in 2017. Meanwhile, as you will surely notice, the government is working hard at widening the highways, or laying new ones – a cause of considerable temporary inconvenience. Towards the end of 2015, for instance, it opened an addition to the A4, which connects The Hague and Rotterdam, thanks to which these two cities – which are only 20 kilometers apart – are now linked by two highways instead of one. Not that this put an end to the traffic jams around Rotterdam, the second largest city of the Netherlands. They will also soon be starting on the construction of a new tunnel underneath the Nieuwe Waterweg (New Waterway), west of Rotterdam, as well as tackling the bottlenecks around Utrecht. Another innovation that is on the agenda is the replacement of gasoline by electricity in order to reduce the emission of CO2. Meanwhile, the highway network around of Rotterdam appears to be running for the position of national champion when it comes to traffic jams and delays. This is due to the end of the crisis and the recovering economy. There is more traffic on the roads – and a mere percentage in increase is enough to congest the entire network.

This traffic situation has revived an age-old discussion; the levying of a traffic jam toll – a dynamic toll such as they have in Singapore that makes drivers pay to make use of the highways. Whereby they pay more during rush hour and much less, for instance, at night. In return, the road tax that everyone owes would be reduced, or abolished. Ict would make this all possible, but there are many objections: the average employee, for example, has no choice but to travel during rush hour – should they be ‘punished’ for this? On the other hand, thanks to modern technology, working from your own home and flexible working hours are certainly an option. Plus, it is not only up to the employees to make things work; their employers can contribute to the solution too. Not to mention the introduction of the self-driving car – no longer something from science fiction. *So many heads, so many opinions*, the Dutch say – which means that one thing is certain: before any decisions are made, many years will have gone by. So, for now, we are just going to have to contend with the traffic jams. Incidentally, no need to fear tolls on the highways during peak hours. This remains a taboo, as far as the third Rutte cabinet is concerned. The ANWB, the largest organization representing the interests of drivers in the Netherlands, expects that travel time will increase by 50% over the coming years. The two billion euros that the government plans to allocate to

improving the infrastructure is not nearly enough to improve matters.

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 will see countless Eastern European URLs on the sides of trucks bearing Eastern European license plates (from Poland, Hungary, Slovenia and Rumania): the wages and taxes 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. Some of these changes are contributing to an increasing undercurrent of nationalism and anti-EU sentiments among the Dutch, as membership of the EU is allowing other transportation companies to offer their services at cheaper rates, leading to unfair competition. More and more measures are being taken to ensure that the competition on the road does not become dangerous. For instance, for some time already, all drivers are required to have a computer in their truck that registers exactly how long they drive; if their breaks are too short, they are fined heavily. A new measure forces drivers to sleep in a hotel and not in their truck.

Coming back to the nation’s wealth: 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, during the 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. Where are the Rolls Royces, Daimlers, Aston Martins and Ferraris? 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, Landrovers, Volvos and BMWs. 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 owners of 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. This is even more so among the younger generation. To millennials, a car is something to get from point A to point B and not a status symbol or an expression of your personality – as was sometimes the case for their parents. Many don’t even bother to obtain a driver’s license as they are not planning to spend their days in a traffic jam, just to be unable to find a parking spot upon reaching their destina-

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, 100, 70 or even 50 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 2016, almost 10 million fines were paid, yielding the nation’s coffers more than € 700 million. In 2010, this had been € 525 million. Especially on those stretches where you can drive 130 kilometers an hour, you must be very alert; exceeding this by even one kilometer will activate the cameras and ensure you a fine. On highways with a lower maximum speed, the authorities are willing to turn a blind eye to an additional three or four kilometers – but, other than that, the so-called *flitspalen* (flash poles, with cameras on them), have been so improved upon and modernized, that there is no escaping them. In April 2017, even the leader of the police union complained about how strict they were. He pointed out that spending on the traffic police had been cut and that he felt that the human eye should not be sacrificed to sophisticated *flitspalen* – as this would be to the detriment of not only safety, but the confidence that people have in the police.

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.



tion. They prefer public transportation, (electric) bicycles and rental cars. Why buy a car, if you only plan to use it occasionally? In 2018, the new Chinese car manufacturer Lync & Co decided to enter the Dutch market, offering short and long lease periods for cars. This way, it thinks it will be able to spark a revolution in Dutch transportation.

The overall picture, however, becomes a quite different when you look at the distribution of wealth. The wealthiest 10% of the population owns more than half (61%) of the total wealth in the Netherlands – in fact, one-third of this belongs the top 2% of this group – while the bottom 60% owns approximately 1% of the nation’s total wealth. In 2017, the Dutch became richer – by 53 billion dollars – but almost half of this went to the wealthiest 1% of the Dutch.

Yet, the Dutch wouldn’t be the Dutch if they thought this concentration of wealth in the bank accounts of just a few was alright, and they have been pleading for a raising of the wealth tax. Die-hard socialists? One of them is a card-carrying Liberalist.

Starting in 2014, the economy showed a slight upswing and the asking prices of houses started to go up – after having gone down 20% over the past years. In 2015, this recovery began to show signs of a true economic upswing. Towards the end of 2017, the Netherlands was leading, in terms of growth percentages, in the European Union. One should keep in mind that, in Europe, a growth percentage of 1.5-2% is already considered quite positive. Nonetheless, this economic growth was sustained over 2016 and through 2017. Unemployment has gone down and the social-democratic minister of finance, Jeroen Dijsselbloem, gave us a pleasant surprise in his last budget (2016): the national budget showed not a deficit, but a surplus. The same was the case for the 2017 and 2018 budgets. If the current policies are continued and the economy continues to improve, this surplus could continue to grow over the coming years. The politicians have calculated that 11 billion

euros could become available for spending or investing – though some economists and the president of the national bank, Klaas Knot, warn against such notions: it might be a good idea to set this money aside for tougher times, which are sure to come again in the future. The Netherlands has had a tendency to spend in times of fortune and to close the purse in times of crisis. The opposite would be more sensible. Through this all, the secularization of this once very Christian country was evident: no one referred to Joseph, who advised the pharaoh to set aside his surplus during the seven fat years, to prepare for the seven lean years that were on their way. The pharaoh appointed Joseph to be his prime minister. But that was 4,000 years ago. In 2018, the political cards are quite different in most countries. Can we expect lean years? Bank president Knot is seriously taking this possibility into account. He is also worried about an over-extension of the real estate market. Thanks to the efforts of the European Central Bank to artificially keep the interest rates at a minimum, mortgage burdens are at an all-time low. The demand for housing has gone up and is back to where it was before the crisis. The increase in prices – initially limited to the larger cities – is now spreading across the country. The wait is now for a new bubble to pop. And aren’t stock prices currently too high, thanks to the fact that too many people are looking towards investments to maximize capital yield, now that putting their money in a savings account is unattractive – thanks to the same low interest rates? Are the swings on the bitcoin market – discovered by the average Dutchman as an speculation option – a preview of what is to come?

Han van der Horst (1949) is an historian. Among expatriates, his best-known book is *The Low Sky – Understanding the Dutch*.

Urbanized Center

The Randstad, in the provinces of North-Holland, South-Holland and Utrecht, is strongly urbanized. There are no real metropolises with millions of people in Holland. The largest city, Amsterdam, does not have more than about 853,000 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.

The cities of the Randstad – Rotterdam, Delft, The Hague, Leiden Haarlem, Amsterdam, Hilversum, Utrecht, Gouda and Dordrecht – form an almost continuous circle or half-moon. The Dutch call this a ‘rand’, or ‘edge’, hence the name Randstad. In the middle of this lays a green area, with small and medium-sized villages. Together with the Southeastern area of Brabant (Eindhoven), 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 three-masters 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.

When it comes to wealth, the situation is different. There are approximately 157,000 millionaires in the Netherlands and one in three households has at least € 100,000 in a bank account. The rest has to make due with less. Often much less. One point one million households have a negative wealth; as in, they are in debt – though, fortunately, this number is going down, now that the economic crisis is slowly receding. Should you run into a Dutchman who complains about the taxes and how the middle class is suffering, ask him to show you the numbers. Whereby it must be noted that the crisis did contribute to poverty. In 2016, there were 1.25 million ‘poor people’ – on a population of 17 million. Of these, 595,000 had been in this situation for more than three years. Before the crisis, there had been 850,000 poor people. In the spring of 2017, it was calculated that the number of children living in poverty has gone up to 400,000. Princess Laurentien, the socially-engaged wife of the King’s youngest brother Constantijn, decided to become involved with their plight and started – with the help of the government – the Missing Chapter Foundation that aims to involve these financially-deprived children in projects aimed at combating poverty among children. State Secretary Jette Klijnsma, of Social Affairs, has made € 100 million available for this project. In the Netherlands, someone who has less than € 973 to spend a month, is considered poor. Couples who have no children are considered poor if they have less than € 1,330. Does this sound like plenty to you? Most Dutch people have high fixed expenses, so that only a modest amount, in the range of € 30-60, remains a week, for food and clothes.



The Netherlands



They Must Be Giants

BY STEVEN STUPP

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 tallest people in the world. 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 (1.70 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 conse-

quence, 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 *Consulatatiebureau* 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.

The Netherlands in a Nutshell

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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 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 to not 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 in which 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.

The windmills of your mind are not playing tricks on you. You have (or your Significant Other 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 Without Dikes

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 coming together to reach a consensus, this give and take in 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.

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, only 10 years later, setting aside Dutch nature in favor of a different approach proved to be harder than initially anticipated and the Dutch re-embraced their old tradition of consultation and detailed agreements.

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 is made up of the country’s ministers and state secretaries and its 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 the ministers and state secretaries; and the right of inquiry. The Upper House focuses primarily on the passing of legislation, while 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 was the case for the second Rutte cabinet, as a consequence of which the ministers found themselves in a position that they had to make concessions in order to garner the support of the members of the Upper House, who were in the opposition – thus muddying the waters a bit.

THE POLITICAL PARTIES

The Dutch Lower House of Parliament is elected by proportional representation and, since the 2017 elections, there are 13 political parties in the Lower House. Traditionally, the three most established 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 (Liberals). In the 21st century, the Dutch voters have become more diverse, thanks in part due to the rise of populist politicians. In the ’80s of the previous century, the largest parties – CDA and PvdA – would generally always garner 40 to 50 seats in parliament. However, after the March 2017 elections, the VVD – with only 33 seats! – came out the largest. A record approximately 80% of the voters cast their ballot this time; severely punishing the VVD and the PvdA, in particular the latter, which went from 38 seats to nine. Many of its constituents felt betrayed by the policies that the party had chosen to support the past four years. Also the right-wing VVD of Prime Minister paid a price, and ended up relinquishing eight seats. Still, Rutte managed to label the elections a victory for his party, as the new parliament in general is more right-wing than the previous one.



Dissatisfaction and Fear

As in almost all other western nations, there is an undercurrent in the Netherlands of dissatisfaction and fear. Electorally, this is expressed by the success of the populist politicians and parties – but this is only the tip of the iceberg. There is a large and widely-felt distrust of the effectiveness of the government’s good intentions.

Of course, dissatisfaction has marked politics in free countries since forever – in the ’50s of the previous century, the U.S. saw the introduction of the Know Nothings, whose members answered every question with ‘know nothing’. Napoleon III’s triumphant victory during the French presidential elections in 1848 is strongly reminiscent of that of Trump in 2016. And, sitting at a bar, you will always find people vociferously criticizing the authorities.

The difference with before is that this dissatisfaction is heard much more powerfully and unfiltered thanks to social media. ‘Angry citizens’ – or *Boze burgers*, as they are called in Dutch – are discovering that they are not alone. And thanks to the same social media, political leaders can reach and organize them. What are the ‘citizens’ angry about? Starting during the upturn in the ’50s of the previous century, they became used to a certain degree of social well-being; there were plenty of jobs and the Dutch social security system protected

them well against the whims of fate – in particular illness and unemployment. It was even hard to fire people. Plus the technological level of society created jobs at an unschooled, semi-schooled and unskilled level.

Since then, technological innovation has erased much of this. The new, computerized economy requires a lot of flexibility from the ‘citizen’ – such as a tremendous willingness and ability to adapt to quickly-changing circumstances – and obligates them to continuously develop new skills in order to remain ‘interesting’ to employers. Jobs-for-life don’t exist anymore. And thanks to globalization and the European Union, there is more and more competition from abroad. The ‘citizen’ has to get used to insecurity – which is especially hard for people like the Dutch, who like to plan. They can no longer rely on being taken care of, from the cradle to the grave – as the Dutch saying goes. Even their pension is not as secure as it used to be.

At the same time, huge socio-cultural changes are taking place in the cities. The Netherlands has become an immigration country, which is particularly noticeable in the big cities. In Rotterdam and Amsterdam, the percentage of western non-Dutch nationals has been less than 50 for years. The cities are becoming increasingly multi-ethnic, and the ethnic Dutch people are becoming confronted with foreign traditions and customs. Conversely, their own traditions and customs are becoming the subject of discussion, as is clear from the controversy surrounding the fairytale figure Zwarte Piet, considered by some an expression of racism. Even national heroes – those whose praises were sung when we were still in school – are not spared scrutiny; for instance, the 17th-century governor Jan Pieterszoon Coen, who is now being criti-

cized for his famous words that big things could be done in the Dutch East Indies. He was responsible for the death of 16,000 people on the Banda Islands, because they opted to sell their cloves to the competitors of the Dutch East India Company, instead of to the Company itself.

And then there is the matter of religion. Traditionally, the Netherlands is a Christian country. Until the beginning of the ’60s, the large majority of its population faithfully went to church every Sunday. This was followed by a period of quick change: under influence of the cultural revolution in the ’60s, a process of mass secularization took place. Taboos when it came to sex and religion were shattered. From a conservative society, the Netherlands became a society that danced around the Golden Calf of sex, drugs and rock&roll. Once again, especially in the cities.

And this is precisely where the Muslims from Turkey and the Maghreb, who were brought here to fill the vacancies at the wharfs and in the factories, settled. The Netherlands now has a growing Islamic culture, as is evident from the huge increase in the number of mosques. And Islam is predominantly conservative. It is a religion that is characterized by a strict adherence to the rules of society that the prophet prescribed in his day, including a certain primness and a strict separation of men and women. This is evident through the headscarves, without which many Muslim women will not go out the door. Just when the Dutch thought they had been liberated from religious prejudice and priestly repression, they are suddenly confronted with a new, and to them alien, form of religiousness.

And terrorism has been committed in the name of this same religion. Most Dutch peo-

ple still recall where they were and what they were doing when the planes hit the Twin Towers in 2001. As of that moment, a certain distrust of Islam has grown quickly. Populist leader Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet owe their political career to this. They claim that the Muslims want to introduce the Sharia in the Netherlands and that they want to repress all other religions and life philosophies.

On the other hand, the non-western Dutch nationals – and in particular the Muslims – feel that they are the victim of discrimination, especially on the labor market. This is regularly supported by undeniable proof. Prime Minister Rutte, who incidentally for years already has been teaching one morning a week at a vocational training school that is largely attended by immigrant children, is quite matter-of-fact about this, observing frankly: “If your name is Mohammed, you have to fight your way in” – as a consequence of which quite a few members of the younger generation have turned their backs on the Netherlands and have developed a willing ear for the messages of their parents and grandparents in, in most cases, Morocco and Turkey. A few hundred of them even sympathize with the Jihad and number of such young Dutch Muslims can be found in the IS’s armies. Once they return, they are locked up in a maximum security jail to await their judgement.

Until now, only one clearly Islamic act of terror has been carried out in the Netherlands; the murder of anti-Islamist film and opinion maker Theo van Gogh, in 2004. A few Islamists have been sent to high-security prisons on grounds that it has been proven that they were organizing a terrorist act – and the recruitment of fighters for the Jihad is severely punished.

The terrorist acts that are taking place in the surrounding countries have had a signifi-



cant impact on the people here and feed a hate and distrust of the Islam. Many Dutch people feel that Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet have a point when they demand: “Close the borders to the refugees”. When in 2015 a large group of refugees from civil-war-torn Syria reached the Netherlands, there were heavy protests and quite a few riots in the towns and cities where the government wanted to place the refugee shelters. Experience showed a change of heart, however, once the locals got to know the newcomers better.

During 2016, people in the Netherlands were afraid of a breakthrough of populists who were loudly demanding a closing of the borders and a leaving of the European Union – even more so after the success of the Brexiteers in Great Britain. In the polls, Geert Wilders consistently had 30 to 38 seats. On the Internet, the rightist populists were forcefully present. However, when push came to shove, the March 2017 elections proved to be a sobering experience for the populists. They had managed to strengthen their position, but not nearly enough to form a government that would allow their initiatives to go through

unhindered. Wilders’ pvv climbed to 20 seats, but that was in fact a disappointment after the expectations created by the polls. The two seats for kindred-spirit party Forum voor Democratie were not of much help either and the left-populist Socialist Party, which is no less anti-EU than the rightwing parties, had to relinquish one of its 15 seats. Once again, the establishment within politics was able to breathe freely again.

However, the undercurrent is still there – though it appears to be contained from a political perspective. You cannot fail to have noticed how well things are marching along in general in the Netherlands and how content and self-conscious the Dutch are, at the moment. They are obviously doing well. And this is also clear from opinion polls: most people say that they and those around them are doing excellently, but that the country – well, the country – *it* is clearly on a collision course. Apparently, there is nothing contradictory to this, according to the Dutch. Could this all be a luxury problem, this dissatisfaction, and the consequence of continued prosperity?

In other words, there was once again majority support for Rutte’s policies. All in all, nonetheless, a coalition of four parties (vvd, cda, d66 and the ChristenUnie) was required to make a majority.

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 which has fruitlessly been campaigning for the introduction of the district system and the election of mayors. Having gone from three to 12 seats between 2006 and 2010, the party went to 19 seats in the 2017 elections, after apparently regaining the confi-

dence of the voters. The other smaller parties that can be found in Parliament are GroenLinks, the fundamentalist protestant parties sgp and ChristenUnie (with its five parliamentary members now part of the coalition), 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 whom 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 focus is on environmental issues. In the 2017 elections, it grew to 14 seats, thanks to its new young leader Jesse Klaver, who has been compared in the media to both Obama and Kennedy.

Double Nationality

Whoever wants to acquire Dutch nationality will have to give up their other nationality. And Dutch people who take on another nationality, automatically lose their Dutch nationality. There is, however, one exception to this rule: the Netherlands does not object if the other country does not allow its national to relinquish their nationality. In that case, double nationality is possible. This is the case, for instance, for the originally Argentinean Queen Máxima, as well as for most Dutch people of Turkish and Moroccan origin. Populists politicians doubt the loyalty of double passport holders: which passport would they choose in times of conflict? The Dutch one or the other one?

Regularly, this leads to a commotion when someone with a double passport is appointed to a higher function.

In the summer of 2016, we saw another type of upheaval. Dutch nationals of Turkish descent felt involved with the events in their former mother country, where President Recep Erdogan, with the help of supporters, beat down a military coup. Turkish *Rotterdamers* showed their solidarity with him by taking to the streets *en masse*, waving Turkish flags – which was observed by the rest of the population with raised eyebrows. The words of Prime Minister Rutte and Rotterdam mayor Achmed Aboutaleb, which they had uttered during other, similar, occasions, came to mind and seemed once again appropriate – at least, according to many people. These words had been uttered during a scandal involving young people of Turkish descent, who were vlogging and yelling obscenities in the streets: the Prime Minister had

used the words ‘scumbags’. He had told them to “Well then, get lost”. And Aboutaleb had told supporters of the Jihad: “If you don’t like it here, beat it.”

This all came to a head again in the days preceding the elections. President Erdogan had issued a referendum, asking the Turkish people to expand upon his power. Also Dutch citizens who had a double passport were allowed to vote and, while the emotions were running high in the Dutch-Turkish community, Ankara decided to send Turkish ministers to the Netherlands to plea for a ‘yes’. The Dutch government, however, stopped the Turkish ministers from entering the country. One of them managed to reach the Turkish consulate in Rotterdam, but Mayor Aboutaleb did not allow her to speak. A few thousand of her supporters gathered in the center of the city, where there were skirmishes with the police. In the ensuing days, Erdogan did not have a kind word – but a few nasty ones – for the Dutch. “Nazis” and “fascists” were two of the more friendly invectives. The Dutch government let the words roll like water off a duck’s back, with resignation, but did not give in and refused to issue any apology demanded by Ankara.

Rightist commentators saw new fodder in these political goings-on for their skepticism when it came to the loyalty of those who hold a double passport – making use of the argument that the integration of these people has proven a failure.

Christian-democratic leader Buma joined this criticism, but quickly fell quiet when it was pointed out to him that Queen Máxima also has two passports as Argentinean law would not allow her to relinquish her Argentinean citizenship. Whereby it is perhaps useful to know that particularly the Christian democrats are known supporters of the Royal Family.

It is clear that they topic of a double nationality will remain a topic of interest in Dutch politics for the time being.

ders also expects the Netherlands to experience an economic boom, if only it were to leave the EU and the euro. This has led to a relatively considerable success – by Dutch standards. Having won 23 seats in 2010, which were reduced to 15 after supporting Rutte’s first unpopular cabinet, it grew to 37 seats in the polls just before the elections – though they ultimately had to make do with 20.

In 2012, a new party, 50 Plus, also managed to win two seats in the Dutch Parliament, which they doubled in 2017, even though the polls had consistently predicted much more. 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 that 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, though the VVD has lost more members this way, as has the PvdA.

NEW PARTIES

In the new parliament, Wilders now has a competitor; the Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy). This is the brainchild of the young intellectual dr. Thierry Baudet, who caused a stir with his Ph.D. thesis, in which he defended the nation state. Baudet considers himself a defender of western civilization, though he abhors modern art and atonal music. He is of the opinion that western culture experienced a decline in the 20th century, and is in favor of using education – and in particular history – to revive a pride in the Dutch nation. He wants to make the executive power stronger and wants to introduce binding referendums so that the government can appeal to the people directly. The party is against immigration, but does not take this as far as Wilders and the PVV, who want to ban the Koran and close all mosques.

Since 2017, the Forum voor Democratie has two seats in the parliament – and its number of members and activists is growing. It is building a tight network, and Baudet travels the country giving lectures, in which he presents himself as the only alternative for what he refers to as the cartel parties, which he feels are smothering the democracy and are divvying up the lucrative positions amongst themselves. During the first months of 2018, the polls allocated 15-16 parliamentary seats to the Forum voor Democratie.

Wilders doesn’t have much of a retort to this. His party has no members or local departments. He appoints his own candidates and sets the policy himself – and there are plenty of politicians who are of the opinion that Baudet is the man of the future, instead of

Wilders. Recent polls appear to prove this: PVV is losing support. Wilders was only able to supply candidates for a limited amount of municipalities during the municipal elections. They did gain a few seats, but the outcome was disappointing. This same, incidentally, was the case for the Forum. It only participated in the Amsterdam elections, where it obtained two of the 35 seats. Nonetheless, the Forum remains more popular – if only because of the fact that it has members. They have been joining the party in droves since it was established, and by the spring of 2018, its membership had already exceeded 20,000. However, it does not yet have a network of local departments, like the traditional Dutch parties do. And its top layer has reserved a lot of power for itself, virtually insulating itself against the risk of removal. Any members who have created problems have been evicted without pity by Thierry Baudet – barely to the detriment of his position in the polls. He is continuing to garner support for his stand that the political power is in the hands of a small group of ‘cartel parties’ that scratch each other’s back, even though there is always one that is officially given the position of ‘opposition’. The Forum for the Democratie, says Baudet, could break this open and release the iron grip that the parties have on the country. Which is why the party is greatly in favor of binding referendums. At the same time, Baudet wants to increase the executive power in relation to judicial power. In 2017, he openly expressed admiration for authoritarian leaders such as Hungary’s prime minister Orbán and for Vladimir Putin – one thing that he actually shares with Geert Wilders.

A party on the other end of the spectrum, DENK, is a party that represents the interests of foreign nationals and immigrants and that is of the opinion that Dutch society is marked by institutional racism. It has been formed by two dissident PvdA parliamentary members with a Turkish background. They separated from the socialist party and their primary supporters are Turkish Muslims. Its leader, Tunahan Kuzu, is a kindred spirit of the Turkish president Erdogan, leader of the conservative Islamic AK party. In 2017,



Are We Headed Towards Polder Islam?

If there are victims of Islamic terrorists anywhere, then the reactions can be predicted. Populists and conservative thinkers are convinced that terrorism is inherent to Mohamed’s teachings. If you want to battle terrorism, you must tackle Islam, they say. Others – those that represent the majority – are of the opinion that you cannot hold all Muslims, let alone an entire religion, accountable for the hideous acts of a few fanatics. They point out that the majority of victims of terrorist acts – on a worldwide scale – are Muslims themselves.

Thanks to the Constitution, the Netherlands knows freedom of religion, which gives Muslims the right to practice their religion however they want to. Across the country, you will find mosques in a variety of sizes, types and convictions. Subject to certain conditions, just like any other religious/philosophical community, the Muslims have a right to a fully-subsidized education. Some of these are Salafist, so that they become the subject of

criticism when the opinions of their religious leaders become known. Particularly, their rejection of homosexuality and their strict ideas regarding the servile role of the wife in a marriage are a bone of contention. Also the fact that the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs Dyanet owns a whole network of mosques in the Netherlands, to which it appoints Imams, who have the same rights and obligations as Turkish civil servants, is considered a bit dubious. As well as the fact that the financing of Islamic religion-based educational institutions is borne by shady sources in the Middle East.

It is clear that the Islam has made a sturdy place for itself in the Netherlands. Also Dutch converts such as, for instance, Nourdeen Wildeman, play a significant role in this and it would appear that at some point on time, even the preaching at the mosques will no longer be done in Turkish or in Moroccan Arabic, but rather in Dutch. Some have suggested founding a Dutch Islamic Theological University of Applied Sciences, so that those Muslims who have a theological calling will no longer have to go abroad. These developments could give rise to what is already being referred to as Polder Islam.



it won three seats, and many consider DENK to be a prime example of the populist parties that are currently in the Dutch parliament. Denk also participated in a number of municipal elections, and with quite some success. It was able to contribute one to three members in a number of municipalities – and that is not so bad at all for a party with a limited constituency.

There is also another new party, that focuses on ethnic minorities in the Netherlands, called BIJ1. It is strongly Caribbean in nature, though it explicitly states that is for anyone who wants an inclusive society. Time will tell whether BIJ1 will manage to establish a place for itself in Dutch politics. Its main competitors are those predominantly white parties – such as D66 or Groenlinks – that claim to want the same.

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 (in 2017, this was almost 7 months), 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. Does this mean that the Netherlands does not have a government in the interim? Of course not. After the cabinet’s resignation, 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. The incumbent ministers then 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. A chamber majority places them under a ‘controversial banner’ and they are then taken off the agenda because they are part of the ‘formation process’.

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 plan-

ning, 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 2013, the second Rutte cabinet placed a number of care and social measures with the municipalities, based on the idea that local governments are closer to the people, making it easier to create tailor-made solutions of high quality. There are, however, a lot fewer funds available for this than the government had at its disposal for these same measures. However you look at it, the daily life of the citizens has become increasingly important to the municipalities – though this has not yet led to an increase in interest among the people for local politics. They are still more focused on ‘The Hague’ and the government. Even when voting in municipal elections, they tend to let themselves be led by their national political preferences, rather than any opinion on the quality of the local leaders. Though there is an increase in local parties, this seems to be fed by people who are worried about the influence of populists on a national level.

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 100. The last elections for the water boards took place in 2015, at the same time as the elections for the Provincial States – but 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 – be a legal resident of the Netherlands. 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).

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 Chamber 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 ranks in the world’s top twenty for GNP, even though, in terms of square kilometers, it is one of the smallest countries in 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 17.1 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 (the largest European seaport in the world in terms of container activity) and Schiphol Airport (the third 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 Dutch economy has been one that other countries are eager to participate in, which has been reflected by the huge investments made in the country’s economy and 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 5). 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; the motors of Dutch economy.

SECTORS

Though the economy of the Netherlands is relatively resilient, it is nonetheless dependent – as a country of trade – on the economic situation in 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, the Netherlands is also Europe’s second 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 off-shore 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.

CLIMATE

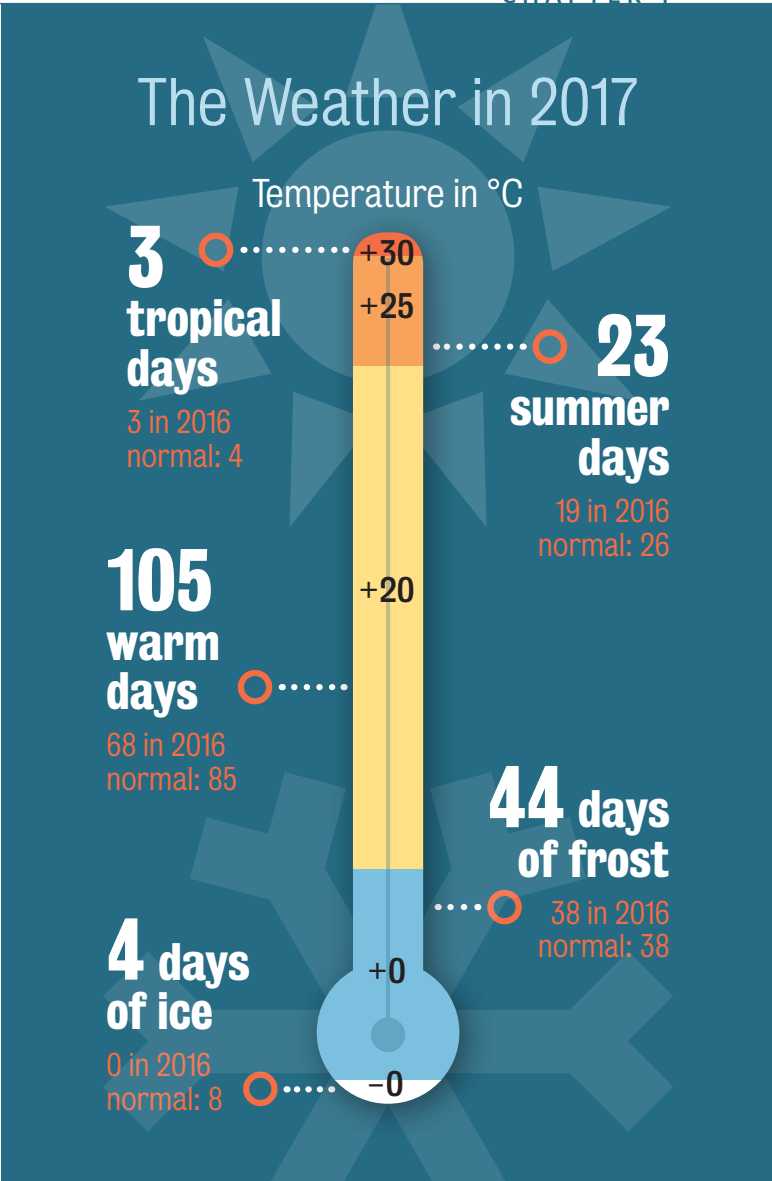
BORING!

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 frigid -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 sum-



mers 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; after a couple of record-breaking, top-of-the-list summers in the ‘90s, the 21st century so far has seen the average annual temperature exceed 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!

2017

For the fourth year in a row, 2017 scored a spot in the top-ten warmest years in recorded meteorological history, with an average temperature of 10.9° C. January was pretty cold – the coldest since 2010 – and though February was mild, it had its wintry week as well. March and April decided to switch positions, making March reasonably balmy, but April cold; causing some damage for the fruit farmers and their orchards. This was compensated for by the month of May, when we had one of the warmest days ever in the history of spring; 33.5° C – a trend that was continued modestly through summer – which was warm, but wet, with August ending up slightly below average. September started out quite pleasant, but quickly changed its mind, preparing us for fall and delivering the first fall storm. Nonetheless, October proved to have a mind of its own, with days in the lower 20s. The unusually pleasant temperatures continued through November and December, with the exception of the second week in December when it was cold and there was enough snow to upset the rail system for a couple of days.

RELIGION

Although modern Dutch society is very secular, 50% of the Dutch people identify with an organized religion or philosophical group, and you will see plenty of churches and other places of worship, while you will have ample opportunity to practice your own religion if you wish.

THE CHURCHES YOU SEE

Before the Protestant Reformation, most Dutch people were Roman Catholics. The churches built were clearly Catholic in nature; 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, there are more registered members of the Roman Catholic Church (24%, or 4.1 million) than of the Protestant Church (16%, or 2.7 million). However, only 17% of the Catholics go to church regularly, while 46.8% of the Protestants do; filling the Protestant churches with almost twice as many people.

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 three main categories of Protestantism in the Netherlands today are *Nederlands Hervormd* (Dutch Reformed; 7%), Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (Protestant Church in the Netherlands; 6%, and *Gereformeerd* (Reformed; 3%). But there are other groups as well – Evangelical, Lutheran, Baptist, Apostolic, Pentecostal and many more.

CATHOLICS

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Dutch Catholic Church was extremely progressive. A series of conservative appointments by subsequent Popes has made it less so, but you can still find a full range of communities – at one end of the spectrum parishes still using the Latin liturgy, and at the other end parishes committed to the most modern ideas and practices – as well as Byzantine Catholic communities.

A little-known group is the so-called Old Catholics; in 1723 – in protest against the concentration of power in Rome – they ‘broke’ with the city by choosing their own bishop. When, in 1870, the infallibility of the Pope was announced, many Old Catholics and others of similar conviction came together and, in 1889, formed the Union of Utrecht. Currently, the Old Catholic Church has approximately 5,800 members in 26 parishes in the Netherlands, however, worldwide there are over 500,000 members.

PHILOSOPHICAL GROUPS

As mentioned earlier, instead of being members of churches, some people in the Netherlands belong to groups that share a particular philosophical outlook on life. There are of course many of these, but the main ones that are also known outside the Netherlands are: Anthroposophists, Humanists, New Age and the Sufi Movement.

ISLAM

With approximately 850,000 (practicing) Muslims living in the Netherlands (5% of the population), Islam has become one of the country’s main religions. Mosques have been built in most of the larger cities by communities of immigrants from Turkey, Morocco and Indonesia, and the Dutch public is gradually learning more about Islam – enough to make allowances for colleagues and pupils who are fasting for Ramadan, for example.

Though many believe that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the Netherlands, that is not necessarily the case; the method of counting applied to the group of Muslims and the group of Christians is different. Only church-registered Christians are taken into account, versus all immigrants from Muslim-countries. If Christians (immigrants) were to be counted in the same manner, then this would prove to be the fastest-growing religious group. The prediction has been made that by the year 2020, Islam will be the second largest religion in the Netherlands, with 7% of the populace being Muslim, and only 10% Catholic. Looking at the numbers for 2013, however, with Roman Catholics making up 24% of the population, Protestants 7.4%, and other religions / philosophical groups 6%, it is hard to believe that these predictions will actually pan out. Perhaps the percentage of Muslims will equal the percentage of Protestants, but that will still leave the country with 34.4% registered Christians, while also among Muslims, second and third generation ‘immigrants’ are becoming more secularized.

JUDAISM

Before and during the Second World War, when Hitler’s anti-Semitism took hold in Europe, many Jews came to the Netherlands. Aside from the fact that there already was a large Jewish community in the Netherlands, this country had remained neutral during the First World War, and more importantly, had (has) a centuries-long tradition of religious tolerance. The Jews hoped that these factors would allow them to find a safe haven here – but unfortunately, history took a different turn. The Netherlands was occupied by the Germans during the war and could not be the safe haven the Jews had hoped for. In fact, only 13% of the Jewish population of the Netherlands, which had been at 140,000, survived the Second World War. This has since grown to a sizeable Jewish community, of around 35,000 members, of which the center is in Amsterdam, though synagogues can also be found in other cities.

OTHER RELIGIONS

Other religious affiliations that have active communities in the Netherlands include Hinduism, Buddhism and Baha’i. For addresses, check the end of this chapter.

YOU CAN’T FIND A COMMUNITY THAT PRACTICES YOUR RELIGION?

Try contacting the Netherlands Center for Foreigners (NCB or *Nederlands Centrum voor Buitenlanders*) in Utrecht, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Leiden or Tilburg (www.ncbnet.nl).

Holland in the Netherlands

Holland or the Netherlands?

Now there’s a good question: why is this country sometimes referred to as Holland and sometimes as the Netherlands? The official name of the country you have come to live in is the Netherlands, or ‘Low Lands’; a country where 60% of the people live below sea level.

Then why is this country so often referred to as Holland? The answer to this question lies in its history. A few centuries ago, the province of Holland (which included today’s North and South Holland provinces) was economically the strongest of all the Dutch provinces, and the one from which virtually all foreign trade originated. Most of the Dutchmen whom foreign traders dealt with were Hollanders, literally from Holland. Hence, when talking about the Netherlands, this became the accepted way of referring to the country and its people. Over the years, both names have come to be accepted, although the official name, of course, remains the Netherlands.

SENSITIVITY

Though it is generally accepted that the Netherlands is referred to as Holland, those who are not from the provinces of North or South Holland do not like to be referred to as Hollanders, or to have their language referred to as Hollands. The other Dutch provinces are: Friesland, Groningen, Drenthe, Limburg, Utrecht, Gelderland, Overijssel, Noord-Brabant, Zeeland and Flevoland (the latter came into existence as recently as 1986 and consists entirely of reclaimed land).

RANDSTAD

Nowadays, it is of course – long since – no longer the case that the Holland provinces are the most advanced, though most businesses are still located in the provinces of North and South Holland and Utrecht – an area that is commonly referred to as the Randstad. The rest of the Netherlands is just as well-developed and houses many international businesses and expatriates, and the infrastructure (road, rail, water and telephone) is excellent, all across the country.



The Randstad

