



## The Netherlands

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*"God created the world, but the Dutch created the Netherlands." Popular Dutch adage.*

The Netherlands is a country bound by history and influenced by business and social agendas. Since the Middle Ages, the Dutch have been a people rooted in the idea of getting along with their neighbors. In 1648 when independence was won from Spain, the Netherlands began building an extensive empire abroad and became a leading maritime and commercial power. While some of that diminished in the following years, the Dutch remained an enormously successful international economic force. In 1958, the Netherlands was one of the six founders of the European Economic Community (EEC).

Located in the northwest region of Europe, the Netherlands is bordered by the North Sea, on the east by Germany and by Belgium to the south. It is a small country covering about 13 square miles, and is the 15<sup>th</sup> most densely populated in the world, with a population of over 16 million. Amsterdam is the capital city, but The Hague is the Netherlands' seat of government, the home of the monarch, and the location of most foreign embassies. There are no cities with a population over one million in the Netherlands, but the top four cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht have populations from 750,000 up to one million. The land is generally flat with gentle hills, but more than one-third of the country's total land mass is below sea level.

The country is clean, well organized, with a very efficient public transportation. There are excellent health facilities and social programs. The society is multicultural, one will find many world nationalities represented, each making their own contribution to the dynamic synergy of this country. It is worth to note that bicycles are very much part of everyday life as well as recreational activities.

The Netherlands is one of countries in the European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) to adopt the Euro as its official currency. The Euro, which replaced the local currency, can be used uniformly for transactions in participating European countries. The introduction of the Euro took place in January 2002 and is now the sole official currency in use.

The name, the Netherlands ("nether" means low) refers to the flat nature of the country. Its highest point is the Vaalserberg hill in the south east, which reaches 321 meters (about 1,000 ft) above sea level. Many areas in the north and west, constituting more than 25% of the total area of the country,

are below sea level. The lowest point near Rotterdam is some 6.7 meters (about 22 ft) below sea level. The balance of land averages only 37 feet above sea level. Much of the land that was once below sea level is today reclaimed and protected by 1,500 miles of dikes.

The Netherlands has been overwhelmed by flooding throughout its history, and the Dutch fight a constant battle against the sea; however, thanks to the sea the fishing industry and trade have flourished.

There is often confusion about Holland. Some people call the Netherlands, Holland, but it is not the same. Holland is only a small part of the Netherlands, and like many states in the US (the Dakotas, Carolinas and Virginias), there are two Hollands. There is North Holland, with a capital city of Haarlem; and South Holland, with The Hague as its capital.

Holland used to be an independent country, but it gave up its independence in the 16th century, when it allied with the Northern and Southern Netherlands against the armies of the King of Spain.

Eventually the Southern Netherlands stopped fighting, and stayed controlled by foreign forces until around 1830. That area is now called Belgium.

In summary, Holland gave up its independence a very long time ago, so calling the Netherlands "Holland", is like calling Great Britain "England."

### **Climate**

Temperatures in the Netherlands do not differ that greatly from season to season. The warmest time of the year occurs between June and August, when temperatures average between 21 to 26 degrees Celsius (70 to 78 degrees Fahrenheit). Even in the winter it does not get that much colder, with temperatures rarely dropping below freezing. During winter there is quite a lot of rain, and in the late autumn and early spring there is a lot of fog.

### **The Culture**

Visitors and newly arrived expatriates can feel at home in the Netherlands as there is an abundance of easily accessible business, social and cultural facilities. However, integration into Dutch society can take some persistence and a lot of patience. The Dutch tend to keep a very close circle of friends, and treat them as family. The Dutch are not known to be overly demonstrative, and tend to be conservative in their greetings. When meeting someone, say your last name while shaking their hand. Saying "Pleased to meet you" is an accepted salutation.

Use the person's proper "Mr." or "Meneer" for a man plus his last name or "Miss" or "Mrs." plus her last name for a woman. But, do not use the first name only unless invited to do so. If you are very familiar with someone, it is customary to kiss their cheek three times (left-right-left, or right-left-right). In the Netherlands, women can kiss both male and female friends on the cheek.

The Dutch are well informed about politics and political situations around the world, so it is acceptable to discuss such issues. However, talk of money, prices or too much prying into their family or job is unacceptable. They do not show their wealth, as money is a very private topic.

The Dutch also appreciate straight, non-confrontational talk. Trust, honesty and directness are signs of respect for your colleagues. Do not exaggerate or embellish your position, as you will not be taken seriously. Be certain to be on time for all business and social occasions. The Dutch appreciate proper, respectful behavior and are not inclined to argue to the point of boisterous discussions. While they are considered conservative by European standards, they are also quite flexible in their acceptance of other cultures, people and ideas.

Dutch homes are usually very private, so it is a rare treat to be invited into one. You may have to know someone for months before he or she actually invites you home. If you are invited to a Dutch home for dinner, it may be called for around 6:30 pm, as they tend to eat on the early side. If you are asked to come around 8:00 p.m. this usually means you are being invited for coffee and cake or pastry. Do not be late, as promptness is a virtue among the Dutch. If you are invited to a home, it may be a good idea to take chocolates or flowers.

A display of wealth and status is really not appreciated. When you're with a group of friends in a pub, it is more usual that everyone pays his share than that one or two people pay for the entire group. Even when two people go out for dinner together, the bill is usually split, thus the term 'Dutch treat.'

### **Language**

Although the official language of The Netherlands is Dutch, you will find that English is commonly understood by the population, especially in larger towns and cities. French and German are also used, but to a lesser degree. You may also hear regional languages of Frisian or Limburgish, but these two languages are also not as commonly used in everyday life. As a courtesy to the host country, it is recommended that Dutch be learned by incoming expatriates and their families. You will find that even the smallest phrases used in Dutch are welcomed.

### **Religion**

Over 30 percent of the Dutch population is Roman Catholic; 20 percent are Protestant, predominantly Dutch Reformed, and eight percent are "other denominations" (Muslims and Hindu). 40 percent have no declared religion. Most protestants live in the northern provinces, while the southern provinces of North Brabant and Limburg are mainly Roman Catholics. Once having a population of over 140,000 Jews, their numbers are now between 30 and 40 thousand, with the largest number living in Amsterdam.

### **Doing Business**

With limited natural resources, the Netherlands has come to rely on international trade to sustain its economy. In this matter, the Dutch have had more experience than most other nations in Europe. For example, trade

with the United Kingdom dates back to before the sixteenth century, and the first Chamber of Commerce for Anglo-Dutch business was set up in 1891.

With their strong heads for business, the Dutch have greatly contributed to the belief in a unified Europe. The country's international companies have strengthened the perception of the Dutch as leaders in business. Virtually all of the Dutch trade policies are liberal and the government has placed few restrictions on foreign enterprise. Foreign companies are given equal status.

The seaport of Rotterdam is one of the largest ones in the world and Schiphol Airport truly is the gateway to Europe. There are many bilateral business clubs and Chambers of Commerce all eager to receive members. Each municipality has its own department of foreign affairs and is willing to provide information for the potential investor.

Amsterdam and Rotterdam have World Trade Centers and most major cities have business services that rent office facilities on a monthly basis until permanent office accommodations can be found. Additional information on office services is provided in the General Section.

Most of the major North American, Japanese and European corporations have representation in the Netherlands. The country has a well deserved reputation for being "foreigner friendly," and there are various tax concessions for new businesses established here. Major industries, such as natural gas, chemicals, electronics, agriculture, can be found in the Netherlands, with a large transit trade going through the country to other European nations.

### **Business Customs & Etiquette**

When entering a room, be sure to extend your hand for a firm handshake to each person in the room. Clearly state your name, and listen to your colleagues name as he/she pronounces it. Handshaking is appropriate when meeting and when departing.

Always use the correct title before an associate's name. Do not assume that because they state their first name, that they welcome using this informal address. You will find that the older the Dutchman, the longer it will take for him/her to reach the first-name basis. It is not looked upon favorably if you do not show up for your meeting on time. Unlike other cultures, the Dutch prefer to be on time for all appointments.

### **Business Dress**

Although the Netherlands as a whole is somewhat casual, always wear appropriate business attire to meetings. Conservative suits and ties are appropriate for men, and women should wear a suit or a skirt and blouse. When in doubt, it is always a good idea to mirror the dress of your Dutch colleague.

### **Business Hours**

Business hours are typically from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00, Monday through Friday.

However, it is not uncommon for businesses to open earlier and close after 5:30 p.m.

### **Everyday Life**

You will find that living in any part of The Netherlands can be just as pleasant and enjoyable as any other place. With a few small adjustments, you will feel right at home in your new home.

### **Shopping**

Although not considered to be one of the fashion centers of the world, The Netherlands does offer fine quality and fashionable shops for the resident. Most people enjoy shopping, which is best illustrated through the many shopping facilities located throughout the city centers. From local supermarkets to small specialty shops, the Dutch marketplace offers much for the eye to see.

Most residents prefer to shop at the small specialty shops for they offer quaint atmospheres, but there are several department stores available as well. The Bijenkorf is the largest department store in the country, and can be found in larger Dutch cities. Offering a full choice of departments, the Bijenkorf is the source for clothing, cosmetics, furniture and household items.

Slightly less expensive than the Bijenkorf is Vroom & Dreesman. Located in most cities as well, this department store offers similar products as the Bijenkorf.

When shopping for food in The Netherlands, most people choose to visit the local butchers, fishmongers and greengrocers. Establishing a friendly relationship with the shop owners can prove to be profitable. For items that can be left to the larger supermarket, Albert Heijn is the largest, and perhaps the most expensive, supermarket chain in the country offering a good selection of items. For even more convenience, Albert Heijn also has smaller "corner shops" (even at gas stations or *benzinstations*) that distributes products and a limited selection of produce.

### **Hours of Operation**

Shops are open from Monday to Saturday, 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The majority of shops do not open until 11:00 a.m. on Mondays. Smaller shops close at 5:00 p.m. on Saturdays. Stores stay open for late-night shopping on Thursday or Friday evenings until 9:00 p.m. Avondwinkels (night shops) and Zondagwinkels (Sunday shops) are open outside normal shopping hours and can be found in the main cities. Restaurants often take last orders at 10:00 p.m.

Every Sunday in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the shops are open from 12:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. In the Hague, shops open once a month on Sunday. Most of the larger supermarket chains are open from 8:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m., Monday to Friday. On Saturday, they all close at 6:00 p.m.

