

Personal reflections of living in the Netherlands

by Esther Fletcher



Personal reflections

In 1975, the Shell research laboratory in the UK where I worked was closed and many of us were moved to other locations. I went to live in Holland, I was 23 years old and had only been overseas for a few times in my life.

I worked in Amsterdam, but lived in a small village in North Holland, called Grotebroek and my journey to work involved a cycle ride and train trip and then taking the Shell tug across the IJ to the research centre. Often meetings were held in the language of the most attendees.

My neighbours did not speak English and had never been to Amsterdam. I soon realised that my basic Dutch lessons were woefully inadequate.

Buying a house in Holland is very different to the UK and once you have agreed to a sale and date you are committed and must deposit a sum of money with the notary which you would lose if you changed your mind.

There was no English television, the newspapers would only arrive if the weather was not foggy, and the BBC radio often faded during the evening.

Trains were highly reliable and rarely hampered by snow, leaves on the line etc. Public transport was excellent, and people cycled when they could.

But the winters were bleak and on occasions children were able to skate down the streets as the rain froze on contact with the ground (ijsel), the trees were picturesque as the leaves were coated in a thin layer of ice. If weather conditions permitted a famous race along the canals took place called the "elfsteden tocht" and only took place if the thickness of the ice reached certain standards.

Even small villages had a "Koop avond" where shops remained open one evening a week.

Every person was required to register at their local police station and we needed copious paperwork to leave and return to Holland.

In November, Sinterklaas and his "Zwarte Piets" arrived, usually by boat and children placed their shoes out for a few days prior to December 5th, hoping for them to be filled with little treats. Families gathered on December 5th and presents exchanged, each with a carefully written poem.

You always took flowers when visiting friends and neighbours and there were plenty of small street stalls selling flowers.

Birthdays are big occasions and there was expectation that you would buy cakes to share with your work colleagues on the day. You congratulated parents on their children's birthdays.

I later moved to the Hague, which was much more cosmopolitan, and a lack of Dutch was not really a problem, there were plenty of clubs for the ex-pat community.

I cycled a lot and unlike the UK, the many cycle tracks meant it was very easy and safe. You often saw whole families cycling with small children in special seats and you would see an adult perched on the back of a bike, I never quite mastered this.

I married in the Netherlands where civil ceremonies are needed and any religious service an extra. There was always a sense of formality to everything.

Fast forward and after almost 4 years in Houston, we returned to Holland in 1983, with two children, both under two. How different was the approach to healthcare compared to the States. We gradually adapted and our son attended a Dutch pre-school (peuterspeelzaal) which he enjoyed very much. Primary school aged children came home for lunch and women rarely worked for this reason.

Eventually he moved to the British School where his classmates were multinational, and it was likely that families moved often but sometimes you saw families that you had known in another country.

Our daughter is autistic and we were faced with a different set of challenges and disabled children were often sent to special schools at an early age, 5 days a week and were quite hidden from society. Dutch hospitals were quite antiquated in their approach with strict visiting times on the children's wards. She was under the care of a pediatrician and received very good care for her very complex health needs.

Visitors loved to visit us, the land of windmills and canals and lots more. The food was different and often very occasion specific. Chocolate letters at Sinterklaas, olibollen at New Year for example. The mix of cultures brought various foods that were enjoyed by all including the Indonesian rijstafel which consisted of many different dishes.

Some information from Esther about Holland

Holland is the land of windmills, canals, tulips, cheese, clogs, Delft Blue and much more.

The main language is Dutch, but most people speak at least one other language. Like most countries there are some regional dialects. The language is complicated by gender (m, f, and neutral) and some formal / informal usage depending on whom you are addressing.

70% of the homes are owned, but the country is densely populated and there are many flats, especially in the cities. Renting property is not seen as a social stigma. 40% of the population live in the Randstad, the area between Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht.

The Dutch are direct, and this is often difficult for foreigners to manage. They like punctuality and prefer visitors to make an arrangement to visit.

When meeting someone for the first time, shake hands and introduce yourself. If you know someone well, kissing (r,l,r) is acceptable, men usually just shake hands with each other.

Transport is efficient and coordinated with travel cards that can be loaded with cash and used on all forms of transport. Stations are modern and larger stations will have shops, including a "bloemen winkel" for those all important flowers and often a small supermarket.

Cycling is very popular in The Netherlands with over 15,000 km of cycle tracks. Trams are found in large towns and cities.

All residents who pay tax must have private health insurance, there is a basic cover which can be topped up. Individuals cannot be turned down for cover. There is a very good health system and there are many modern hospitals.

Education: Children are required to attend school from age 6 until 16, but most children start earlier but formal education doesn't start until age 6. Schools do not provide lunch and children either go home or take a packed lunch. Families tend to on the basis of these results are sent to one of three types of school, VMBO is a vocational option lasting 4 years. HAVO is a five year programme which prepares young people for university and then there is VWO which is a six year course that prepares students to follow a bachelors degree at a research university.

There are also special schools for children who need support because of their disability but many children can attend local schools with support.

There are also many schools that cater for the ex-pat communities, usually in the larger cities.

There are a number of foods that are typically Dutch. These include:

Stroopwafel, a thick round waffle, cut in half and then stuck back together with syrup. Originally sold from the back door of bakeries, poor man's cookie, invented in Gouda where there is still a siroopwafelfabriek.

Poffertjes are tiny pancake puffs served with butter and powdered sugar.

Bitterballen are a snack and are a deep-fried meat ragout ball with a lovely crust.

Oliebollen and **erwtensoep**, these are winter foods. An oliebol is a deep-fried batter ball with or without raisins or currants, served with powdered sugar and is sold from street stalls leading up to New Year. Pea soup is popular during the winter months.

Holland's **Nieuwe** herring is a delicacy in June and once again often sold from street stalls.

The Netherlands has been a kingdom since 1815. At present, the King is William Alexander and his wife is Queen Maxima. The Dutch celebrate his birthday on 27th April each year and this is a public holiday.

There are a number of flower festivals each year, including the world famous Keukenhof, the Floriade (every 10 years), plus of course the famous flower market at Aalsmeer.

Amsterdam has many museums and Holland is known for its many artists whose paintings can be seen in these museums. The Anne Frank Museum is a popular tourist stop and trips along the canals are a must. The Hague offers glimpses of the parliament buildings.

The Dutch exchange presents on December 5th and Sinterklaas arrives by boat tother with his Zwarte Piet helpers from Spain mid-November and children leave out their shoes for a few days prior to December 5th in the hope they will be filled with sweets. On December 5, the eve of the feast of St. Nicholas families gather and exchange gifts which are called "surprise" and there will be a specially composed poem enclosed with each gift. Children will be given chocolate letters in the shape of their initial and there will be "pepernoten" and "speculaas" to eat. December 5th is not a public holiday.

Christmas tends to be more low key and there is the Eerste Kertsdag and the Tweede Kerstdag, both public holidays.

There are 10 public holidays each year in the Netherlands.

Eurostar now provides a direct service between London and Amsterdam.

Whilst the Dutch ideally speak good English, they appreciate foreigners trying to speak their language and it is good to know some basic words and phrases.

Yes **Ya**

No **Nee**

Thank- you **Dank u well**

Please **Alstublieft** (also said when passing something over to someone, often heard in shops)

Do you speak English? **Spreekt tu Engels ?**

I don't speak Dutch **Ik spreek geen Nederlands**

Can I please have a menu ? **Mag ik de menukaart ?**

Please can I pay the bill ? **Mag ik de rekening betalen Alstublieft ?**

My name is **Mijn name is.....**

What is your name ? **How heet U ?**

Coffee **Koffie**

With milk **Met melk**

Without milk **Zonder milk**

Sugar **Suiker**

I am sorry **Het spijt me**

What is the time? **Hoe laat is 't ?**

Where is the hospital / pharmacy? **Waar is 't ziekenhuis / pharmacist?**