

## RELATE

A lot has been written on Dutch culture and the way the Dutch are perceived in the international community. This is my personal favourite topic and food for thought! Such a small country and such an impact in the world. Why is that?

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## 1. Dutch Culture

A lot has been written on Dutch culture and the way the Dutch are perceived in the international community. You might recognise the following stereotypes:  
(source: “Dealing with the Dutch” by Jacob Vossestein)

### The sturdy image

A flat, wet country, most of it lying below sea level (60%!). A place where it never stops raining and which would surely be flooded if it were not for the windmills, the famous Delta Works and little Hans Brinker sticking his finger in the dyke.

### The tourist image

Charming King Willen Alexander but mostly his wife Queen Maxima ruling over an innocent little country, the inhabitants of which wear wooden shoes, and ride bicycles and peacefully produce milk, cheese and flowers. The residents live in old, quaintly-gabled houses along canals or in picturesque, thatched-roof farmhouses. Of course the sun is always shining.

### The cultural image

A small country with a great tradition in the arts. Famous painters past and present, with their works on display in wonderful museums. Also renowned for its world-famous symphony orchestras and ballet companies; a good place for avant-garde theatre and modern design. Of late, it is also gaining fame as a source of great literature, which the outside world reads in translation.

### The permissive, lenient image

A place where apparently anything goes. Although most of the journalists and travellers typically concentrate on downtown Amsterdam, they tend to depict *all* of the Netherlands quite sensationally as a far too liberal society, where specialist shops sell legal drugs and pornography. A nation that finds it perfectly normal for gay couples – officially married of course – to obtain children by artificial insemination, and where people are helped to die by itinerant doctors legally practising euthanasia.

### The human image

A comfortable, safe haven, an idea held by immigrants and political refugees coming into Europe, linked to the permissive image above, but from yet another perspective. A country that takes seriously its international obligations in providing development assistance and not only takes part in international peace missions, but also presents initiatives in environmental and other global issues.

### **The blunt and opinionated image**

A tiny country with a big mouth, wanting to appear larger than it is. Its people tactlessly expressing their views on other people's and other nations' affairs.

### **The sporting image**

A nation of excellent football teams applying intriguing techniques. Fans dress in bizarre orange outfits, feasting and partying, even literally painting the town orange. Dutch hockey teams may be among the best in the world, but back home they are lucky to receive more than a few minutes of TV coverage.

### **The tight-with-money image**

Money-minded people whose greatest pleasure is extracting every last cent out of any transaction. Many people abroad are convinced that when the Dutch go on holiday elsewhere in Europe, they load up their caravans with food from their own supermarket rather than spend money in local restaurants. You will know the expression "Going Dutch" and possibly have come across "Kijken, kijken, niet kopen" meaning looking, looking, but never buying.

### **The economic image**

Even now that the polder model has lost its spell, the Dutch economy internationally is still taken very seriously. Small as it is, the Netherlands is one of the world's larger trading nations and aims to maintain the "Gateway to Europe" position. It is the home of a large number of globalising companies and financial institutions and has the highest "multinational company density" in the world.

While these images may be over-generalised and over-simplified, many Dutch people, and I think you as well, will recognise them.

**NOTE:** If you are interested in culture and want to learn more, you might consider buying one of the following books on the topic yourself.

<b>"Minding your Manners"</b> by Magda Berman	ISBN 978 90 4390 926 6
<b>"Living with the Dutch"</b> by Noreen Sharpe	ISBN 90 6832 574 4
<b>"The Undutchables"</b> by Colin White & Laurie Boucke	ISBN 13 978 1 88850 32 7
<b>"Riding the waves of Culture"</b> by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner	ISBN 13 978 1 85788 176 9

## 2. Customs & Habits

The Dutch have their own unique customs and characteristics. In order to achieve some measure of integration, you should try to find out what being Dutch is all about. You will then avoid misunderstandings and feel more at home amongst the Dutch. Though the Dutch may appear to be somewhat reserved to the outsider, they are actually very cordial, friendly people to know. They just believe in the right to privacy and, until proper introductions are made, they feel that what you do is entirely your own business.

### Neighbours

There is a Dutch expression that says, “a friendly neighbour is better than a distant friend”.

In the Netherlands it is customary that you introduce yourself to the nextdoor neighbour. The new arrival, you in this case, is expected to make the first move. If you for any reason don't introduce yourself, your neighbour will think that you do not wish to be bothered and will probably leave you alone for the rest of your stay out of respect for privacy.

When extending an invitation for coffee, tea, or a drink, make sure to agree on a date and time as the Dutch do not like dropping in unless they are very good friends. So if you have just become acquainted never visit unannounced for a drink. Call first so that you do not surprise them.

### Birthdays

Almost every Dutchman, old or young, celebrates his birthday. When visiting the home of the birthday person, you'll find that everyone congratulates each other. Not only the birthday person, but all that are present at the party.

You may also observe that every family will have a birthday calendar showing birthdays of everyone they know. This calendar usually hangs in the family's bathroom.

For children a real party will be thrown with candies, cakes and lots of presents. All little friends are invited and usually an outing will be organized (movies, McDonald's, swimming pool or bowling). When your child is invited for a “*Partijtje*” (children's birthday party), it goes without saying to bring a small gift. When you bring your child, do not forget to congratulate the parents and other family members. The birthday child hands out a sweet, a piece of cheese or fruit to classmates at school (only in his/her class) and to the teachers of all other classes. It is best to ask another mother what your child should hand out.

If you are invited to a birthday party bring a small present like flowers, a plant, a book or for the men, for instance, a bottle of good wine.

Birthdays are usually celebrated at work among colleagues. You are expected to treat your colleagues to special cakes with morning coffee and normally you will receive a birthday present bought with donations from your colleagues.

### **Tipping**

Although you might have read that one does not tip in the Netherlands, there are exceptions:

- Coat check; If you are not charged you are free to pay 50 eurocent e.g.
- Paperboy; At the end of the year your paperboy will ring the doorbell and hand you out his card with season greetings. In return he expects some money, like €2,00 or €5,00 for services rendered.  
Most of the people make an exception for the paperboy who is bringing the daily paper and give him a bit more.
- Restrooms; (Public restrooms) the minimum is 50 eurocent or more.
- Restaurants; If you are happy with the service, 10% is customary over the standard.
- Taxi; Although the tip is included in the fare, it is not uncommon to round fare off to the next euro. The driver should at least help you with your luggage.

### **“U” and “jij”**

The Dutch have two words for the word “you”.

“U” is used in more formal situations when people do not know each other very well.

“Jij” is used if people talk to each other on a first name basis and if you address children.

### **First name, last name**

Although Dutch society seems very informal, it is best to not start using first names even if people introduce themselves as, for example, Peter Smit. The rule is to start using first names only when the person suggests it.

## **3. Language**

The casual attitude the Dutch have to their language may explain why foreigners learning to speak Dutch are looked upon with pleasant surprise, but not taken very seriously. A few quotes by expatriates:

*“Dutch is not a language, it is a secret code for business people and they don’t want foreigners to learn the business code. Keep the knowledge of Dutch restricted, then we all make more profit.”*

*One American lady comments: “now that I have taken it upon myself to learn and speak the Dutch language, the locals are more than flattered – they’re shocked that any outsider would make an effort to “bother” with such an obscure language!”*

You will find that the Dutch are prouder of speaking foreign languages than of mastering their own. Most Dutch people will choose to switch to English rather than exercise the patience to wait for the slow beginner’s answer or listen to their accent. In some respects, the Dutch are perhaps embarrassed for the struggling foreigner and simply revert to English to accommodate them. Do not let all of that stop you though in your efforts. Speaking the language will for sure help you getting in touch with the locals and learn and understand them quicker. It will enhance the experience of living and working abroad!

I can recommend you to read chapter 17 of the book “The Undutchables”. It tells about the Dutch language and had me (and I am Dutch!) laughing out loud.

**NOTE:** ask your IMC at the Eres NL office or your HR representative for their preferred supplier on language course.

#### 4. Food

The Dutch have many specialities for you to try. Popular Dutch treats are, in alphabetical order:

- Beschuit* Rusk’s served for breakfast or lunch. Very crisp and light. When a baby is born, you will often get served *beschuit met muisjes* (Rusk’s covered with anise flavoured pink or blue topping).
- Bitterballen* *Bitterballen* are the same as *kroketten* but shaped in small round balls. Deep fried and often served with cocktail sticks and mustard.
- Boerenkool* A very famous *stamppot* of curly cabbage with potatoes served with smoked sausage.
- Drop* The national sweet/candy or salt liquorice in every shape.
- Erwtensoep* Old fashioned, thick, split pea soup cooked with pieces of fat bacon and sausage. A typical winter dish.
- Frikadel* Ground meat in the shape of a Frankfurter.

<i>Kroketten</i>	Known as rissoles in the U.K. similar to <i>timbales</i> or <i>croquettes</i> but with less meat. Often served for lunch on a sandwich. Always served with mustard.
<i>Muisjes</i>	Grain-like topping to be sprinkled on bread or <i>beschuit</i> . <i>Muisjes</i> are aniseed flavoured.
<i>Hagelslag</i>	Chocolate rain comes in dark, milk and white chocolate.
<i>Nieuwe Haring</i>	Raw and salted herring preserved in a uniquely Dutch way. Eating raw herring may take some courage but it is worth the try.
<i>Oliebollen</i>	Doughnuts without a hole, with or without raisins, eaten especially on New Year's Eve.
<i>Poffertjes</i>	A two-inch version of the pancake. A plateful is served with a topping of icing sugar and butter. A favourite for the children.
<i>Speculaas</i>	Cookies with a spicy (cinnamon) flavour. Large sizes are sold during St. Nicholas time (November and December).
<i>Stamppot</i>	A casserole dish of diced meat, vegetables and potatoes.
<i>Stroopwafels</i>	Two thin waffles with a light sugar syrup in between.
<i>Zuurkool</i>	<i>Sauerkraut</i> , usually served with sausage or bacon.

## 5. Events Calendar & Public Holidays

A cold January invites endless speculation about the nation-stopping *Elfstedentocht* (Eleven Cities Race), a gruelling 200km (124mi) skating marathon through the countryside of Friesland. The last one was held in 1997, and it could be decades before it all freezes over again.

The Holland Festival in June is celebrated mostly in Amsterdam and The Hague. It's often highbrow and pretentious but there are many fringe events. The Port of Rotterdam's North Sea Jazz Festival each July is the world's biggest jazz junket.

Vying for attention as Holland's oldest city, Nijmegen attracts revellers from all over for the country's hugest walking festival. The *Vierdaagse* (Four Day March) over 200km (124mi) through the surrounding countryside is a major event for serious walkers and partygoers alike, starting on the third Tuesday in July. The event is ushered in and drawn to a close by the *Zomerfeesten* (Summer Festival), that start on the Saturday before the *Vierdaagse*.

January 1

**New Year's Day** (*Nieuwjaarsdag*)

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The 1st of January is a bank holiday in the Netherlands, so all shops and offices are closed. Everybody may drop in for a visit and wish you Happy New Year. The next couple of days at the office everybody shakes hands and wishes you a Happy New Year.

*January 6*

**Epiphany/Twelfth-night** (*Drie Koningen*)

Especially in the south of the Netherlands, the Catholic festival of the three kings (Casper, Melchior and Balthasar) is celebrated by the children. They dress up as kings and parade through the streets or ring the doorbell. Some people eat a special dessert with a hidden almond in one of the portions; the person who finds the almond will be the king and will receive a crown.

*February 14*

**Valentine's Day** (*Valentijnsdag*)

Not a typical Dutch celebration, but warmly welcomed in the last decades by the Dutch. An opportunity to secretly admire a loved one and send presents or cards.

*February*

**Carnival** (*Catholic Celebration*)

The Netherlands have been divided in two factions for a number of years: those living below the large rivers (Maas, Rijn, Waal) and those living above them. The Southerners, mostly Catholics, know how to throw a party and to exuberantly celebrate life. The northerners, mostly Calvinists and protestants, take life a lot more seriously. Nowadays, that fine line seems to fade and many Northerners visit the south of the Netherlands to take part in the celebrations.

The key to a city is symbolically transferred to the "Council of Eleven" and a Prince of Carnival is selected. He will be the figurehead for the celebrations during two or three days. There are carnival parades and most people dress up. Shops and offices might be closed. Children go to school in fancy dresses and children's parties are organised locally. The end of carnival marks the beginning of the spring season.

*March/April*

**Palm Sunday** (*Palm Pasen*)

On the Sunday before Easter certain areas of the Netherlands still hold processions through the streets with the children carrying a *Palmpasestok*, a long stick decorated with a rooster, a duck or a swan made of bread, some fruit and garlands. This Christian celebration is in remembrance of the procession into Jerusalem with palms and olive branches.



*March/April*

**Good Friday** (*Goede Vrijdag*)

Again, a Christian holiday in remembrance of the crucifixion of Jesus. Offices might be closed, shops are mostly open, but will close earlier in the afternoon.

*March/April*

**Easter** (*Pasen*)

In the Netherlands Easter Sunday and Easter Monday are celebrated, which are bank holidays and therefore shops and offices are closed. On Easter Sunday people usually have a large Easter breakfast and the children hunt for hidden eggs, which are usually hard-boiled and painted or nicely decorated. Go to a performance of the St. Matthew's Passion by Bach, details available at any VVV (=tourist information office).

*March 8*

**International Women's Day**

*April 1*

**April Fool's Day**

Sometimes an April Fool's joke, always good natured and not hurtful, is found to be so good and creative that it is mentioned in the national press.

*April, 27*

**King Willem-Alexander's birthday**

We celebrate King's Day on 27 April, Willem-Alexander's birthday. This is a national Holiday and an absolute favourite day for all Dutchmen around the world. In every town there is a "Kermis" or pleasure fair and lots of other activities like street markets, games and parties. Many houses show the Dutch flag often in combination with an orange banner. A well-known drink on this day is *oranjebitter*: a strongly alcoholic and orange coloured spirit made of an extract of spices and fruit.

*April/June*

**Ascension Day** (*Hemelvaart*)

Takes place 40 days after Christ's Resurrection on Easter. It is always a Thursday, so people tend to take long weekends of. Nice break to visit the Keukenhof in Lisse (check your tourist information centre or VVV).

*April 20*

**Secretary Day**

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Your secretary will appreciate a bouquet of flowers

*April/May*

**Pentecost or Whitsuntide** (*Pinksteren*)

Fifty days after Easter is *Pinksteren*. This follows the celebration of *Hemelvaartsdag* (Ascension Day). *Pinksteren* now has more of a May Day spirit than a religious meaning. The following Monday is also a bank holiday.

The Saturday before *Pinksteren* is called ***Luilak*** or “***Lazybones***”. Mostly in the western provinces of the Netherlands. Children get up very early or do not go to bed at all. They make a lot of noise and try to wake you up. Some are even looking for trouble and try to damage cars, etc. Put away any belongings around the outside of the house and switch off your front door bell. Park your car in the garage or somewhere safe.

*May 4*

**Remembrance or Memorial Day** (*Dodenherdenking*)

On May 4, ceremonies are held all over the Netherlands in remembrance of those who died during the Second World War. Ceremonies and parades are held at the Waalsdorperlakte near The Hague and at the National Monument on the Dam in Amsterdam.

From 6:00 p.m. to sunset flags are flown at half-mast. At 8:00 p.m. two-minute silence is observed in memory of the dead. Everyone in the Netherlands is expected to refrain from all activities and think of those who fought for the Netherlands’ freedom. This day is not a holiday.

*May 5*

**Liberation Day** (*Bevrijdingsdag*)

The end of World War II is celebrated. It is a (working) national holiday and a day of rejoicing with many activities at school and in the community. Every 5 years this is celebrated as a national bank holiday.

*May 9*

**Europe Day**

*May*

**Mother’s Day**

Always on the second Sunday in May all mothers are thanked and surprised with gifts.

June

**Father's Day**

Let's not forget the fathers. This is the third Sunday in June!

September

**Prinsjesdag** (State Opening of Parliament)

The third Tuesday of September is *Prinsjesdag*. The King and Queen rides in the *Gouden Koets* (golden carriage) through the streets of The Hague and the King gives an annual speech – the *Troonrede* (throne speech) at Parliament. This can be watched on television.

October 4

**Animal Day** (*Dierendag*)

Popular with kids of course. Pets will be treated extra well on this day.

October 31

**Halloween**

This is a relatively new celebration in the Netherlands. Although it originates from the Catholic festival of *Allerheiligen* or All Hallows (all saints) it was abolished by the Protestants.

It is becoming more and more popular, specially among the young.

November 11

**Sint Maarten**

Especially celebrated in the provinces of Utrecht and northern Netherlands. Children walk through the streets carrying lighted lanterns, ring doorbells, sing a song and get sweets, fruit and biscuits. It could be considered the Dutch equivalent for Halloween

End of November

**Saint Nicholas arrives** (*Sinterklaas*)

Dutch children are just as excited about *Sinterklaas* as about their own birthday. He arrives in November from Spain by boat. From then on, the children may put their shoe in front of the chimney. In the morning they will find a small present/candy in it. This can continue until the 6<sup>th</sup> of December, St. Nicholas' birthday. During this period, you can eat special sweets such as *speculaaspoppen*, *marsepein*, *pepernootjes*, *taai taai* and *borstplaat*.

November

### **Thanksgiving**

Holiday for US citizens and also celebrated in Leiden, a stopover for the Pilgrims before their departure to The New World.

December 6

### **Sinterklaas**

*Sinterklaas* celebrates his birthday. Early in the evening of December 5 – *Pakjesavond* - he visits every house with lots of presents. He may come in person or he may just knock on your door and disappear, leaving a bag of presents on your doorstep! *Sinterklaas* is celebrated as a very cozy family evening when family members buy presents for each other and make poems which provide a clue for the contents of the gift. As soon as the kids are old enough, the family will draw straws containing the name of one family member. This is the person for who a special and creative Surprise present will have to be prepared.

*Sinterklaas* is not a national holiday but shops and offices usually close an hour earlier.

December 25/26

### **Christmas**

Christmas in the Netherlands is also a time filled with the magic atmosphere of the holiday season. More and more, the American tradition is followed, placing gifts under the Christmas Tree instead of giving them at *Pakjesavond*.

Christmas is for the most part a family occasion with the *kerstdiner* as a high point. The Dutch sensibly have two Christmas Days (December 25 and 26), which is handy for in-laws.

It is also the time of the *Kerstpakket*. Your employer might present you with a box filled with some wine, luxury foods and decorations. It is customary to send *Kerstpakketten* to business relations as well. Both days are public holidays (shops are closed).

Fireworks are only allowed to be sold in the days preceding New Year's Eve.

December 31

### **New Year's Eve (Oudejaarsavond or Oud en Nieuw)**

In the evening of December 31, the Dutch will serve "*oliebollen*" or oil balls and "*appelflappen*" or apple turnovers dipped in powder sugar and drink champagne to celebrate the New Year. When the clock turns 00.00 family and friends will kiss and wish one-another all the best for the new year and go out to meet the neighbours.

Fireworks are being lit together with the neighbours in the streets. Everybody eats *oliebollen* and *appelflappen*, the shape of a doughnut without a hole, with or without raisins or slices of apple. People meet up with family and friends.

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