

HOW TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE



IN THE NETHERLANDS
(FOR EXPATS MYSTIFIED BY THE DUTCH)

PRODUCED BY ICF WAGENINGEN

How to Survive and Thrive in the Netherlands

For Expats Mystified by the Dutch

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Thanks and Acknowledgments

As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” (1 Corinthians 12.20-21 NIV)

- God (obviously),
- Pastor Boudewijn for his direction and support,
- Daniel, Roland, Minnie, Precious, Andy and Koos for their feedback and comments on drafts,
- My family for being awesome,
- The entire nation of the Netherlands for putting up with me as a puzzled expat.
- Cover design whipped up with suspiciously cheerful help from Microsoft Copilot.

Contents

A Word from Our Pastor.....	viii
Preface.....	ix
1 What's in a Name?	12
2 A Rocky Start to the Netherlands	14
3 Quantum Weather or Not	16
4 Helicopter Needed to View the Indigenous Folk.....	18
5 Cultivating Work Productivity.....	20
6 Accommodation	25
7 Gardening.....	27
The Bumble Bee.....	28
The Anti-Leafer	28
Ants.....	29
8 Pedal Power – the Cycle of Dutch Life.....	30
Second Nature	31
Bike Ownership.....	32
Dutch Bicycles.....	33
Cycling in the Netherlands.....	33
9 Driving it Home.....	36
10 Public Transport.....	41
Trains	41
Buses.....	46
Taxis	47

11 Cultural Paradox	48
12 Time for a Rude and Unruly Awakening	52
13 Word of Mouth: The Dutch Language	55
Common Dutch Words and Language	58
14 Health and Healthcare.....	63
General Practitioners	63
Eyecare.....	65
Dental.....	65
Psychology	65
Spiritual health.....	67
15 Eating Out	68
A is for Apple.....	68
B is for Bread.....	69
C is for Cheese.....	69
Other Foodstuffs and Beverages.....	70
Eating Out	71
Miscellaneous Points	72
16 Caught Short in the Netherlands (A male Perspective)	75
The “Wild Pisser”	75
Public Toilets in Public Places.....	76
Chatting.....	77
17 Shopping.....	79

18 Birthday Parties and the Dreaded “Kring”	83
The Birthday Calendar	83
The Birthday Party	84
The Birthday “Kring”	84
19 Public Holidays and Festivities.....	88
New Year’s Day	88
New Year’s Eve.....	88
New Year’s Day	89
King’s Day.....	90
Easter Sunday and Bank Holiday Monday	91
“Sinterklaas”	91
Christmas Day and Boxing Day	93
20 Miscellaneous.....	95
21 Facing Uncertainty and Loneliness in the Netherlands	99
Start Easy: Stay close to home.....	100
Stretching Out.....	101
Treading New Ground.....	102
And Obviously.....	102
22 The Great Commission	104
About ICF Wageningen and the Author	105

A Word from Our Pastor

Hi internationals,

With a smile, a nod and a sympathising face did I read Paul's thoughts on being new to the Netherlands. A Brit surviving and thriving, and showing me my country. At times I could "glue him behind the wallpaper", other times see that he 'fell with his nose in the butter' or 'didn't eat much cheese of it'. And yet, wonderful to have him (and you!) as our fellow countryman.

It is tough to move to the Netherlands. So much is so different. The language, the jokes, food, weather, the double Dutch and going Dutch. In many ways you can feel lost, lonely and little. And yet for all that, there are more similarities between us than differences.

There is a wonderful promise of God for all internationals living in the Netherlands, "If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast." (Psalm 139.9-10 NIV). All we need to do is hold out our own hand and let God hold us.

And we too at the International Christian Fellowship, ICF Wageningen, want to hold out our hand, put a hand on your shoulder, and help you have a home away from home.

May God be near you in the Netherlands,

Boudewijn van Schoonhoven (Pastor at ICF Wageningen)

www.ICFwageningen.org

Preface

...if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. (Psalm 139.9-10 NIV)

Welcome to the Netherlands!

The Netherlands is a strange place and the locals do things differently here. Strange noises come out of their mouths. Strange things go into their mouths. They do strange things, then they look at you as if it's you who's strange when you do your normal things.

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. (James 5.16 NIV)

I came to the Netherlands 15 years ago when I married my Dutch wife.

Having a Dutchie literally hold my hand and guiding me through the mysteries of a strange land seems like a perfect landing into the Netherlands! But it was tough. I was getting used to a new job in a new country as well as to married life – my wife too, who at times wondered when this strange man from England hanging around her house would go back home. At times, I also wondered where home was.

I'd discovered that 40 years of living in England didn't help me much in the Netherlands; the Netherlands is not England and the Dutch are not English. After just a few weeks I hit difficulties and the struggles of settling in started.

Simple things were now complicated and I grew increasingly frustrated – even angry – that I couldn’t do anything in the Netherlands. I was like a child. I couldn’t even communicate. I lost sense of who I was.

Friends around me wanted to help (note: kind-natured Dutchies!) but I wanted empathy, not solutions. I needed someone to recognise me so I wouldn’t feel alone, or like an outsider. I wanted someone to talk to me in English, not tell me about the linguistic roots of the Dutch language and send me a link to an online Dutch language course. And I wanted someone to say “Yes, it’s weird there’s a piano in the library”, or “Yes, it’s strange you need to make an appointment to make an appointment before you meet a friend.” I needed someone to see things for a moment through my eyes and say, “Yes, it’s tough here.”

They were tough times in a country that seemed tough.

We come to the Netherlands with high hopes! We come to study, to work, to marry, we come for a hundred different reasons. And we think it’s going to be great! Why else would we come? But living in the Netherlands isn’t all roses; there are prickly thorns too for the newcomer who isn’t willing to accept and adapt.

And that’s where this guide comes in; to show you some of the strange things in the Netherlands and some of the strange things the locals do – not so you recognise them as potential thorns and navigate past them, but so you’ll come to understand the culture and why Dutch life is like it is. I hope you’ll accept it, and through acceptance discover an amazing nation of good people! And I hope too that you’ll adapt to it, so

you're not just surviving here in the Netherlands, but becoming a part of Dutch society – and thriving in it!

Even when things are tough, living in the Netherlands is not a temporary prison sentence; it can be a home away from home. Indeed, many visitors end up staying here for longer than they initially planned – voluntarily!

Remember, if you feel alone and isolated, God's with you and knows exactly what you're facing and what you're going through. And (to a lesser extent) so do many other internationals – even some who put on brave faces and tell you it's all an adventure and exciting.

You're not alone!

Paul

Bennekom, the Netherlands, September 2024 AD.

Disclaimer: The experiences and observations in this guide are based on the Dutch people and places I've encountered during my time here in the Netherlands, and from my own personal point of view as an Englishman. They do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of ICF Wageningen.

1

What's in a Name?

The nations will see your vindication, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow. (Isaiah 62.2 NIV)

Let's get the name thing sorted off the bat, because some locals seem to be sensitive about this.

In the English language (so the same language as all of the English translations of the Bible), "the Netherlands" and "Holland" are synonymous with each other – they both refer to the country.

For the Dutch, "Holland" is the name of one the provinces, notably, the province with Amsterdam sitting in it. (Note the province has now been split into North and South Holland). "The Netherlands" is the countryside that surrounds Amsterdam.

In days gone by, most visitors to Holland / the Netherlands only went to Amsterdam and returned home saying they'd been to Holland. Dutch officials, in a rebranding effort to popularise the rest of the country, promoted using "the Netherlands" to refer to the whole country in an effort to show foreigners there's more to "Holland" than Amsterdam.

Tip: Get into the habit of calling the country "the Netherlands". Then you avoid this whole conversation. Besides, it sounds

similar to the Dutch pronunciation of their country “Nederland”.

All that said, many Dutchies refer to the United Kingdom as “England”. So even when they go to the country of Scotland, they go to “England”.

2

A Rocky Start to the Netherlands

In the beginning God made from nothing the heavens and the earth. The earth was an empty waste and darkness was over the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was moving over the top of the waters. (Genesis 1.1-2 NLV)

God moves with an incredible and mighty force over planet Earth.

And the Earth moves.

Lovers call it romance. Astronomers call it “heliocentric orbiting”, and timekeepers call it “synodic rotation”. God loves the creatures walking, flying and swimming over the Earth’s surface. And He loves geologists who noticed rocks* moving over the Earth too.

* God probably loves rocks too. After all, He’s the one who made them.

Geologists call the moving rocks “Plate tectonics”. Plate tectonics is a slow process where huge slabs of solid rock float around on pools of molten rock, and they mash and grind against each other, pushing one another down forming mysterious deep-sea trenches, or push each other up to form magnificent mountain ranges.

The mountain ranges are part of continents, masses of land that people drew artificial lines across and call countries

and live on. Other countries stayed under water and were difficult to live on so they became homes of myths and legends.

One special country had no mountains, but neither was it completely under water. Just mostly. The country is called the Netherlands (the “low lying lands”), and its peoples had legendary ideas of their own. They didn’t like waddling around in the water up to their knees, so they pumped the water away through a complicated and exhausting system of planning, talking, red tape, more talking, some discussion and a little bit more talking (an official system called “*Poldering*”). And a water pumping system powered – perhaps unsurprisingly – by wind.

Welcome to the Netherlands. It’s flat, and above all (except sea level), it’s dry. Except when it rains.

Quantum Weather or Not

He said to the crowd: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?” (Luke 12.54-56 NIV)

Despite the rumours, Dutch weather is not any worse than the 100-year storm that’s on Jupiter’s great red spot, or than the howling toxic winds of Venus. Given the small size of the Netherlands, by the time the North Sea wind enters from the West, there’s not enough distance for it to build up any significant speed before it’s crossed the country’s easterly border (sorry Germany).

There’s a saying in the Netherlands that it’s either raining, or if it’s not raining it’s about to rain. Some people helpfully comment that it’s not raining between the raindrops. These people get prodded in the eye with the tips of umbrellas carried by people who don’t fit between raindrops. The point is whether it’s raining or about to rain is a question of seeing your Schrodinger rain gauge as either half full or half empty.

Would you like a picnic on the lawn in the sunshine or would you like the rain to ensure you have a healthy lawn in the first place? Dutch weather is always perfect for someone,

especially if you have the right mindset; there is no bad weather, just bad clothing.

Mention an outdoor activity and Dutchies dive for a rain radar app to ascertain whether said activity will render them wet or dry.

My Dutch wife tells me the app is accurate to within about an hour and 5 km. Practically speaking, this is useless. Stepping off a jetty an hour after the ferry has left, or standing 5 km starboard of the ferry's deck makes all the difference in being wet or dry. I mentioned this to a colleague at KNMI (the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute) and he suggested I use a "personal wetness app". I nearly wet myself laughing at the name.

The Quantum Observer Effect comes into play; observation changes the weather system. You observe it's dry outside but the app tells you it's raining. The Dutch stay inside. And vice versa. Add a splash of Schrodinger: differing systems run simultaneously. It's raining outside, but the app tells you it's either dry or going to be dry. The Dutch leak out of the doorways and into the rain.

In short, the app tells you less about what the rain is doing or will do, but much more about what the Dutch will do.

Tip: Carry an umbrella if you don't want to get wet. It keeps you dry by ensuring it won't rain on the quantum observer effect that you're prepared for some personal wetness.

Helicopter Needed to View the Indigenous Folk

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation,... (1 Peter 2.2 NIV)

Have you ever squeezed a short, fat, marshmallow in your hand, and watched it extrude from the top of your fist?

Some of the Dutch folk are just as ~~soft and squidgey~~ cuddly as your fistful of stroodling marshmallows, and there's a theory that Dutchies have similarly succumbed to crushing tectonic pressure and grown to disproportionate heights, winning for themselves the number 1 ranking position as nation for tallest people on the planet.*

* The theory also explains why the Netherlands is one of the smallest countries on the planet.

Well. It's just a theory. Like evolution. Another theory is that their height is a species survival trait that allows them to keep their heads above water level should their sea dykes fail.

In short, the Dutch are tall. If you can get used to the idea you'll be spending most of your time shouting into their belly buttons when you're standing next to one and trying to hold a decent conversation, you'll be mentally well set-up for surviving in the Netherlands.

Tip: Sing the song “Read your Bible, pray every day and you’ll grow, grow, grow.”

Tip: Learning to swim is also a good back-up survival strategy.

Cultivating Work Productivity

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground ‘land,’ and the gathered waters he called ‘seas.’ And God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1.9-10 NIV)

Let’s be fair. Not all of the Netherlands has been rescued from the watery grip of the sea. Thousands of years ago, sediment was carried by 4 large rivers across Europe to the west. Much of it ended up in the sea and settled forming flat sea beds. And a lot of the sediment formed flat lowlands – the Netherlands – along the way where people settled and who would later seek to reunite the sediment upon which they stood with the sediment over which they swam and fished.

There’s an old saying: “God created the world, but the Dutch created the Netherlands.”

By the time the Dutch finished pumping the sea away they were tired. Then they noticed the rivers were still flowing over their dry bits and depositing more sediment into their wet bits. Spirits drained, but still level-headed, they had no energy to create any mountains. So the Dutch packed up and called it a day, and ate some pancakes whilst they looked over their flat work.

Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (Genesis 2.3 NIV)

However, to this day, the Dutch are still pumping water back into the sea. And the constant drainage means the drying of some areas causes the Netherlands to sink even further below sea level. There's no doubt that the Dutch are hard workers, but thankfully God doesn't get that sinking feeling when He surveys the quality of His work!

Like their landscape, Dutch societal structure is flat. If you raise yourself above someone, you'll swiftly be brought back down to the same level as everyone else. Lower yourself and you'll be considered a fool. It's natural then, that the social hierarchy is also flat.

The flat social structure often means more informality, so first names are commonly used*. Titles, including academic titles, are largely dismissed, even on company business cards.

*** Brief aside on names in the Netherlands:** Dutchies are given an official first and middle name at birth which is only used on formal documentation such as birth certificates and death certificates. Then they're designated a "calling name" which is the name they are known and called by for their time in between their birth and their death.

New parent: "This is our baby son, Siebren Jacob."

Visitor: "How sweet! What's he called?"

New parent: "Sico."

The strange exception to the equal standing within Dutch society is the Dutch word "*U*" (You) which is reserved for people you respect, or for strangers (because you don't know yet whether they deserve your respect or not). In practice, *u* is used for the elderly, and for other people it lasts for about the

first half minute of conversation. After that, each participant tends to slide into using the more informal version, *je* (you).

This informality also extends to the workplace where hierarchy is distinctly absent. Whilst there is still a myriad of teams, project groups, sections and departments, each with their own head, you'll find your immediate boss is more of an equal colleague than an unapproachable dictator higher up than you on the corporate ladder. They'll be open to discuss their decisions – as well as hear criticism; everyone has the right to voice their opinion, and everyone strives to achieve the best possible final outcome.

To ensure everyone has the chance to make their opinion known, Dutchies use the “Polder Model” (“*Poldermodel*”) to bring people and teams together for consensus-based decision making. Poldering marks a period of intense and thorough discussion, planning, optimisation and organising to make sure that the absolute best possible outcome is approved by the absolute most possible number of people involved. And given the astonishingly enormous number of people involved, the verb “to polder” (“*polderen*”) is sometimes taken to mean “to make compromises and work together”.

In practice, poldering means endless meetings to get everyone's opinion, then everyone's opinion on everyone else's opinion. By the time a decision has been made (and discussed, approved and planned in), the people at the end of the project are a completely different set of people to those who started the project, thanks to new recruits (with new ideas and new opinions that need to be discussed), retirement or exasperated

sick leave. In practice, the verb “*polderen*” is taken to signify a slow decision-making process.

Be aware that Dutchies are direct in their speech and don't sugar-coat negativity; if they don't agree with you they will tell you immediately and straight to your face. And in a meeting this means they're telling it to everyone else's face too. However harsh and abrasive this seems, don't take it personally! It's simply the Dutchie expressing their opinion – just as you're encouraged to express yours too! So be sure to take it as constructive criticism – or defend your idea!

It won't take you long to realise that it's the Dutch who dominate international group project discussions. It's not arrogance, rather, the Dutchies are bemused that the rest of world don't say what they think in meetings which are organised so that ideas can be discussed! So go ahead and make your thoughts and your ideas known – and stand by them!

Note: The sad corollary of this is that compliments (if any) are given in private after a meeting.

Dutch work mentality is friendly but fierce. The standard working work is 40 hours, and there tends to be a clear social division between your colleagues and your friends at home. At the same time, many companies make large efforts to give their employees a good work-life balance, for example, through allowances to work at home, providing access to wellness and lifestyle centres, a flexible spending budget and a personal education budget.

Part-time work is very popular, and companies are also open to their employees regularly working more than their

contracted number of hours to build up extra holiday days in lieu. In these cases, options exist to maximise tax savings.

Accommodation

But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew 7.26-27 NIV)

The Netherlands is a sandy place. This isn't surprising because a lot of it used to be underwater. But don't be deterred that Jesus' words effectively rule out building any houses just about anywhere in the Netherlands. The Dutch aren't.

The Netherlands is – or at least seems to be – one of the most densely populated places not just on planet Earth, but in the whole of the solar system, and indeed, the whole of the known universe. And perhaps, in some parts of the unknown universe too. In this latter point I don't know for sure, but I suppose that's the point of it being unknown.

The other point is that given the crazy amount of housing in the Netherlands, surprisingly little of it is available for rent. This is mostly due to high mortgage interest rates and taxes on rental homes which means it's cheaper for locals to live in their houses instead of renting them out. And the lack of rental homes (as well as lack of dry land) pushes the rental prices of these scarce rooms for rent sky high. On the plus side, if you do manage to find a place to rent, the Dutch system grants tenants a lot of rights.

Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Matthew 8.20 (NIV)

Houses, or individual rooms for rent, can be found through rental agencies and real estate agents, but be aware that many of these organisations charge a fee just to register and waiting lists are long. You can also try the private market by checking local newspapers and noticeboards in supermarkets.

Wageningen University and Research, near the ICF Wageningen Church, has a webpage with information and useful links to local and national organisations that can help you finding accommodation. Other universities within the Netherlands may also be home to information that assists their local students.

Tip: Don't be afraid of unfurnished dwellings. If you can get transport arranged, there is plenty of cheap furniture available at second-hand stores (“*kringloop winkels*”).

Tip: You may also consider staying with a host or a guest family for a “soft landing” in the Dutch culture.

7

Gardening

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2.15 NIV)

If you're lucky enough to find accommodation to keep you warm and dry, you may also be lucky enough to find a place with a garden so you can be outside at the same time as being home. But there are rules...

Most Dutch residences have a back and a front garden with rigid demarcation. Not by the house in between them, but by their purpose. The rule is the front garden is for the neighbours and the one at the back is for yourself.

A Dutch friend knocked at my door last week.

Me: Nice to see you, come in!

Dutch friend: You need a gardener.

Me (to myself): If you can't make it to the front door, you don't deserve to come in.

Front gardens are for show; an outdoor welcome mat for passers-by. And the Dutch feel welcomed with clean tiles, or with shrubs laid on bare soil in geometric precision in right-angled rows and columns or diagonals calculated personally by Pythagoras. Dutch front gardens are designed masterfully with as much precision and forethought as in a game of chess,

constructed to attract and guide potential visitors like bishops and queens into their Dutch 'castle'.

The back garden is for yourself. There are 3 kinds of Dutch garden selves:

1 The Bumble Bee

The bumble bee gardener loves their garden and delights in its organic growth. These gardeners are like the bumble bees of the insect world – working hard to ensure tamed beauty in the area they have, often transforming concrete hell into a well-grounded Dutch version of the hanging gardens of Babylon. A Dutch garden needs to have flowers, but make no mistake – it isn't all tulips in the Netherlands; there are plenty of varieties of colourful and aromatic flowers that grow well in the Dutch climate, and the bumble bee gardener knows exactly what to do with them!

Occasionally a town or village organises days where Bumble Bee gardeners show off their gardens to the public – and hopefully inspire them!

2 The Anti-Leafer

Despite the creative freedom owning a back garden for yourself provides, the anti-leafer's back garden isn't for gardening; it's for using in summer to sit in or on and drink tea with friends and family. It's often bought as is from a garden centre, or installed with either concrete tiles or fully grown shrubs bought in maturity and in need of just an occasional sprinkle of water. But only a sprinkle; water in the Netherlands is metered and costs cash. Even when it rains.

Anti-leafer's "gardening" is preparing it for the summer, and that means their main gardening activity is clearing leaves away. So where most countries do the majority of their gardening in Spring, cutting back dead branches and sowing seeds, anti-leafers do most of theirs in Autumn.

Every good anti-leafer has a leaf blower, which is odd because every good anti-leafer garden has no leaves. It's a chicken and egg situation, though in fairness, several Dutch gardens have those too. Some anti-leafers go against the pneumatic flow and have a garden vacuum cleaner designed to suck up pesky leaves. The bags of collected leaves are then, presumably, sold to the leaf-blowing fraternity who wish to practice their leaf blowing skills through the year when leaves are mercifully less plentiful. Rakes are less common; they don't make so much noise.

Independent of size, the necessary feature of a Dutch back garden is the shed. Building a shed increases the property price, so it's almost compulsory to have one in your garden, even if it means you have no garden left. Not only does the garden shed become a misnomer, it becomes a mystery as to what purpose the garden tools kept inside are used for. In some housing estates, the back garden shed doesn't fit in the back garden so you'll find it located at the front of the house.

3 Ants

I mean *actual* ants. Many Dutch gardens seem to be full of them! I don't know what the ants do in the gardens, but I guess they do something; they certainly look busy whilst they're doing it.

Pedal Power – the Cycle of Dutch Life

**“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.”
(Matthew 5.41 NIV)**

“Preferably by bicycle.” – Nearly any Dutchie.

“Obviously.” – Nearly all of the other Dutchies.

Note: My editor advised me to keep each section short. For cycling in the Netherlands that’s going to be an impossibility. Sorry Ed..

You know when fixing a water leak and after hours of toil and several cubic meters of plumber’s gunge you’re amazed to find that water just dribbles and oozes out of everywhere? Dutch bicycles are like that water; they’re everywhere, and they get everywhere. I had a shower last week and wasn’t surprised at all to see a cyclist in the cubicle.

The invention of the wheel was a revolutionary idea and a turning point in Dutch transportation; getting around in the Netherlands is done predominantly by bike, bicycle, cycle, city bike, mountain bike, tricycle, unicycle and cargo bike*.

* Cargo bikes (“*bakfiets*”) are wheelbarrows disguised as bikes, and are used to move upwards of 4 children around at the same time.

Second Nature

The popularity of cycling is not, as many people might think, because the Netherlands is flat (which it is). Or is it because of the abundance of cycle lanes (cart before the horse; the cycle lanes are built because of the abundance of cycles). The Dutch affinity with cycling is the result of a finely tuned and honed state of mind.

Most nurseries around the world teach children “The wheels on the bus go round and round.” Dutch children are taught that the feet on the bike pedals go round and round.

It’s not unheard of to see parents balancing babies on the front handlebars with a pillow for comfort. Whilst reading this may cause your jaw to drop to the floor in shock, spend a moment to pity my wife who broke her jaw when, as all laws of physics and biology would predict (starting from Newton’s laws of gravity and including natural selection), a certain baby fell off my mother-in-law’s bike front handlebar.

Note: Credit to Dutch drivers. When a distraught mother stands in the middle of the road with a half-crazed look in her eye, clutching a baby dripping with blood and a broken jaw, most Dutch drivers will stop and take you pretty pronto to the nearest hospital.

Seemingly, a single baby balancing on a bike is no moral problem for a Dutchie. Or, despite the above, a physical problem either. Indeed, up to 3 or 4 babies and / or young children can be easily strapped in together or attached in some way to a bicycle (as well as saddle-bags packed full of the week’s groceries) and the Dutch cyclist is perfectly able to pedal off with an outstretched helping arm pushing a toddler on their

bike who's still learning to cycle. *And* they're able to stick out their other arm to indicate! It's fairly safe to say that the Dutch are as dexterous with their cogged and sprocketed bikes as the finest elven watchmakers are with their intricate timepieces of lore.

Bike Ownership

Owning a bicycle in the Netherlands is expected – not because of the health and environmental benefits, but because it's a way of life. So naturally it's also expected to cycle long distances through severe weather conditions (“There's no bad weather for cycling; there's just bad clothing.”). Everyone has a bike, so it's worth getting one – not just to have one, but so that you don't not have one.

Whilst the level of bike ownership is more or less a constant (high) proportion of Dutch inhabitants, the actual owner of a given bicycle varies considerably, and not always through choice. In other words, bike theft is common (especially at train stations). So get a lock. Not just so you don't not have a lock, but so that you still have a bike, and it's still where you left it.

New bikes purchased from stores cost an arm and a leg. This explains the preceding paragraph. Some bike shops have a dedicated second-hand section with used bikes at (slightly) discounted prices. Even though some shops claim these bikes have been serviced before resale, it's always worth checking the validity of this claim.

You can pick up good bargains when buying a bike privately – but also metallic tubular scrap. Don't be taken in by “*zgan*” – short for “*zo goed als nieuw*” (as good as new) – in the

descriptions. No-one enforces this. Some 2nd hand shops (*“kringloop winkels”*) sell bikes where what you see is what you get, but there are often good bikes at a reasonable price.

Dutch Bicycles

- Saddle bags, kick-stands, chainguards and built-in locks and lights make cycling life much easier.
- The front brake is usually on the *left* brake lever.
- Many bikes have a *“terugtraprem”* where the back brake is activated when you pedal backwards.
- Bikes with an internal gear mechanism are low maintenance. They’re also good for beginner cyclists because these bikes don’t need to be moving to change gear.

Cycling in the Netherlands

- Do the same as everyone else, and if not, be predictable so other cyclists can account for it.
- Use the cycle lane if there is one.
Mopeds are allowed on cycle lanes, so be aware one may come zooming up from behind. Ridden mostly by teenagers, their behaviour can be quite erratic. You can’t hear the electric ones. And you can’t breathe clean air after a petrol one has passed you.
- Cycling two-a-breast is permitted, even on roads with no cycle lanes.

- Not having your lights on when it's dark is a fineable offence.
- Using a mobile phone whilst cycling is also a fineable offence.
- Wearing a cycle helmet is encouraged, but it seems to be only young kids and the elderly who wear them. It helps the kids bounce better when they fall from handlebars and child seats. The helmets help the elderly get this far in life.
- Cycle routes are laid out with *padestoelen* (mushrooms) – concrete lumps that look like mushrooms and display directions and distances to go to a place where you're not currently at. There are also *knooppunten* which are posts with numbers and directions to other posts with other numbers. The thinking is it's easier to remember a series of numbers (consider them as way points) than it is to remember a route (or read a map). There are also apps available that help you navigate cycle routes – but remember holding a mobile phone is not permitted whilst cycling.
- Cycle lanes through forests and alongside fields are usually just wide enough to cycle two-a-breast, so you can share an enjoyable bike ride with a friend. When you meet oncoming cyclists there's twice the fun.
- Ringing your bell to alert someone of your presence is not considered rude, but expected and welcomed. Pay

particular attention to the elderly who may not hear you when you approach them from behind (or see you when you approach from the front). Don't assume that because they're old, they're weak and crumbly; many show their inner strength quite forcibly when you 'creep up' on them 'unannounced'.

Driving it Home

See, the Lord is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. (Isaiah 66.15 NIV)

Trading on the stock market is a risky business. But if you prefer the surety of losing money, buy a Dutch car. For too much money, you get too little when it comes to owning your own set of wheels. And when you've got them, you get to pay excessive road taxes, insurance premiums, and then pay for the luxury of very, very expensive maintenance and fuel.

Once you've got your car and admin arranged you're free to join the Dutch drivers in one of their traffic jams. You can either choose one (chances are high there's one close to you) or create your own tailback by doing something crazy like driving at the speed limit or stopping at a red traffic light.

Note: Bringing your car into the Netherlands is allowed, but after a certain period of time it needs an expensive certification to show it's safe enough to be allowed to sit still in a Dutch traffic jam.

The Dutch are a level headed, pragmatic and logical species. But given the pent-up frustration from sitting in a jam that accumulates almost as fast as low-level atmospheric pollutants, it shouldn't be surprising that the exception to this rule is when they're behind a wheel. And there are lots of wheels in the Netherlands. The average Dutchie drives

aggressively and selfishly. (One might hypothetically ponder over the cause of traffic jams...)

I had an American friend with a Dutch husband. She was terrified of letting him drive back in the States because if he drove with the (perceived) aggression and arrogance of a Dutch driver, he'd be shot dead.

Being shot is thankfully not a big risk in the Netherlands. But being overtaken is almost as bad for a Dutchie because the point of driving in the Netherlands is to be the car in front. If you overtake a slow car and find yourself stopping at a traffic light, that slow car will catch up and wait alongside you in the left (fast) lane just for another chance to pip in front of you when the light goes green and the lanes merge. ("Past performance is no guarantee of future results" – but they still try!)

The Dutch don't keep distance, so counter-intuitively, if you're the car behind and unable to overtake, your secondary objective is to get inside the boot of the car in front of you. If you're the car in front, helpfully slowing down or braking so they can catch up doesn't seem to be appreciated.

I'll say it again – bikes are everywhere and have more right of way than drivers. The cyclists know it, and they take it. You're about to turn right? There's a bike undertaking you. You want to drive straight on at the traffic light? There's a bike on your right who's cutting across you and turning left. You're reversing? Guess what's behind you? Yep, a cyclist. Beware of bikes!

Not driving your car is almost as difficult as driving it, not least because finding a parking space for your car is almost

as difficult as finding a place to rent. And like home rental rates, parking rates are extortionate.

Because space is so tight, the main rule to follow with parking is to park as close as possible to an adjacent car. You won't be able open the door and get out of your car unless you're less than the width of your wing mirror. This gives you the same effect as being in a traffic jam because you need to wait for the car next to you to move before you can also move. (You also get to watch the driver squeeze into his car, and then scowl when his car door hits your own metallic shell. He'll shrug; *You should have come by bicycle, shouldn't you?!*)

Some rare car parks allow you to park for free for a fixed amount of time. You can buy a parking disk ("*parkeer schijf*") which you use to display the time of your arrival, and hopefully a traffic warden doesn't look at it after the allotted permitted time.

Handy to Know

- Drive on the right-hand side of the road.
- It's normal to drive with your headlights on, even in blazing sunshine.
- Dutch drivers assume your car has a brake, so you're perfectly able to brake when they pull out in front of you.
- The "2 second rule" which sort of states it's safe and healthy to eat food from the floor as long as you do it within 2 seconds of dropping it, seems to unofficially apply to jumping red lights; many drivers jump red

lights within a few seconds of it turning red. Being the first in line at a red light means you've underestimated 2 seconds or you're chicken.

- Traffic lights turn straight from red to green without turning orange. It's not safe and healthy to drive off quickly after the light has turned green because you might collide with the 2-second red light jumpers from the other direction.
- Traffic lights are positioned ridiculously close to the stop line and set high up on overhead gantries. This means you need to lean forwards in your seat and crane your neck to see nothing but silhouettes against the bright sky. The sound of the car horn behind you is your best indication the traffic light has turned green.
- The Dutch don't know how to use multilane roundabouts correctly. Some town councils place helpful lumps of concrete to guide vehicles around the roundabouts correctly. Some town councils don't know how to use multilane roundabouts. Some helpful lumps of concrete are not that helpful.
- Traffic on your right has the right of way. I can't elaborate on this; it's just one of those weird things where you realise living in a foreign country is like playing a computer game that's been programmed by someone who should be doing art instead of writing computer code. The rule does, however, explain the general miscomprehension surrounding roundabouts where traffic on the left has right of way. (And 'of

course' bikes that orbit around the outside, crossing entrances to and exits from the roundabout.)

- If you're caught doing anything wrong, you get a fine – but don't worry. It's just another way to lose money with your car.*

* The Dutch don't use a driving license points-based driver disqualification system. Presumably this is because there would be too many Dutch drivers disqualified from driving and therefore not enough revenue from drivers paying fines. Driving disqualification is reserved for the most heinous of driving offences such as drink driving and other cretinous driving behaviour.

Public Transport

But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. (Jonah 1.3 NIV)

Trains

The Dutch train system is great! For just a few euros you get access to the Dutch rail network which webs across most of the country, and has maximised the number of trains it can squeeze onto its tracks. You also get access to the other people across the country who also want to access other parts of the country. And they want to squeeze into your seat. It is, after all, a small country and space is limited.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. First you need to get onto the train, and to do that you need to get ahead of everyone else. Getting onto a Dutch train is like getting onto a school bus; it's fighting to get on first, grab a double seat and putting your bag next to you.

Good things come to those who wait. Except seats.

You won't need to wait long for a train, but if you wait for a seat, you'll be waiting a long time. On your feet.

Manspreading is rife, made all the worse because Dutch legs are long. Women sit sideways on seats so they can cross their legs and tap your shin with their toes. Again, made

all the worse because Dutch legs are long. It would be much simpler if Dutchies laid lengthwise along the floor of the long Dutch trains to fit in their long legs. Naturally in the Netherlands, it's not unexpected to find a bicycle folded up on the floor in front of you.

Once you're on, seated and comfortable with the amount of leg warmth / shin tapping from your seat buddy and chain grease, the "5-minute walk" begins. Don't worry, this isn't for you. This is a train (ha ha) of people who didn't get a seat, and stream past you, usually towards the front of the train. It lasts for about 5 minutes, then magically these people disappear. Don't be fooled into thinking they're looking for a seat and found one; they're piling into the driver's cabin at the front because they'd like to have a go at steering the train. They do a pretty good job.

And why not want a go? The Dutch should rightly be proud of their trains which are clean (as are the train stations) and for the most part, punctual.

Travelling on a Dutch train is noisy. The sound of a 2,000-horsepower train is easily overpowered by its onboard human cargo. Kids pointing to trains and squealing "train!". Grandparents pointing to trains and saying "train!" to their grandkids. Parents who bring their kids onto the train to tell them off. Teenagers screeching courting calls to each other. Excited day-trippers. Businesspeople making their important calls that everyone needs to hear. The Dutch population makes up in volume what the Netherlands doesn't have in area.

Then add to the noise the clanking metal lids on metal bins positioned inexplicably at shin height. And the double beep system of opening and closing doors – one excruciatingly

painful electronic strangulation of your ear drums to emulate the whistle of a human train guard, and a second because all electronic items on this planet beep when they're about to do something. Or when they have stopped doing something.

Many passengers wear headphones to drown the cacophony, and helpfully turn up their volume so the passengers without headphones can also benefit. Other passengers go for a seat in the silent carriage ("*stiltcoupe*") where there are plenty of passengers who shout about it not being silent in there. And there are onboard announcements with an odd sense of timing such as the announcements that tell you where the train is heading *after* it has pulled away from the platform.

Tip: Ask a fellow passenger for information. It adds to the noise, but you get the chance to jump off the train if you're on the wrong one.

Caveat: The morning commute is the exception to the high noise levels. That's when there's real silence – like the kind of silence you get when your mum asks you which of you and your brothers superglued your dad's remote control to the armchair. Commuters don't talk, but they do practice their percussion on laptop keypads.

Like the sleek train gliding on the tracks towards its station, we slide gracefully into the subject of disembarkation.

The number 1 train rule still applies: you need to be first. In this case, to get off the train.

The number 2 rule is ever present: so does everyone else.

The ritual of leaving a train begins around 5 km away and is cued with the onboard announcement. This has the effect of a starting pistol at a 100-metre sprint race, but one where the finish line is 5,000 metres distant, and the way is blocked with a stubbornly locked train door. And a hundred other passengers.

It's a matter of waiting until the train brings you closer, but this is no time to sit by idly. Standard race procedure is standing up and moving towards the door. The simplicity of the method is complicated because the rest of the train's passenger load tries doing the same thing. End result; you're stuck standing 3 inches from your seat and pride prevents you sitting back down again because that's an admission of defeat.

Dutch culture prevents anyone from pressing the button to activate the train door because that promotes individuality. (See the section on Culture.) This rule doesn't apply to children who are more than happy to act as doorman, and take on the trampling as pocket money in kind. Rush hour, when there are no children to open train doors, can leave many adults vibrating on a stationary train caught between the desire to be the first to leave and maintaining the status quo.

The twist to all of this: As well as competing against other disembarking passengers you also need to push against the boarding passengers competing for your ex-seat.

Connections are handled brilliantly; usually you only need to cross to the other side of a platform to continue your journey to a major train station, rather than running over bridges to a platform on the other side of the station.

Note: You don't always have a choice where to get off your train. Occasionally there's the dreaded "This train doesn't go further" announcement ("*Deze trein rijdt niet verder*") and it stops for an indeterminate amount of time at a minor train station *en route* to wherever the train is supposed to take you, and you're thrown off. Sometimes you can wait for another train to rescue you. Sometimes there are buses to take you to the next train station. Sometimes there's nothing but an abyss. Often there's a lack of information.

Tip: The train app often has more up to date information available than at the station you've been dumped at. In these instances, your fellow Dutch passengers contact friends and family to pick them up by car, and are often awesome in offering spare seats to fellow strandedees.

Train companies don't publicise this: you can claim a percentage of your train fare back from the train company if you're excessively delayed.

Helpful tips:

- Payment for Dutch public transport is done with a Public Transport Chip Card ("*OV (openbaar vervoer) chipkaart*") which you load with euros and swipe at the train station or on buses to get the euros taken away again. The card can be linked to your bank account for automatic top-up when your balance falls below a set threshold. The card also allows you to park your bike at some train stations. They're also handy for spreading jam on your bread on a picnic when you've forgotten your knife.

- Paying for a paper ticket from a machine costs you an extra euro for the ‘administration’ of using a paper ticket.
- The major rail operator in the Netherlands is NS. Get the NS app which has more information than the train station and on-board announcements. There’s a language setting for English. You can also couple your *OV chipkaart* to the app and access a range of confusing discounts which give you the impression you’re missing out on something if you don’t subscribe to one.
- Bikes are allowed on trains but only at specific times, and require a special ticket. They can be precariously leaned against other bikes in carriages with a bicycle painted on the door.
- Foldable bikes are considered as hand luggage. They’re sometimes found on the floor space of your double-seat buddy, but usually you’ll find them in front of your feet.
- Arrival information at stations is not quite useless. This is because there are 2 assumptions:
 1. The Netherlands is small, so you should already know where the train has come from.
 2. Trains are so reliable that of course it will arrive.

Buses

I don’t use buses much so know only a little about them. I do know though, from an early age, that their wheels go round and round, and the wipers go swish swish swish.

Some buses have monitors on board where they show you where the bus – and therefore you – are on your journey. Sometimes the monitors are switched on. And sometimes tall Dutchies don't sit in your line of sight.

I once asked a bus driver to tell me when we reached a certain stop. We duly approached my desired destination and he called out to indicate the next stop was mine. Then he drove past it! I staggered up the aisle and asked him why he didn't stop at the bus at the stop.

“You didn't ring the bell.”

Tip 1: Use your phone maps app to know where you are.

Tip 2: Always ring the bell to let the driver know when you want to get off at the next stop.

Taxis

Taxis, let alone ranks of them, aren't as prolific in the Netherlands as they are in the UK. They cost an arm and a leg so they're in low demand – and therefore aren't prolific...

Cultural Paradox

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Philippians 2.3-4 NIV)

There are 2 primary cultural rules by which Dutchies abide:

1. *Alles mag!* (Live and let live!) It's an independent, individualistic culture so it's everyone for themselves and you can do what you want except complain about someone else doing what they want.
2. *Doe gewoon.* (Be normal, that's crazy enough.) Do the same as everyone else because you're not above anyone else.

In summation, the collective noun for the Dutch is "individuals". The irony is Rule 1 means you don't need to follow rules. And Rule 2 means no-one should set rules in the first place anyway. Yet these 2 rules explain a lot of Dutch behaviour.

For example. Take the situation where you're walking past a Dutchie on the pavement (note: also on the right-hand side, like driving). Just at the exact moment you reach eye contact distance, Rule 1 explains why the Dutchie blind-sides you and looks at something absolutely fascinating on the other side of the road. They're not being rude – they're respecting

your individual *mental* space (the Netherlands is busy; this is the closest you'll get to privacy.)

An aside on personal space: Personal space for a Dutchie extends upwards more than outwards. Dutchies don't like it when other Dutchies tower above them (Rule 2 – you're not above anyone else). Being 2 cm away from your elbow is no problem; personal *lateral* space doesn't exist because Rule 2 allows other Dutchies to stand, sit, drive, park etc. as close to you as possible in an effort to be like you i.e. in the same place as you. This also extends to walking on the pavement, where there are many collisions because they're busy looking on the other side of the street and not where they're going.

(There's also the reasoning that the Netherlands is so small there's not enough space for personal space. This means space needs to be shared, usually with the person who should be standing behind you in a queue. All reasonings apply in big queues where there's more space too.)

But have you spotted the paradox? The requirement to be the same as everybody else at the same time as being an independent individual might floor many (nations of) individuals. But the floor is a long, long way down for most Dutchies and long steps are taken to avoid meeting it head on. So the Dutch have found an elegant solution.

It's a solution that appears subtle but it's definitely not, and it's the solution of shared individualism. This is where, for example, a Dutchie stands still in a doorway, or at the head of a queue. This Dutchie is now individual because they're the only one in the doorway, or the only one receiving attention from the cashier. But have you noticed how many other Dutchies want the same thing? They *all* want to be in the same place as

you – through the door, or with the cashier. They’re queuing up for it!*

* Queuing doesn’t really exist in the Netherlands because it intrinsically means someone is better than you because they’re in front of you, and/or they’ll be served before you (disobeyment of Rule 2). The solution is horizontal queuing, where the main action is standing next to the person in front of you. We are all equal after all, and in particular, not after the person in front. We’re too individual for that (Rule 1).

Note: queue rules don’t apply to old ladies with shopping bags who wheedle in straight to the front of the queue. Rule 2 forbids complaint. And naturally, there is always space to wheel your bike with you in a queue. Rule 1 allows it and most people around you do too anyway (Rule 2).

Tip: Say hello when people arrive after you. Then they know you know they should know their place. They think it’s beside you, but we all know it’s behind you! ;)

A clear manifestation of shared individualism is noise, so don’t be fooled into thinking that flat fields of colourful tulips and windmills set in picturesque and idyllic scenes means the Netherlands is a peaceful country. When a star collapses on itself, it generates immense thermal energy; when crushing tectonic pressure is applied to the Netherlands, the energy produced is sound.*

* Apart from on Sundays when everything’s silent thanks to the mighty grasp of the Bible Belt that’s drawn tighter than an 18th century corset.

By being noisy, Dutchies exert their individual right to say or to listen to whatever (and wherever and whenever) they

want (Rule 1). And they render everyone else as equals by allowing everyone else to hear exactly the same as them through sheer decibelic volume.

Whether it's a conversation in the silent carriage in the train, blasting music on a nature walk, playing the piano in a library or adjusting the position of a leaf on your driveway with a 1,000-watt leaf blower, everyone who's not you gets to share in at least some way, a part of your Dutch life. Everyone's in*. Everyone's equal. Everyone's individual.

* "Everyone's in" extends to everyone outside the Netherlands; the Dutch are good at languages because their noise can be heard – and understood – on an international level.

The bootstrap solution to the paradox works because Rule 2 forbids anyone from complaining about it.

You're allowed to do anything you like as long as it's the same as everyone else. If everyone else is not doing the same as you, use force.

The final note on this paradox is this: God loves you deeply and personally. And He loves everyone else in exactly the same way too!

Time for a Rude and Unruly Awakening

“So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” (Matthew 24.44 NIV)

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. (Romans 13.11 NIV)

Dutchies are tall, but it doesn't mean their heads are in the clouds. In fact, they're a very down-to-Earth species. As a nation they're extremely pragmatic which is a curious phenomenon because as a nation they don't like extremes. And they're extremely honest about that.

Honesty to a Dutchie is the best policy. An honest opinion isn't held back, disguised or the blow softened if the pill is hard to swallow. It's tough love, but you know what you get – a blunt, but truthful opinion.

In a similar vein, Dutchies are direct with their speech and have little time for the niceties we're too keen on in England. Indeed, it wasn't until I came to the Netherlands I realised how much we say in English without saying it:

“Would you like a tea?”

English guest: “(No), I'm fine (without tea) thanks.”

Dutch guest 1: “No.”

Dutch guest 2: “No. You don’t make it well.”

But don’t mistake a Dutchie’s hard-line practicality and bluntness for rudeness because it’s quite the opposite. The reluctance to utter a “Please” or “Thank you” comes because these words are considered fluffy and superfluous to requirement. Holding a door open for someone, for example, is such an obvious thing to do, it’s not special and the action doesn’t need to be thanked.

So the reputation Dutchies have for being rude is undeserved. But try giving one a nice compliment and you’re in for a sharp surprise. Compliments are seen as personal opinions, and therefore immediately set up the compliment giver as a self-inflating judge who’s too free in imparting their view on others. Compliments therefore need to come with qualification and evidence, or even assurance that they’re not intended to be sarcastic. The sad corollary is receiving a compliment from a Dutchie is a rare phenomenon. (Or maybe it’s that I personally haven’t deserved to get one...)

Tip: I can’t bring myself to suggest that it’s a waste of time to compliment a Dutchie. But sometimes it feels like that.

Like compliments, giving rules to a Dutchie needs a reason why it’s imposed so they can disagree with it and find a workaround. After all, someone imposing a rule is someone putting themselves in a higher position, and that’s against Rule 2.

It’s another paradox because much as the Dutch say they love rules, they love not obeying them even more.

Tip: Offer suggestions to a Dutchie instead of rules.

Punctuality is a sort of rule because you must be at a specified place at a specified time. Time is set by the sun's passage across the sky. For the tall Dutch, I imagine there's some sort of parallax viewing error which causes their warped view on time keeping. All the same, the Dutch pride themselves on their punctuality (Rule 2), and they leave their offices punctually at 14:00 and head for the meeting room on the other side of the building for their 14:00 meeting, thus arriving at a different time, at their own convenience, than the other attendees at the international meeting (Rule 1).

Thankfully their trains are testament to a more conventional idea of punctuality, as indeed are the passengers who strive to be in time ready to board or disembark first.

Tip: Don't mention punctuality to a Dutchie. Just ask them to come 15 minutes before you need them.

Word of Mouth: The Dutch Language

The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” (Genesis 11.6-7 NIV)

Dutch words are incredibly useful as long as you use them in the Netherlands – and in the right order. The trouble is the order of the letters in each Dutch word were determined by a scrabble master with a dodgy set of letter tiles. And they sound like he needed more sleep.

However impossible it seems to master the Dutch language, it's worth giving it a go. After all, your new home is in the Netherlands, and *when in Rome...*learn Dutch. Besides, Dutchies appreciate you having at least a basic understanding of their language so they know you know how much you need to pay for their Dutch courses and books.*

* Given the Dutch ability to pick up a language as easily as picking up a local dictionary, appreciation soon turns into expectation.

Spend enough time and effort learning the lingo and you'll fall asleep dreaming of Dutchies having conversations in Dutch. You'll wake up wondering whether it really was Dutch or just some gobbledygook concocted in your subconscious mind

in need of rest. Give learning Dutch some more time and effort, and you'll be wise enough to know the difference.

But learning Dutch is not an easy road to tread, and at times you'll feel frustrated within all realms of linguistic lexicon and tackled in human psychology text books.

You'll go to the market and see a sign for 5 oranges for 1 euro, and you'll pay 5 euros and come back with 1 apple. You go to the workshop to collect your car from its service and come back home on a bicycle with a soft tyre. And a bill for 450 euros.

Dutch people won't understand you, even though you're speaking their language. Simple conversations and ideas fly over your head. You'll feel like a child because you can't express yourself properly or because you barely grasp what's going on around you. You're over-looked. Or patronised. You're reduced to only half of who you used to be.

In these difficult times it's very important to remember **you're not alone!** You're part of a group of expats who also don't know what's going on, and are likely having very similar struggles. Including the ones keeping quiet about it – or don't even know they're struggling. It's worth saying again: you're not alone!

And just as important is to know this: **You're not half a person. You're one and a half people!** You're not taking *away* half the person you were before you came to the Netherlands; you're *adding* new experiences and new skills (such as language) to your existing personality. You're still you and you haven't lost anything! In spite of how you're feeling, you're more than who you were!

The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. Cherish her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honour you. (Proverbs 4.7-8 NIV)

Tip: Don't pay attention to anyone's tips. We're all individual and what works for some people won't necessarily work for you. But for what it's worth, these are the things which helped me:

- Some companies and universities promote and support (even facilitate) new internationals learning the Dutch language, so it's worth asking your employer or mentor.
- There are an abundance of courses and private tuition available online.
- (Personal experience) Books aren't a good substitute for a teacher. Books won't correct your mistakes. And despite the strange contortions your mouth will make when trying to pronounce Dutch words, you'll need feedback.
- (Personal experience) Total immersion (doing *everything* in Dutch and not using any English) did not work for me. Total immersion works for babies, but I'm not a baby. That said, I do recommend listening to Dutch radio and reading Dutch. Do not be fooled into thinking you'll learn the language (and don't try), but you will become familiar with how it looks and how it sounds, and this will help your passive understanding.

- Don't get bogged down if you're stuck for the right Dutch word. Slide the English word (or word from your native language) into your Dutch sentences to keep the flow. You'll get more from your conversation and feel motivated to continue talking to Dutchies.
- It's OK to speak Dutch with an accent. (It's part of who you are.)
- Don't worry about sounding bad. The Dutch language sounds bad even when it's spoken by a Dutchie.
- (Personal experience) If you're completely lost in a conversation and there's no chance of finding your way back home, look thoughtful, nod, and say "*Inderdaad*" which means "Indeed; I agree", or "I hear you, but I'm thinking about it."

During this thinking period, they will carry on talking (Dutchies don't like silence unless you ask for a pay rise) and you're saved from another response in Dutch.

Failing that, head west. The further west you travel in the Netherlands, the more English is spoken and accepted as a viable language. Go far enough west, past the damp patch, and you'll find a whole country dedicated to communicating only in English.

Common Dutch Words and Language

- The Dutch are very proud of this word: *Gezellig*. The translation you'll get from a Dutchie is "*Ja*. It's not quite cosy."

- *Ja / Nou / Heh / Hoor + Joh*
Not to be taken literally as “Yes”, “Now” and “Eh? / Isn’t it?”.

Ja and *Nou* are randomly added to the beginning of sentences and isn’t condescending in Dutch as it would be considered in English; *Heh* is added either in the middle or at the end of a sentence, and *Hoor* seems to come only at the end. I think these words are uttered to encourage engagement. They sound patronising, but I don’t think they’re meant to be. *Joh!* often comes at the end of a sentence and I’ve never met a Dutchie who’s been able to explain how or why it’s used.

- *Lekker!*
Generally means “tasty!” but it’s also a positive adjective for a load of non-food-based things such as *Lekker weer* (Nice weather!) and *Lekker dromen* (Sweet dreams). Often followed by *Heh?* or *Hoor!* which means “I need you to nod and agree with me.”
- *Eet smakelijk!* (Enjoy your meal!) is used very commonly, even by strangers as they walk past your table and eye up your food.
- *Hetzelfde!* (Same!) is a good thing to say to the cashier when you leave a shop. It works on the assumption they’ve wished you a nice afternoon, evening, weekend etc.. (If they haven’t bestowed these wishes on you they deserve the sarcasm).

- *Shit!* is not considered swearing or bad language.
- *Puntinel* often heard on commercial radio and isn't a Dutch word! It's the end of a Dutch website URL, .nl .
- The Dutch word for "You" is *Je, Jij, Jullie, Jou* or *U*. Take your pick and hope you end up speaking to the right person.
- Numbers. "123" is pronounced in Dutch as one, three and twenty, so you need to hear the whole number before you can write it down. "1,234" is pronounced as "one thousand, two four and thirty". So presumably the least secure pin number in the Netherlands is 1243.
- Commas are used as decimal points in Dutch, so "1,234" is pronounced as "one comma, two four and thirty" and means 1.234. Decimal points are used as thousand separators, so 1.234 is a thousand times bigger in the Netherlands than you think it is.
- Hyphens aren't used as hyphens, but as an indication of a shortened or alternative ending to a word. For example, *Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst* ("Immigration- and Naturalisation service") means "Immigration service and Naturalisation service".
- When sentences have 2 verbs, at least one of them goes at the end. This is a strategy forcing you to let Dutchies finish speaking so you know what they are talking about.

- Telling the time:
4:30 (half four) is pronounced as half five.
4:35 is pronounced as five after half five.
- If you hear a soft G it often means something is in the past tense.

When people tell you the Dutch G is pronounced like the “ch” in “loch” (the Scottish word for lake), wipe their phlegm off your face and explain (1) you’re learning Dutch not Scottish, and (2) the Scottish had to learn it from somewhere so it’s a circular argument.

- Letters:

Dutch I is pronounced as English “E”

Dutch E is pronounced as English “A”

Dutch A is pronounced as English “R”

Dutch R is pronounced as English “Air”

Now take a deep breath and practice spelling your name in Dutch.

- However unnatural, cold and robotic it may seem , emulate the Dutchie’s style of speaking by using passive sentence structures. Dutchies prefer these in favour to active or personalised forms because they feel the latter brings too much attention towards themselves. e.g. it’s better to say “Dinner is being cooked” than “I’m cooking dinner”.

- The Dutch have no problem with confrontation and they expect the same from you. This means the subtle English nuances to avoid saying “no” are taken literally and therefore misinterpreted by the Dutch. Speak directly and to the point to a Dutchie. It may seem rude to you, but the Dutch won’t see it that way, and it avoids confusion further down the road (however bumpy).

As we come to the end of this section on the Dutch language, I’ll remind you painfully that somewhere between 70% and 90% of communication is non-verbal...

Health and Healthcare

He replied, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’” (Luke 13.32 NIV)

The Netherlands is a healthy nation with a population that takes on a healthy lifestyle. Even dogs take their owners out for regular walks, keeping their charge's hands warm on cold winter mornings by providing a warm substance that their owners carry in a thin, thermally-conductive, see-through bag.

So the Dutch are a hardy bunch. They're born this way; Dutch women have their babies at home. “*Childbirth isn't a disease!*” so there's no need to go to hospital and suffer the pain of on-the-spot medical support and painkillers. Home births are just as normal as delivering a package and nearly as common as Dutch babies.

There's no doubt that Dutch women and their babies are tough! It's paracetamol and natural selection for the rest of us.

General Practitioners

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. (Proverbs 17.22 NIV)

In the UK, waiting lists to see a doctor are excessively long. The Netherlands uses a reverse approach to waiting: you're seen by a doctor (“*huisarts*”) very quickly, but (from

personal experience) much medical advice is to take a paracetamol and then wait for your symptoms to evaporate.

Telling the doctor you've already waited sometimes circumnavigates their prescription of time (which doesn't always heal all wounds). But the doctor knows this and makes you wait anyway. But you know this, so you can throw in some more waiting time *apriori*. I suspect they know this too. I also suspect this is the doctors' way of making healthy people look stupid when they eventually die of 'nothing'.

Prescriptions heavier than paracetamol are sent directly from the doctor to the pharmacy where you're registered.

Tips:

- Register at a pharmacy.
- Since you can't collect your medication from a pharmacy other than the one where you're registered, it's a good idea to be healthy before you intend being unable to get to your pharmacy.
- The local authority ("*gemeente*") in Ede, maybe others, run Dutch courses for internationals specifically aimed at being able to read the information leaflet provided with the medicine ("*bijsluiters*"). Thanks to reading the enclosed information leaflet, my then pregnant wife avoided taking medicine clearly labelled as unsuitable for pregnant women. (Maybe some of the doctors should learn to read these information leaflets too.)

- Eat fresh fruit and vegetables and drink plenty of water. Or at least an apple to “keep the doctor away”.

Eyecare

Opticians sell glasses and contact lenses. Many offer free eyesight tests, but won't let you see your prescription unless you pay for it, i.e. buy a set of glasses from them. Optometrists are medically trained and can examine the health of your eyes, but can't write you a prescription. They work irregular hours, flitting between different opticians. And they're expensive. Optometrists and doctors can refer you, if required, to an eye specialist (“*oogarts*”) who can tell you to wait, refer you to another specialist, or send a prescription to your pharmacy.

Dental

Dutch dental care is probably the same as in many other countries; dentists (“*tandarts*”) dangle their fingers in your mouth and ask you questions which you can't answer without biting them. Some dentists, like mine in Bennekom, are amazing. Others, like the monster I escaped from in a small village south of Zwolle, remind you it was a dentist who invented the electric chair as a legal means of execution.

Psychology

Two people are talking on a train, and the discussion comes round to their lines of work.

“I'm a doctor,” says the first.

“Interesting,” replies the other. “I'm also in healthcare. I run my own psychology practice.”

“I love my work,” said the doctor, “but as soon as people find out I’m a doctor they expect help and tell me all their aches and pains.”

“I have the same problem,” said the psychologist, “but I’ve found a good solution. I charge people for my advice.”

“That sounds like a good strategy.”

The psychologist smiles professionally. “That’ll be fifty euros then please.”

Mental health is as important as physical health, and the Netherlands provides a huge selection of psychologists who work for themselves in private practices or within larger centres healthcare centres. Not all have contracts with health insurers which means you’ll be faced with huge bills. Where health insurance is involved, be sure to ask your doctor for a letter of referral which they can send straight to the psychologist.

Tips:

- Emergency services (for life threatening situations) is 112.
- For non life-threatening medical emergencies outside office hours you can call the “*Huisartspost*”. It’s sort of like the Accident and Emergency at the hospital.
- Health insurance is mandatory from the moment you register your residence at the City Hall. It’s expensive, and covers a complicated range of services, with complicated ways to get a small portion of your health fees back, but carefully calculated that by the end of the year you won’t come close to breaking even.

- Health insurance is 'free' for under 18-year-olds because it's covered by their parents' cover. If a parent buys additional cover for certain aspects of healthcare (e.g. for dental costs), this extends to all of their children.

Some healthcare costs are tax deductible. Benjamin Franklin knows this makes sense; "Only death and taxes are certain."

Spiritual health

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Matthew 16.25-26 NIV)

Only Jesus can save you.

15

Eating Out

**“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?”
(Matthew 6.25 NIV)**

I’m not a foodie so this section will be sparse. But it doesn’t excuse my forgetting the 3rd cultural rule in the “Cultural Paradox” section:

3. Eat dinner at 18:00.

This is unalterable. Eating before 6 pm is considered snacking, and you’ll ruin your appetite. Eating after 6 pm is for the people who snacked, lost their appetite at six and need digesting time before they can have their evening meal.

So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 8.15 NIV)

Dutch food is as easy as ABC.

A is for Apple

Adam and Eve died in sin with the apple. The Dutch live by them. They love them! Maybe it’s to keep the doctor away. Or it could be the mastication of the crunchy ones help the

Dutchies with their daily decibelic quota. Or maybe they're simply the source of knowledge of good and evil.

Mention "apple pie with cream" and you'll see a Dutchie carry out the strangest body language – waving at the side of their mouth. You'd think they were crazy, dizzy or delirious, but it's meaning is "*Lekker!*" (Tasty!).

B is for Bread

The Dutch expression *Brood nodig* (As necessary as bread) shows how crucial bread is for the Dutch diet. They don't have lunch or sandwiches, they have bread ("*brood*"). This might be because sausage rolls, Cornish pasties, meat pies etc. are relatively hard to come by in the Netherlands. It's the bread and pastry version of chicken and egg*.

* Chicken pies and Scotch eggs are also difficult to find in the Netherlands.

Bread is so important that many bakers don't have the shelf-space to sell many non-bread products for want of only bread. This is also true when the bread has sold out by 11:00 am.

C is for Cheese

A house without cheese ("*kaas*") is not a house in the Netherlands because obviously something needs to go on your bread, and obviously that's cheese. Cheese is the opium of the Dutch masses. I can't think what more to say about Dutch cheese. It's cheese and it's tasty, but you'll need to deal with the Dutch horizontal queuing system to get the good stuff from the market. Allegedly, Dutchies like holes in their cheese because it means free air. More cheese means more holes

which means less cheese. At least you've got something to think about whilst you're waiting to be served.

If you want people to smile in your photos, don't ask them to say cheese. When they say "*kaas*" you get a completely different effect.

Other Foodstuffs and Beverages

A traditional Dutch recipe is *stampapot*. I'd translate this as "Coarsely ground baby food served with a sliced sausage" because it's a mashup of a load of ingredients – except the sausage where you're allowed to switch off the food processor and use a slicing knife instead. Apparently *stampapot* is delicious. Personally, I grew out of it when I was 10 - 12 months old.

Kibbeling is small pieces of deep-fried white fish with a crispy batter coating dusted in a herby powder. Undoubtedly it's best from the market, and because it's often served with garlic sauce, it's also best if you share it with your partner.

Stroopwafels (Syrup waffles). Delectable! They're like cookies because the waffles are hard and the syrup sandwiched between them is thick like caramel. In winter, *stroopwafels* are used as lids for your tea or coffee because the cold weather makes them so hard you can crack your teeth on them and the warm drink softens them up enough to save you a trip to the dentist. Some markets sell *stroopwafels* freshly made; the waffles are softer and the syrup more syrupy. Market *stroopwafels* are popular with toddlers and also old ladies who have their hearts warmed when they look at those sticky little faces. Parents of toddlers who forget wet-wipes may prefer the supermarket variety.

Melk (Milk) is considered a drink for adults, and it's not uncommon to see milk served at business meetings. Milk moustaches, sadly, are uncommon in those meetings. They would certainly lighten the mood, if not the stiff upper lip.

Warning: Under no circumstances must you confuse *karnemelk* with milk. The ~~first~~ only time I had it, I thought it was a brand name of regular milk and that it had gone off. I returned it for replacement, but the replacement was sour too. My wife tried it, and told me the truth: *karnemelk* is supposed to taste like that. Taste is subjective, but throwing up isn't. *Karnemelk* tastes like vomit! So avoid it or throw up. And if you do throw up, serve it to someone else as the dreaded *karnemelk*.

Beschuut met muisjes are tiny aniseed balls (*muisjes* - mice) served on top of rusks. They're messy to make, and messier to eat because the aniseed balls roll off the plate and get wedged in between the settee cushions, or bounce around on the floor and roll into hard-to-reach places under the settee. This is why they're traditionally served by new parents when friends and family visit to see their new baby. Discovering a sleep-deprived parent catching a sneaky moment of shut-eye when they're pretending to rummage around on the floor behind the settee clearing aniseed balls is a cruel but fun sport.

Eating Out

Eating out in the Netherlands is a noisy and space-limited affair with people bumping the back of your seat or walking past your table and shouting to each other. Prices are through the roof, even when you're eating outside on a "*terrace*" – an outside seating area on patios where you can sit in second-hand smoke, listen to loud music and swat wasps on wobbly plastic tables whilst you wait to be noticed by staff to

take your order. If you're lucky enough to be asked to pay before you get your food, you get to leave as soon as you've finished.

Many meals are "served with chips". This means a common bowl of chips is placed on the table and is available to share with everyone who ordered a meal served with chips. And everyone else. The size of this bowl, or number of bowls supplied, doesn't vary with the number of people who expected chips. And you need to pay for 'extra'.

It's definitely worth visiting a *pannenkoekrestaurant* (pancake restaurant) where Dutch chefs turn pancakes into pizzas by preparing them with bacon, pineapple, ham, or a gazillion other options of toppings. There's a combo out there with your name on it!

Miscellaneous Points

- It's not normal to have desert after lunch. "Not normal" is frowned upon in the Netherlands (Rule 2). Thankfully we're allowed to compensate the lack of a sweet with cake decorations such chocolate flakes ("*vlokken*"), hundred-and-thousands, powdered sugar and tiny aniseed balls on your final sandwich piece of bread. You might see Dutchies pour mice droppings on their bread. Don't worry – these are chocolate sprinkles (*hagelslags*).
- You'll never get vinegar for your chips; you need to ask for it. Then you get to see the restaurant staff 'secretly' spying on you to see what you're going to do with the *cleaning* vinegar they've just brought you.

- Mayonnaise is more common than tomato ketchup. Brown sauce is even rarer, even though the brown sauce production factories moved from the UK to the Netherlands. (Some argue this is why I moved to the Netherlands...)
- The Dutch love “High Tea” more than the English do. “Tea” in the Netherlands means a glass of hot water and a selection of teabags arranged by flavour in a box that resembles a 3D-printed noughts-and-crosses game. Milk is not supplied as standard.
- Soft drinks are usually served in meagre 200 ml portions and charged at the regular 330 ml price available in other countries. Half of your drink is ice except in summer when it’s served ready-melted.
- Order “cola” if you’d like Coca Cola. Order a “coke” and you’ll be reminded swiftly that the Netherlands has liberal drug policies.
- Dutchies are diametrically opposed to putting the handles of their knives and forks together neatly to show they’ve finished at the end of their meal. They either stop and leave their cutlery in the last position it was used, or with the handles sticking outwards in a ‘quarter-past-nine’ position. This means you don’t know if a Dutchie has finished eating or is taking a pause. It also means waiters and waitresses need to work harder to stack the plates when clearing the table.

- I'm not sure what the rule is on tipping. My philosophy is the staff are already taking the biscuit with their prices – and also more than a fair share of a decent tip's worth as well, so there's no need to pay them any extra as a tip. My wife's philosophy is money grows on trees and the poor darlings are entitled to some of the harvest. Either that, or that they deserve something extra because of the cutlery nonsense.
- The *snackbar* is the closest you'll get to a chippy. They serve tasty deep-fried crap with fries and assume you want sauce with it. If you don't want your fries swimming in sauce, specifically order *patat zonder* (literally: fries without). You can choose to eat on the premises and enjoy plastic, sticky seating, or alternatively go for the take-home option where you can enjoy someone else's order that's gone cold on the way to the luxury of your own home.
- There are a few expat shops around the Netherlands (mostly in the west) who can get hold of 'home' food. It's very expensive, but sometimes it's worth paying for a little taste of home.

Caught Short in the Netherlands (A male Perspective)

“Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.” (Matthew 15.17-18 NIV)

Like many young boys, I wanted to be an astronaut when I grew up. Never once did I think to myself “I’d like to write something about Dutch toilets.” The public toilet situation in the Netherlands is so crazy there’s no way I cannot possibly write something to explain the ludicrousness of it all. Actually, I can’t explain it; I can only describe it. (Note: There are few tips in this section, but a lot of warnings.)

In short: Public toilets really are public.

The “Wild Pisser”

In the past there weren’t many public toilets in the Netherlands and this led rise to the “*wildplasser*” (wild pisser) – guys who urinated illegally in public. To combat this antisocial behaviour, urinals were placed in city centres. (When I lived in Zwolle in 2009, there was one installed near the wall of one of the big churches in the city centre.) These urinals are in full view of anyone walking past; there are no doors and certainly no discretion, so urinating in them is still very public. But now it isn’t illegal.

Public Toilets in Public Places

Expat: "Excuse me, do you have a toilet?"

Dutchie: "Yes."

Tip: Ask a Dutchie *where* their toilet is.

Toilets for men are marked as "*Heren*" (Gentlemen) or simply "H". Women's toilets have a "V" for "*Vrouwen*". Some toilet doors have sophisticated artwork so you have no idea of what you're getting yourself into, but at least you have a 50% chance of getting it right.

Open the door to the gents and right in front of you are the 3 urinals. There's a Dutch guy manspreading in the central one, each of his feet under the 2 adjacent urinals.

If you're an international guy, you know immediately what's wrong here. For the ladies, firstly, I commend you for reading this section because indeed, Dutch women wander into male toilets as free a bird. And secondly, a brief explanation of the wrongness of the central urinal.

It is this: the central urinal is only used when it's the last one available. And even then, not really.

If you're the first person, you use the urinal in the corner. If you're the second person, you use the one in the other corner. If you're the third person you either (1) Go out and come back later, (2) Go to the cubicles, or (3) Wait until a corner urinal is available, but not in a weird creepy 'I'm watching you' kind of way. Using the middle urinal is barely on the list for a non-Dutchie.

But when in Rome we must piss as the Dutch guy does. We're forced to stand next to him, either interweaving one of our legs with one of his so we don't step on his foot, or standing awkwardly with our own legs too close together and risk losing our balance – which probably explains the female cleaner standing behind us wielding her mop, adeptly manoeuvring it around and between our combination of legs like a hockey stick*.

* Dutch guys are tall and often miss the urinal, even though gravity and hydrostatic pressure is on their side (as are the unfortunate guys using the adjacent urinals). A fly is sometimes painted on the base of the urinal as a point to aim for, because a 1 cm picture of a fly is easier to squirt at than a 30 cm urinal. The other solution is to raise the height of the urinal. It's a good solution for the Dutch guy, but for the rest of us standing under 2m, we're better off using the urinal placed lower down for children.

Chatting

Personal rule: I never talk to or look at, let alone shake hands with, another man whilst he has certain parts of his anatomy in his hand. Unfortunately this rule is impossible to keep in the Netherlands.

In the UK we never, ever talk to other men in the toilet. Not even if it's to let them know the building's on fire (there's a certain irony there). Not even if it's our best friend. In the Netherlands, men chat to you in the toilet as if you're already best friends, and if they're not, they'll want to shake your hand and introduce themselves.

So for an ounce of dignity, or to deliver a number 2 (*"boodschapp doen"* literally: leave a message), head over to the cubicles. Toilet space, as in the rest of the Netherlands, is limited, so reaching them means pushing past the men at the urinals. Too often there's a urinal in front of the cubicle door; it needs to be said again; space is tight.

In England, cubicle doors are left open when they're vacant. It's a sort of welcome for the next user. Granted, not much of a welcome (and personally I wouldn't want much more of one) but there it is. And the door is closed when it's occupied. In the Netherlands it's the reverse; when empty, the cubicle door is closed. When occupied, it's fifty-fifty whether the door is open or closed. I'm not dedicating the thinking time to work out why.

17

Shopping

In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. (John 2.14-15 NIV)

England is a nation of shopkeepers. We're welcoming, polite, friendly and courteous. We might not know anything about the products we sell, but at least we smile when we feed you some bull about them. And when you thank us for doing something, we say "It's the least we could do". And it often is.

On the other side of the North Sea, the Dutch are known for being a nation of salespeople. This is why the Dutch are good at languages – so they can use their sales patter to foreigners and convince them to buy little clogs made out of Delft Blue china and orange clothing.

Within the Netherlands the sales strategy is: if you're desperate enough to come into a physical shop to buy something, then you're desperate enough to pay anything for it. This explains why the Netherlands has one of Europe's highest costs of living. On a positive note, if you can find a salesperson willing to assist you (although why would they? As soon as you step inside the work of the sale is already half done), then for the most part, they do know their onions.

Most shops are in city and town centres with very few in the suburbs or on street corners. Opening times are generally 9:00 am – 5:00 pm. Here, “opening” means shop doors are unlocked and opened – not necessarily to let customers in, but to bring half the stock outside and dump it onto the pavement. This is common practice to entice customers to come inside where there’s no-one to serve you because they’re busy outside arranging the pavement display.

Many shops are closed on a Monday morning – or even the whole of Monday – because they’ve been open the previous Saturday. Sunday trading is generally not permitted except on specified Sundays (“*Koopzondagen*”). Lack of customers during opening hours is not good business sense for shops, so some shops work by appointment (“*op afspraak*”) where they attract customers by switching off their lights, locking the doors and scribbling a note on the door inviting you to call the owner on a mobile number and at a specified time he’ll open up especially for you. No pressure...

Although the Dutch expression is “Customer is King”, everyone knows Culture Rule 1 is President – it’s everyone for themselves. If you stand back from a shelf to get a better view of the products, expect a Dutchie to stand in front of you and have a look at the exact same thing (Culture Rule 2).

Many fashion shops have the “men collection”. This is where men gather under collective boredom in little globules and stare at their phones whilst their partners peruse rails and rails of identical clothing in subtly different colours and shades. Like in English toilets, men don’t talk to each other here. In fact, it’s probably the most silent and private place you’ll find in the

Netherlands. Men can only leave the men collection when their partners return and ask them “Are you ready?”

Tip for men: Enjoy the silence and the privacy, but don’t urinate here.

Note for shopping partners: Yes. The men are ready.

In England we take our kids to the supermarket to tell them off. That doesn’t happen in the Netherlands because of Rule 1: children can do what they like. Rule 2: no-one can complain about it. Dutch supermarkets in the daytime are like a playground. Often there are schemes where you’re given a childish gimmick based on the number of euros you’ve been duped into paying. This means you have a quick introduction to the local youth who would like to have this crap from the super-marketing department and hang around by the cashier. You’re guilted, bullied or mugged into handing over your winnings to these kids instead of your own who you’ve forgotten about and are still (hopefully) playing with the lettuces in the fruit and veg section at the front of the store.

You’ll find the range of foods available in the Netherlands might differ from what you’re used to at home. Dutch supermarkets are dominated by anything and everything dairy related – including the cow which you’ll find in the sliced meats section. (Reminder: stay away from *karnemelk*.) Anything vaguely different from Dutch ‘usual’ might be found in the “foreign foods” section, but of course it comes nothing close to what’s available in dedicated expat stores.

Keep an eye out for these words:

- Korting (Saving)

- *Actie* (Savings deal)
- 2 halen 1 *betalen* (Buy 1 get 1 free). It can get as ridiculous as buy 4, get the fifth half price.

Tips:

- People walk around shops anticlockwise. If they're not walking, they're standing between you and the shelf you're looking at.
- The "Next Customer" bar used to separate your shopping on the conveyor belt from the customer in front of you is placed by yourself. But don't worry if you forget; the person in front will pay for your items.
- Shop online, or use dedicated shopping apps.
- 2nd hand stores are a great place to pick up bargains (and get rid of your unwanted items). There are also online options for second hand goods. Be aware that (online) negotiations start even before items have been viewed in real life. As a very rough guide, you can settle around 75% of the original asking price. Obviously this varies with seller, buyer and product.

As a seller, I've experienced many trolls and timewasters on one of the most popular 2nd hand websites (I can't bring myself to name it and give it the publicity, but you'll find it quick enough on an internet search.) Of course, there are some good eggs there too.

Birthday Parties and the Dreaded “*Kring*”

“However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (Luke 10.20 NIV)

Don’t rejoice yet – your names are also written on the toilet walls of your Dutch friends.

The Birthday Calendar

“Han sent me a birthday card.”

“That’s nice he was thinking of you!”

“Yes! And he’s even scented it with mountain fresh lavender!”

Does this sound like a nice conversation when the morning post drops on your doormat?

Dutchies are an organised species, and one thing you can be sure of when it comes to precision organisation is a Dutch birthday. Dutchies know exactly when their friend’s birthday is, when a card needs to be bought, signed and sent in order to get it to the recipient on exactly the right day. This is thanks to the “Birthday calendar” – a calendar without years, but only dates and months where you write the names of the people against their birth date. (For added efficiency, you may also add their year of birth to give a mathematical indication of their age.)

The birthday calendar is placed near a common household item to ensure everyone in the whole family will see it – as well as guests so they can see how many friends you have. And the household appliance the Dutchie chooses for this social etiquette is the toilet.

So when you receive a birthday card from your Dutch friend and you're delighted he's thought of you, don't think too much about what he was doing when your name came to his mind.

Note: You may also shudder at the thought that when Dutchies do a No.2 they say they're "Leaving a message" (*"Laat je boodschaaap achter"*). So don't be in a rush to read what message waits for you in your birthday card.

The Birthday Party

If you're caught with a bout of constipation and don't require a trip to the toilet, receiving a birthday party invitation (with a wedding-style list of practical gift ideas attached) serves as a reminder of a friend or family member's upcoming birthday.

Note on presents: If you've bought a present and are unable to come to the party, you're allowed to save the present for the following year (or keep it for yourself).

The Birthday "*Kring*"

Dutchies naturally gravitate towards the lounge at a typical Dutch birthday party, and there can be a lot of them there – friends, family (all generations, both sides) and neighbours (both sides). This natural force of social attraction is counter-balanced by Culture Rule 2: Dutchies don't like being

the centre of attention. The result is they push themselves away from the geometric centre of a group of friends at a birthday party, thus forming themselves into a circle or *kring**.

* The size of the *kring* is perfect because coincidentally, chairs have been laid out along the line of the circumference based on the expected number of guests.

There is a variation of the circular birthday *kring*, and it's like blowing a balloon inside a square bottle; the lounge is not big enough to support a geometric circle of guests, so their outward movement expands to, and is constrained by, the perimeter of the lounge – which in many houses is L-shaped.

It's effectively a nod to the absence of (English) kitchen parties where an overspill of guests ends up in the kitchen. (These tend to be the 'cool' guests because they arrive fashionably late). The Dutch prefer a more King Arthurian knights-of-the-round-table approach where everyone is considered equal (Rule 2), and certainly no-one would be permitted to be identified as being one (or not one) of the cool kids in the kitchen. Besides, having people in the kitchen is inefficient because they'd be in the way of the catering service (i.e. the birthday boy / girl).

Once you've located the *kring* you know you've arrived at the right place. Your task now is to introduce yourself to everyone. This is done by working your way around the *kring* (anti-clockwise) and shaking hands with each of the other guests* and following the immutable conversation template: "*Gefeliciteerd*, [your name]" and their appropriate response is: "*Gefeliciteerd*, [their name]".**

* Many Dutchies choose this exact moment to look away and avoid eye contact with you (Rule 1). This is a good moment to steal their birthday cake.

** *Gefeliciteerd* means “congratulations”; it’s normal to congratulate a Dutchie for an entirely different Dutchie’s birthday.

You move around the *kring* in this manner until you’ve found a vacant seat, hoping all the while that you’re not going to be the first person in the L-shaped portion of the lounge sitting around the corner on your own.

Note: By definition, people introducing themselves to you after you’re seated means they’re late and not worth even looking at. But hang on to your slice of birthday cake when you shake their hand.

Once seated in the *kring* you can talk comfortably only to the people sitting either side of you. The exact number of people this refers to depends on (1) how many people are looking in your direction, (2) how loud your voice is, and (3) the acoustics of the lounge. Given these people are sitting either side of you at a little less than 180 degrees, it’s actually not that comfortable at all when speaking from the view point on top of your twisting neck.

The practical upshot is you end up shouting to the person on the opposite side of the circle some [circumference divided by π] units of distance away, and everyone else listens in, and/or shouts to join in. Congratulations – you’ve just become the centre of attention in a very noisy room (Rule 1). And it’s not even your birthday*.

* The birthday boy / girl also gets a small measure of attention because they're the one cutting and serving the birthday cake, and naturally everyone is looking in this direction until they've received their slice. There may also be a long explanation of either the ingredients in the cake if it was self-made, or how much it was discounted if it was bought.

Public Holidays and Festivities

Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones. (Isaiah 49.13 NIV)

The Netherlands has a strong work ethic, but there's also a nice selection of public holidays when the work ethic also takes a little break. Be warned that public holidays aren't carried over in lieu to the following work week if they land on a weekend. This might mean you drive home from work on Christmas Eve on a Friday night, celebrate Christmas Day on Saturday, Boxing Day on Sunday, then go back to work on Monday morning. Some years are definitely worse than others so make sure you (don't) work in a good one!

New Year's Day ("*Nieuwjaarsdag*") 1 January

The year starts with a day off which is a good beginning to any year, especially the years that follow a night of celebration, loud fireworks and a trip to the hospital Accident and Emergency or eye doctor.

For that to make sense, it makes more sense to talk about New Year's Eve first.

New Year's Eve ("*Oudenieuwe*") 31 December

New Year's Eve starts just after Boxing Day, and it's all about noise. Many people think it's about spectacular fireworks, but when Covid restrictions banned fireworks for fear

of overloading the hospital Accident and Emergency department, the Dutch found a novel solution: pulling inflated balloons through a ring of nails. Popping balloons *en masse* made almost the same sound and almost as much noise as letting off 3 megatons of fireworks.

Fireworks are let off by both adults and young children in gardens, on streets and on pavements in the run-up to midnight. There's a two-minute pause immediately before midnight, then the explosions continue until the early hours (or very late hours depending which side you're working from). By 4 am you start wondering whether people have been waiting for a slight lull in firework traffic before igniting their own arsenal, or whether they've been hard at it since midnight. I suspect it's the latter.

I'll happily admit this might be my English appreciation of health and safety talking, or my natural biological desire to wish to remain alive and fully-sighted, but here's my tip (I know I'm going to get flamed for this, but better I get some angry emails, than you get a flaming firework in your face):

Tip (serious note): stay inside, and look at the fireworks from your window. If you do wish to venture outside, wear protective eyeglasses which are readily available in shops around this time of year.

New Year's Day ("*Nieuwjaarsdag*") 1 January

New Year's Day is chiefly a recovery day, either for the fools who excessively drink, or because of the fools who let off a firework in your face and got you into hospital. New year's day is one of quietest days in the Netherlands; save for the gentle swishing of brooms clearing crates of spent fireworks from the

driveways, clearing fallen crap from lawns and garden tiles, and the ringing in your ears from a full night's-worth of explosions.

King's Day ("*Koningsdag*") 27 April

This is your chance to wear bright orange and not be conspicuous.

King's Day is a celebration of the Dutch monarchy as well as a public holiday that signifies national unity. It falls on the date of King Willem-Alexander's birthday, but if this is a Sunday, then celebrations are held a day earlier on 26th April. If the current Dutch monarch is a queen, then the day is known as Queen's Day ("*Koninginnedag*").

Note: The last Queen's Day was celebrated on 30 April which was the birthday of the then queen's mother. The queen kept this date instead of her own birthday in January because the weather in April is more favourable for the traditional outdoor activities.

King's Day is marked by visits from the King and his family to various parts of his kingdom. There are also processions, fairgrounds and flea markets where children lay out old toys on blankets and sell them for extra pocket money. It's a good opportunity for parents to get rid of their old stuff too.

Although it's warmer in April than January, it's often wet. Dutchies are well-prepared for such eventualities, and cover their displays with plastic sheeting to keep them invisible, but dry. As for yourself, you might be wet, but at least you're warmer than you would be in winter.

Easter Sunday and Bank Holiday Monday (1st *“Paasdag”* and 2nd *“Paasdag”*)

Note that regarding days off, Good Friday only means something in the Netherlands if you work for a Christian company with a Christian boss. Even (some) Christian schools remain open on Good Friday.

The traditional Dutch Easter tradition is hiding small chocolate eggs in the garden and sending your children out to find them again. Some regions in the east of the Netherlands build bonfires (*“Easter Fires”*) so huge (10’s of metres high) that permission is needed from the local authorities. I hope it’s obvious to you that you shouldn’t build these in your own back garden or in the common room of your student accommodation.

We can cry that we need to go to work and / or study on Good Friday (*“Goede vrijdag”*), but Ascension Thursday (*“Hemelvaartsdag”*) and Pentecost Sunday (1st *“Pinksterdag”* and 2nd *“Pinksterdag”* – Bank Holiday Monday) count as public holidays in the Netherlands.

“Sinterklaas” 5 December

There is a single golden rule for the expat during the Sinterklaas period – DO NOT MENTION SANTA CLAUSE. Not if it’s that they’re both around in December. Not if it’s the similarity in appearance between the two white bearded old men. And absolutely not if it’s to point out that that Santa Claus seems to be just that little bit more jolly and cheerful than a stately, serious old bishop with apparent discomfort in front of large crowds.

Any *gezellig*-ness you had with a Dutchie until this point will evaporate faster than a euro in a child's hand in a sweet shop because you're letting yourself in for a torrent of lectures educating you about Saint Nicholas and Coca Cola advertising. You will, however, be invited to join in on an ongoing argument about Sinterklaas' helpers. I'll leave it at that because you're bound to hear about it.

Sinterklaas is a Greek bishop in Turkey who comes to the Netherlands after leaving from Spain on a steamboat. Coincidentally, he also rides around on a white horse, so I guess our equine friend also has a sturdy set of sea legs and a stack of (p)assports. Sinterklaas arrives in the Netherlands around mid-November, and from then he stands in various town centres smiling at the town mayor and listening to loud songs played by a local brass band. He has a flurry of helpers who assist him handing out presents to children and throwing sweets into crowds of villagers.

Note: Be aware there is a lot of controversy surrounding these helpers, and you will hear them referred to as *Zwartepiet* (Black Pete) or *Regenbouwpiet* (Rainbow Pete).

Children leave carrots in their shoes and leave them by the front door, and sing a song to goad Sinterklaas into leaving them a present the following morning. There's no set night or nights on which this happens, but it's usually triggered when parents find out that Sinterklaas visited the houses of the friends of their children the night before.

5 December is the big night and is known as "*Pakjesavond*" (Literally: Packages evening) because this is the night when the biggest presents are given to each other. Humorous poems are often written about and read to your

friends, or surprises made for each other – home-crafting projects which carry a humorous element and say something about the recipient's character. Dutch families often get together for a meal on this evening.

Traditional food around the Sinterklaas period includes chocolate letters and *pepernoten* which are button-sized biscuit things.

Tip: If you plan on celebrating both Sinterklaas and Christmas and worry about the excess of present giving, it may be handy to arrange a meeting between Sinterklaas and Santa Claus. After all, they're friends and can make an agreement with each other about when and how often the presents trickle in.

And of course, they have absolutely nothing in common with each other.

Christmas Day and Boxing Day

(1st "*Kerstdag*" and 2nd "*Kerstdag*") 25 and 26 December

Christmas in the Netherlands is a sombre affair. This could be from a strong anti-commercialism sentiment for Christian feast days, or perhaps from sheer exhaustion from Sinterklaas.

Christmas is a day to spend with family, and another day to spend with the in-laws. Some families have Christmas trees, decorate their homes with lights and exchange gifts; many don't. The Dutch version of Santa Claus is *de Kerstman* (Literally: the Christmas man) but generally speaking he's not as popular with the Dutchies as Sinterklaas.

Dutchies are pragmatic with their Christmas cards by only signing their names inside. *Why write anything more when the greeting is already printed inside?*

Tip: Reuse the front of the card as a gift label for next year.

During the Christmas period (December to 6 January) you can use discounted postage stamps ("*kerstpostzegels*") to send greetings cards. (After 6 January you can use them, but their value needs to be topped up to the current price of a regular postage stamp.)

Some companies offer their employees a Christmas package ("*kerstpakket*"). This is a bag with goodies such as an envelope of cash, vouchers for days out, or various gifts like (and this is from personal experience...) an ugly bag made from recycled plastic crap from a train station.

Miscellaneous

**“For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”
(Matthew 5.18 NIV)**

Random points that don't warrant a section:

- The heaviest household appliance, the washing machine, is carried by Dutchies all the way upstairs to the attic. This means you can walk upstairs with your dirty laundry and walk all the way back downstairs when it's cleaned to sort it out and fold it up, then take it back upstairs to put in your clothes cupboard.

I asked a Dutch colleague why washing machines are preferentially placed in the attic. He explained: “The washing machine goes in the attic.” So I guess that clears it up.

- Clothing. You can wear any colour clothing you like in the Netherlands as long as it's orange. This might be something Dutchies tell only tourists and expats so they can be spotted easily.
- Libraries have pianos so you can read your book or study in peaceful surroundings whilst listening to a 2-year-old tinkle on the ivories. Other 2-year-olds are in

the nearby indoor playground situated by the adult non-fiction section (I'm not making this up...). Some libraries are part of cultural centres which use coffee grinding machines connected to subwoofers to epitomise the love of continuous, raucous din in the Dutch culture. This can't be said loud enough: silence in a Dutch library is unheard of. If you need a more peaceful atmosphere than a Dutch library, sit under the flight path of a commercial jet.

- There are 2 kinds of electricity sockets, one for earthed plugs and another for unearthed plugs. The latter is less safe, not just electrically, but because of self-injury induced from the frustration that your old plug doesn't fit into the more common earthed socket.
- If the pen is a mighty sword, then the agenda is the Dutch shield. This is because making an appointment with a Dutchie is like jousting – start to pencil in a date and you'll be blocked with the agenda: "I don't know if I'm free; I need to check my agenda." Then comes the desperate plea to "make an appointment to make an appointment". It's a vague rebuttal which will leave you bewildered and by the time you've figured out what's going on, the time and date will have long passed.
- The Dutch have a reputation for being mean with their money. I haven't noticed this, but if you compliment a Dutchie on one of their possessions, they will tell you how much it was discounted when they bought it.

- Taxes in the Netherlands are more certain than death. Even though your income is (usually) taxed at source and you pay tax on (nearly) everything you buy or use, taxes need to be filed annually just to make sure that as much as possible has been squeezed out of you.

Tax returns are carried out electronically, and many of the required strange facts and figures are pre-filled.

Some say paying an accountant to file your tax returns saves you more money than the fees they charge (including tax). I went for marrying a Dutchie; my wife files my taxes for me, though to be honest, she does have expensive tastes so I'm not sure if I've come out on top financially!

Although taxes are high, we have to admit that things work pretty well here in the Netherlands!

- Dutchies often bring cake to the office on their birthday and send a group-wide email at work to announce it. Having a birthday in the Netherlands is a great way to meet people you've never seen before in your working life. You won't see many of them again for another year – or until it's their birthday.
- A school bag hanging on a flagpole outside a Dutchie's house means a child inside has passed their exams for that school year. Presumably the parents hope that their children won't choose to go to university (expensive!) because they can't find their lucky school bag.

The tradition is replicated by builders who hang wheelbarrows from cranes overnight during a building project. Having not gone to building school* myself, I don't know why they do this.

* Building school is where you're taught how to build walls using loud music to bind the sand and cement, whistle and park your van in the most inconvenient location.

- Dutch music. Switch it off. Not just because it's dreadful (which is it), but because you'll surely hear it from at least one of your neighbours so you may as well save electricity.
- The Dutch national anthem is known as the Wilhelmus and has a staggering 15 verses. Understandably, only the 1st – and less understandably – the 6th verses are usually sung. In the 1st verse Dutchies declare their German blood, faithfulness to the German fatherland, and grant a lifelong loyalty to the king of Spain.

Facing Uncertainty and Loneliness in the Netherlands

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29.11 NIV)

To be honest, this is a difficult section for me to write because I had a lot of trouble in this area. And even after 15 years with a Dutch wife and family, I’m not certain that I’ve mastered it yet. In any case, I hope the following helps at least a little.

From all of the beautiful places on planet Earth with rocky mountains, wild forests, craggy coastlines, waterfalls and deep, dark skies, I sometimes need reminding why I chose the Netherlands to be my new home. I left the life I know behind. And my family. And my friends. I sold my house and my right-hand drive car. And here I am in the Netherlands with none of those things any more.

My experiences and knowledge that I built back in England count for nothing here – it’s a different place with a different culture that needs a different skill set. My parents don’t see their grandkids grow up. I can’t be a proper big brother to my siblings. And I’ve got a weird car with the steering wheel and gear stick on the wrong side. So did I make the right decision to come to the Netherlands? Is all this trouble of settling in really worth it?

From a personal perspective, it's the people we connect with and have relationships with who make the difference. Without them, settling into new surroundings is tough, especially when the new culture slaps you in the face 24/7 and there's never, ever any rest. When there's no-one to turn to for comfort, let alone help, loneliness in a new country *stings*.

The saying goes something like "There's never more loneliness than in a crowded place" – and the Netherlands is a very crowded place. It's very easy to feel alone here, especially given the independent culture where Dutchies tend to keep to themselves and are slow to reach out; the assumption is everything is OK with you because otherwise you'd ask.

Note carefully this doesn't mean they're unwelcoming or insensitive to the difficulties you face! Indeed, ask for help and it will come – though not necessarily in the way you expect. The heart, and the willingness is there.

Tips:

- Stay yourself! Adapting to a culture doesn't mean changing into a local. Adapting is learning to swim, not changing into a fish. You don't need to wear clogs and suffer blisters to make Dutch friends, but having a go at learning the Dutch language will go a long way. And keeping your accent is fine!

Start Easy: Stay close to home

- Keep your grounding by contacting your family and friends back home regularly. Ask for pictures and video clips to keep yourself connected to normal life in a normal culture.

- Connect with someone from your own culture. Someone with a similar cultural background as you means they'll offer more empathy than a Dutchie.
- Find expat shops to get that taste of home. There's nothing wrong with Dutch food (except *karnemelk* and *stamppot*), but when you hanker for home food why not treat yourself? And if you're able to go there personally instead of ordering online, maybe you'll meet some fellow expats.

Stretching Out

For (us) introverts, there's no denying it and I can't sugar-coat it; finding and meeting new people, especially in an unfamiliar setting is a garish nightmare. The good news is even though you feel alone in this, you're not! There are loads of other introverts out there who want to connect with you too!

Last year at the ICF Wageningen we had a service leader who asked people to raise their hands if they were an extrovert. (I think she wanted to make the point we're a mixed bunch of Christians). About a quarter of the congregation raised their hands, a few stood up, and all of them whooped and cheered. Then she asked the introverts to raise their hands. No-one's hand went up and about half of the congregation shrank into their seats. **But there were many pairs of eyes scouting the room to see who was who and who was what...**

- Search out people similar to you, in your study course, in your work or even in and around your accommodation.

- Find Dutchies who are happy to speak your own language with you. This goes against the whole “Try to speak as much Dutch as you can” shenanigans; if you can’t understand each other, how will you connect? Communicating in your own language forms deeper bonds.

Treading New Ground

Approach Dutchies on their own terms:

- Show willingness to settle in (if that’s true...). For example, have a stab at speaking some simple Dutch words in the shops, wander around the flea markets on King’s Day and wear orange. And of course – never mention Santa Clause during the *Sinterklaas* period.
- In general, Dutchies don’t welcome spontaneity; turning up unexpected at their door isn’t considered ‘normal’ in the Netherlands. Instead, an appointment needs to be made for a visit, or indeed, to offer an invitation.

To ensure the appointment addresses all terms of the upcoming social event, another appointment is needed – the appointment for an appointment (“*afspraak voor een afspraak*”). Bring your own agenda, but you’re allowed to borrow a pen.

And Obviously...

- Boudewijn, the pastor at ICF Wageningen, will kill me if I don’t mention that you are always welcome at our church!

(Warning for the introverts: at a point in the Sunday service you'll be invited to stand up in front of everyone and introduce yourself. It's terrifying! So prepare yourself for that, or don't do it and stay seated and head straight for the Host Team at the end of the service. Or come and find me!)

- This is so obvious and I suppose it should have been first on the list, but for ending on a high note for literary pizzazz:

God is always with you. Pray!

The Great Commission

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10.16 NIV)

The Dutch are a wonderful species. That’s why we love them, marry them and end up trapped here. True, they might seem like rough, uncut diamonds at first, but look at them closely and understand them, and you’ll wonder how you ever missed their dazzling sparkle!

As you continue to live, work or study in the Netherlands, I’d encourage you to spend time with the indigenous folk. And when things get dark and gloomy, let your eyes get accustomed to the darkness and you’ll see the hidden beauty of the Netherlands and its Dutchies. I hope this guide acts as a flashlight and gives you a head start!

We’re all the same: God made us – and Dutchies – individual with our unique take and perspective on people and things around us. So whilst this guide is written from the viewpoint of my own history through my time here in the Netherlands, in time you’ll have your own Dutch experiences which might be quite different to mine! I sincerely hope you’ll enjoy them!

Succes! (Good luck!)

Paul

About ICF Wageningen and the Author

ICF Wageningen

The International Christian Fellowship (ICF), Wageningen is an interdenominational Christian Church whose ministry focuses on foreign students and other internationals residing in and around Wageningen, offering hospitality and support through various activities.

Our vision is to be an open Bible-based community of Christians from diverse cultures, countries, denominations or backgrounds that together worships Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, grows through discipleship and is active in the witness of Jesus Christ.

Paul

I landed on Earth half a century ago and have been unable to escape the planet ever since without my wife's permission or my imagination. Arriving as a wet, screaming bundle of joy in 1970's London, I morphed into human adulthood as an ocean scientist, spending much of my existence in the Netherlands – a country nearly as famous as Atlantis for lying largely below sea level.

I was raised as a Christian, but fell away from faith when I left home to study. Thankfully God didn't leave me, and I heard Him calling me back to Him a few years later. I've been a member of ICF Wageningen Church for 6 years. Given the transient nature of its predominantly international student membership, 6 years is an immensely long time. It's not as

immensely long as the 16 years I've been in the Netherlands, so surviving and thriving is certainly possible here!

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3.5-6 NIV)