

The Netherlands at a glance, 2008

Some facts and figures

The Netherlands is a small country with a limited internal market, consequently the Dutch look across their borders for markets. They started out as worldwide maritime traders in the 16th century and today they are still significant players in the global economy.

"The Netherlands" means "Low Lands"; a large part of the country is situated below sea level. The Netherlands is often referred to as Holland, but Holland is actually only the northwestern part of the country.

Society

With its 16 million inhabitants (16,570,613 ~ *July 2007 est.*), the Netherlands is the fourth most densely populated country in the world. Every-day life is structured down to the smallest detail. Private life and work are carefully planned and nothing is left to the unexpected. Ad hoc changes are not appreciated.

The Netherlands is a democracy with a tolerant, open society. Although 70 percent of the Dutch do not attend church, Calvinism still strongly influences their values and beliefs. This Protestant Christian religion originated in the Reformation in the 16th Century, and emphasises the Lordship of Christ over all creation. For practical purposes, it meant that the relationship between the Creator and the individual was a direct relationship, without the need of an intermediary priest or saint.

The Dutch are mistakenly called stingy. This reputation was given to them by the English, and is directly linked to the last successful invasion of England by any foreign power. Besides, in reality they simply hate to waste anything from food to money. Most importantly, they used their capital to generate more trade, to be productive, rather than consuming the profits. It is this virtue, above all others, that made this small country an economic world power.

Egalitarian society

The Netherlands has an egalitarian society. Status and respect are obtained through study and work and not through family ties or old age. Every person is equal and should be treated accordingly, which may be difficult for foreigners to understand.

It is normal for a general manager to exchange some words daily with the cleaning lady, to discuss all the work with his managers and to kindly ask his secretary what phone calls came in for him, even to making his own photocopies and coffee.

It can seem the Dutch way of working is time consuming as no one can be given a quick order without explaining why. But in order to deliver good work, the Dutch like to consider the risks and consequences of everything they do, well in advance. They want to have detailed information, and as a consequence, will accept responsibility for failure or success.

Consensus

The Dutch are famous in the Western world for the many hours a week they spend in meetings. Decision-making processes are complex. Everyone involved needs to be heard. In the end a compromise will be reached in which every one agrees. Once agreed upon the work can progress steadily. Therefore, changes are usually lengthy processes.

The need for consensus is rooted in the polder. The polder is a piece of land that would normally be below sea level, but through the co-operation and consensus of everybody, it is possible to create dry land and keep it dry and hence productive.

The global traveler

The contrary takes place when Dutch businessmen and women travel. They usually have the individual authority to close deals on the spot without consulting the home office.

Dutch global traders are much more flexible abroad than at their home office.

Directness

The Dutch directness in the communication with foreigners regularly causes misunderstandings. They speak in a friendly tone in rather short, clear, sober sentences lacking any form of politeness or courtesy.

Being very nice may awaken the suspicion that one is in need of a special favour. Excess politeness may also cause irritation as it is considered a waste of time. Besides, there's no time to be nice when the dyke threatens to burst and flood the polder.

Loss of face

The Dutch expect others to be open and direct like them. They will tell you what they think of you and criticise your work indifferent of your status if you are a superior or a subordinate.

They expect you to criticise their work in return, honestly and directly. If you detect mistakes in their work and you do not inform them about these mistakes, they will be extremely disappointed with you. The Dutch do not feel ashamed when you inform them of a mistake. On the contrary, they feel that you give them the opportunity to correct and thus improve themselves. The Dutch feel that in the end, one learns from his mistakes.

Loss of face is a rather unknown concept in Dutch society when compared to other cultures.

Time off

The Dutch love time off to spend with their partner, kids and friends, for vacation or to study. Therefore they will prefer to reduce working hours instead of having an increase in salary.

Vacation days, depending on the labour contract, run from 21 to as many as 35 working days a year.

Expatriates on foreign work-contracts in the Netherlands often complain they are always in the office while the Dutch are on vacation.

Concept of time

Being very organised and time conscious, one has to plan business appointments at least four weeks ahead, with bosses, clients and colleagues.

As for your private agenda you may be expected to plan an evening at the cinema with your best friend six weeks from today. Of course there is no such thing as just "dropping by to say hello". Above all, one must be punctual or early.

The family

Despite having a very open and individualistic society, when it comes to the family nucleus, it is a hermetically closed circle. The family nucleus is detached from the extended family.

Adult brothers and sisters usually see each other only on birthday celebrations, weddings and funerals. This is mostly because there are a million other things to do.

Contradictions

With all this planning and structuring, little is left to the unexpected. However, they have an adventurous mind and dare to take risks in business, which requests flexibility.

Despite the strong Christian (Roman Catholic, Reformed & Calvinist) background and a disapproval of extremes, homosexual marriages, sex on TV and legalised soft drugs, these are all part of daily life.

The Dutch may have great work relationships with their colleagues, but they rarely invite them to their homes. Work and private life are strictly separated. Also, Dutch businessmen do not feel obligated to entertain foreign business visitors after business hours.

Being an egalitarian society, personal and academic titles are not used on business cards. Only corporate Holland will print the academic titles of their managers on their business cards.

People retire between 50 and 65 years old. The elderly are not respected in the corporate world.

Elderly people may never be consulted for their wisdom but they are well taken care of in comfortable old-age houses once they are unable to live on their own. If you are wealthy or not, everyone gets equal treatment.

The Dutch are open and will enjoy lengthy discussions over a beer in a bar with mostly anybody. This relationship ends when you say goodbye at the door. However, once you do have a Dutchman as a friend, you have a friend for life.

Some more facts and figures *(Source: CIA World Factbook)*

Government type: Constitutional monarchy

Ethnic groups: Dutch ~ 83%
Non-Western origin (*mainly Turks, Moroccans, Antilleans, Surinamese, and Indonesians*) ~ 9% (1999 est.)
Other ~ 8%

Religions: Roman Catholic ~ 31%
(2002) Dutch Reformed ~ 13%
Calvinist ~ 7%
Muslim ~ 5.5%
Other ~ 2.5%
None ~ 41%

Economy - overview:

Depends heavily on foreign trade. The economy is noted for stable industrial relations, moderate unemployment and inflation, a sizable current account surplus, and an important role as a European transportation hub.

Exports - partners:

(2006) Germany ~ 25.5%
Belgium ~ 14%
UK ~ 8.9%
France ~ 8.6%
Italy ~ 5.1%
US ~ 4.5%

Imports - partners:

(2006) Germany ~ 17.1%
Belgium ~ 9.4%
China ~ 9.4%
US ~ 7.8%
UK ~ 5.9%
Russia ~ 5.1%
France ~ 4.5%

Agriculture - products:

Grains, potatoes, sugar beets, flowers & bulbs, fruits, vegetables, dairy, pork & chicken.

Industries:

Agro-industries, metal and engineering products, electrical machinery and equipment, chemicals, petroleum, construction, microelectronics, fishing.

Illicit drugs:

Major European producer of synthetic drugs, including ecstasy, and cannabis cultivator; important gateway for cocaine, heroin, and hashish entering Europe; major exporter of ecstasy; large financial sector vulnerable to money laundering; significant consumer of ecstasy.

Climate: Temperate; marine; cool summers and mild winters

Terrain: Mostly coastal lowland and reclaimed land (polders); some hills in southeast.