



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 16,040

Area (sq. km.): 41,543

The Netherlands is roughly the size of Switzerland or the U.S. states of Massachusetts and Connecticut combined. It borders the North Sea. Western areas that have been reclaimed from the sea are called *polders*. Windmills once pumped water from the land, and dikes held back the ocean. Today, modern machines do the pumping. About 1,000 windmills (out of an original 10,000) still dot the landscape. Nearly 300 continue to function, mostly for tourists, but some mill grain or perform other work. Because pumping has led to sinking land, water pollution, and problems with the water table, the government is buying tracts of agricultural land in the pumped territory and returning it to nature. Some dikes are being destroyed, allowing marshes and wetlands to gradually fill with water and return to their original state. However, other dikes are being built up to avoid flooding. In the east, the land is above sea level and has a few hills. Grasslands for grazing are common in the north but also can be found nationwide outside cities. In addition to the country of the Netherlands, the Kingdom of the Netherlands also includes the Caribbean island countries of Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten, as well as three special municipalities (the islands of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba).

The climate in the Netherlands is temperate. Rain is common throughout the year. Winters can be cold, but some

are quite mild; likewise, summers can be warm and sometimes cool. Average temperatures range from 28°F (-2°C) in the winter to 72°F (22°C) in the summer. The Caribbean islands have a tropical climate year-round. Bonaire, Sint Maarten, and Saba experience hurricanes in the summer, while Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire have warmer and drier climates.

### History

#### *Roman, Spanish, and French Rule*

For thousands of years, Germanic, Celtic, and Frisian tribes inhabited the area. In the first century BC, the Roman military overwhelmed the tribes, allowing the Roman Empire to rule the land. Around the time of the fall of Rome (AD 476), Franks and Saxons settled there. The people remained part of the Frankish Kingdom until AD 800. In medieval times, the entire area consisted of autonomous areas ruled by dukes and counts. In the 1500s, these areas, along with Belgium and Luxembourg, were known as the Low Countries and were ruled by Spain.

In 1568, Prince William of Orange rebelled against the Spanish Crown and began an 80-year war for independence. In 1648, with the Peace of Münster, the Netherlands became independent. In the years following, it built a vast overseas empire, becoming one of the world's leading maritime and commercial powers. The Netherlands established trade stations and colonies in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Americas. The United States and the Netherlands have enjoyed unbroken diplomatic relations since 1782.

In 1795, French forces made the Netherlands a subordinate state, and Napoleon annexed the territory in 1810. The

Congress of Vienna ended French occupation, and the United Kingdom of the Netherlands was created in 1815. It originally included Belgium, which seceded in 1830.

### ***The World Wars and the End of Colonialism***

The Netherlands remained neutral during World War I but was invaded by Germany in World War II. In 1945, after the devastations of the war, the country joined the United Nations (UN) and in 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In 1958, it played an important role in the founding of the European Economic Community, the forerunner of the European Union (EU). Around the same time, the Netherlands granted independence to most of its overseas holdings, including Indonesia (1949) and Suriname (1975).

In 1980, Queen Juliana gave up the throne to her daughter Queen Beatrix. After the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles in 2010, Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba became special municipalities of the Netherlands. Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten became separate countries but remained within the Kingdom of the Netherlands as equal partners with the Netherlands and are overseen by the Dutch monarch.

### ***Immigration and Economic Concerns***

The murder of controversial filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in 2004 by a Dutch Muslim fundamentalist and the exodus of moderate Muslim *imams* (religious leaders) have intensified debate about immigration policies and the assimilation of immigrants into Dutch society. In 2006, the Netherlands passed a law requiring immigrants to pass an exam on language and Dutch society that measures their level of integration. Those who live abroad and are planning to immigrate must pass the test before coming to the Netherlands to prove their ability to integrate.

Dutch voters expressed concern as the Netherlands imposed budget restrictions in response to the financial strain of the worldwide economic recession. Because the right-wing party refused to participate in budget talks in April 2012, Prime Minister Mark Rutte resigned, though he was subsequently reelected in the following elections. A coalition government compromised on budget cuts, including a one-billion-euro cut to the healthcare budget. At the end of April 2013, Queen Beatrix abdicated the throne to her son Willem-Alexander, the first king since 1890.

### ***Recent Events and Trends***

- **Nazi-looted art returned:** In fall of 2013, Dutch art museums identified 139 artworks that were likely stolen from Jewish owners before and during World War II and then sold to the museums. Descendants of Dutch Jews may now file claims for these pieces of art.
- **Asylum for LGBT Africans:** After three gay Africans requested asylum in the Netherlands, the country turned to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) for legal counsel. In November 2013, the ECJ ruled that all EU nations can grant asylum to LGBT people from countries where homosexual acts are illegal and can result in imprisonment.
- **Dutch passengers killed in Ukraine:** In July 2014, a Malaysia Airlines plane was shot down over rebel-held territory in eastern Ukraine. The flight had departed from Amsterdam, and the majority of passengers were Dutch. Although responsibility for the incident has yet to be proven, many Western governments suspect that the plane was

downed by a Russian-supplied missile fired by the rebels. Many Dutch were outraged when the rebels interfered with the international investigation of the crash and delayed the transfer of the bodies back to the Netherlands.

## **THE PEOPLE**

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### **Population**

*Population:* 16,877,351

*Population Growth Rate:* 0.42%

*Urban Population:* 84%

More than one-third of the Netherlands' population lives in the two western provinces of North and South Holland. These provinces, from which the Netherlands received its nickname, Holland, contain the three largest Dutch cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague. Along with Utrecht, these cities form an area called Randstad. The population is 81 percent ethnic Dutch. Much of the foreign population comes from other European countries (5 percent), Indonesia (2 percent), Turkey (2 percent), Suriname (2 percent), Morocco (2 percent), and the Caribbean (less than 1 percent).

### **Language**

The official language is Dutch, a Germanic language. Frisian is a Germanic language similar to Dutch that is spoken in the northeastern province of Friesland. English, German, and French are commonly understood and spoken and are taught in secondary school.

There are also many dialects of Dutch spoken, including both rural and urban dialects. Some dialects are considered part of *standaardnederlands* (the standard Dutch language), and those who speak local (non-standard) dialects can also speak *standaardnederlands*. The provinces of Zeeland, Limburg, Noord-Brabant, and Groningen have distinct dialects.

On the Caribbean islands of Sint Maarten, Saba, Bonaire, and Sint Eustatius, English is an official language. Papiamentu is an official language on the islands of Curaçao and Aruba.

### **Religion**

About 30 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Most Catholics live in the southern provinces of Brabant and Limburg. Another 20 percent is Protestant, 6 percent is Muslim, and 2 percent belongs to other churches. The remaining 42 percent is not officially affiliated with any religion. Around 16 percent of the population attends religious services at least once a month; fewer attend weekly. The Netherlands, like many European countries, is a secular society with a strong tradition of maintaining the separation of church and state.

In 2004, the Dutch Reformed Church, a Calvinist church that was the largest Protestant church body in the Netherlands, merged with other Calvinist and Lutheran churches to form the Dutch Protestant Church. A minority objected to the merger and founded the Restored Reformed Church.

## General Attitudes

Although its official name is the Kingdom of the Netherlands, many people know the country as Holland. While many Dutch people also call the country Holland, some Dutch, particularly those who do not live in either the North or South Holland provinces, greatly prefer to call it the Netherlands. There is a marked difference in attitudes among those who live north of the Rhine Delta, a traditionally Protestant (Calvinist) region, and those who live in the traditionally Catholic south. By reputation, people in the south are more gregarious.

In general, the traits most admired by the Dutch are honesty, humor, modesty, and education. Social status is measured mostly by occupation. Widely held attitudes about equality helped the Dutch create an extensive welfare system, which remains a high priority despite the increasing cost of supporting it. As a small, trade-dependent nation, the Netherlands has long recognized the importance of being internationally minded. It has a strong tradition of involvement in international affairs, primarily those in Europe since the Second World War. For example, The Hague (in the province of South Holland) is not only the seat of Dutch government and parliament but also home to over 150 international organizations, including the Permanent Court of Arbitration (the oldest institution for international dispute resolution), the International Criminal Court, and the International Court of Justice.

Openness to the world has made the Dutch no less proud of their own culture and heritage, whether it be politics, the arts, or technology. Through hard work and skillful engineering, the Dutch took much of their territory from the sea by pumping water from land that is below sea level and building dikes to keep the water back. This feat is reflected in the Dutch saying: "God made the earth, but the Dutch made the Netherlands." The Dutch value keeping their country clean, and the government uses a system of fines and waste taxes to encourage the population to responsibly manage household waste. They separate organic waste from other garbage and collect it in different containers, and they recycle paper and bottles. Known for their strong tradition of liberalism, the country has an open attitude toward the use of "soft drugs" such as marijuana and has legalized prostitution, euthanasia, and homosexual marriage.

## Personal Appearance

European fashions are popular in the Netherlands. The Dutch enjoy stylish casual attire, as long as it is neat and clean. Professionals tend to wear long pants (or skirts) to work, but in their free time almost anything goes. Shorts and tank tops are common in the summer, and head-to-toe waterproof gear is donned when it rains.

Traditional attire is rarely worn. The Dutch are famous for their *klompen* (wooden shoes or clogs). *Klompen* are no longer used in everyday situations, except on the farm, where field-workers still wear them. Most *klompen* produced today are exported.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

A warm and hearty handshake is an appropriate greeting for both men and women. It is also popular for friends to kiss on alternating cheeks three times when greeting. A common phrase is *Hoe gaat het?* (How are you?), or *Alles goed?* (Is everything all right?). While people may wave if greeting from a distance, shouting is impolite. The use of given names generally is reserved for close friends and relatives. Instead, the Dutch address others by their titles and family names. However, young people do use first names when speaking to each other. When talking on the telephone, both the caller and the receiver identify themselves first before starting a conversation. It is rude not to do so.

### Gestures

Eye contact and facial expressions are important, though one should not stand too close to another person when speaking. One covers the mouth when yawning. When someone sneezes, a person nearby will say *Proost* or *Gezondheid*, the equivalent of saying "Bless you." It is impolite to pass between conversing individuals or to chew gum while speaking. Pointing the index finger to the forehead implies that someone is crazy and is an insult. Wagging the index finger emphasizes a point.

### Visiting

The Dutch are hospitable and enjoy having visitors. Unannounced visits are not common, except between very close friends or relatives. It is important to be punctual. If no time is stated for an evening visit to new acquaintances, it is usual to arrive after 8:30 p.m. and to leave before midnight. Guests shake hands with everyone present, including children. Hosts nearly always offer refreshments to guests. On a first visit to someone's home, a guest does not expect a meal (unless specifically invited for it). Rather, coffee or tea is served with sweet biscuits, and then drinks are served later in the evening. Dinner guests usually give the host a bottle of wine and the hostess some flowers.

Social visiting is especially important on birthdays. One is normally invited to a gathering that lasts from 8 p.m. to midnight and begins with coffee or tea accompanied by birthday cake. Afterward, one is served beer or wine (juice or lemonade for children). The table is spread with cheese, chips, or nuts.

### Eating

The Dutch generally eat three meals a day. Dinner (around 6 p.m.) is the main meal for most people, but some rural families and older people retain the tradition of eating the main meal at midday. For them, the evening meal is light and often consists of bread, cold cuts, cheese, and salad.

The Dutch consider it important to wash their hands before eating and to be at the table on time. It is impolite to begin eating before others. A parent or host often indicates when to eat by saying *Eet smakelijk* (pronounced "ATE

smahk-ay-lick”), which literally means “Eat deliciously” but is used in the same way as the French *Bon appétit* (Enjoy the meal).

It is proper to keep hands above the table (rather than in the lap) but not to rest elbows on the table. The Dutch eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Forks are not used to eat dessert; small spoons are provided. One leaves the table only after all have finished eating.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

#### Structure

The Dutch have strong, small families. Most have only one or two children, including the southern (Catholic) families that used to be a bit larger. Today, women usually wait longer to have children than did previous generations. Immigrants tend to have larger families. Single parents are common.

#### Parents and Children

Parents often have grandparents care for the children rather than dropping the children off at expensive day care centers. Children are generally expected to help around the house with chores, such as doing the dishes or taking out the trash. Parents help children with their studies and encourage them in sports, music, and other activities. Secondary school students often have part-time jobs or do sports after school. Children frequently move out and live on their own at 18, and those who do stay at home often pay for room and board.

The Netherlands has an aging population, and many of the elderly require care. They typically live on their own, in nursing homes, or in apartment buildings specially designed for elderly tenants, often including ambulatory care. However, people generally live close to their extended family, and many holidays emphasize family gatherings. Families usually visit their grandparents on weekends, birthdays, and holidays.

#### Gender Roles

More than half of all Dutch women work, though the majority work part-time. Many women work in male dominated fields, but relatively few women hold director positions in big companies. Some women claim there is a *glazen plafond* (glass ceiling) caused by discrimination and the fact that many women work part-time.

Working women try to balance their careers with running busy households and taking care of family. In theory, fathers take on equal responsibility in household chores and raising children. Most Dutch men help around the house, and many couples try to split household chores evenly. In practice, women often end up doing most of the work around the home. Increasingly, both parents choose to work part-time so that one is usually at home to take care of the children while the other is at work.

On average, mothers are entitled to sixteen weeks of paid maternity leave, starting four to six weeks before delivery. Fathers are entitled to two days of paternity leave, but many try to save up vacation time to use around the time of their wife's delivery.

### Housing

#### Urban

Cities have a variety of housing. Standard family homes are made of red or white brick with tiled roofs. They sometimes have a yard or garden in front or back. Most people live in a *rijtjeshuis*, a house that shares walls with neighbors on either side. Because the Netherlands has a dense urban population, these tall, narrow, and compact houses allow more people to live in a smaller area. Detached houses with green spaces around them are far less common in cities. Some wealthier people live in 18th-century houses in the traditional style of brown brick, sometimes with patterns made out of white brick. Big cities have multistorey apartment buildings that rarely exceed 10 storeys and a mix of old and new houses. Some new houses are built in a traditional style to fit into an old neighborhood. New houses usually have big windows and patterns in the brick facades.

#### Rural

In rural areas, houses are usually semi-detached or terraced (condos) and are almost always constructed of reddish-brown brick and clay tiles. People also may live in farmhouses, which are typically built with reddish bricks and either a thatched or red-tiled roof. Because there is more space, some wealthy people also build houses with modern architectural designs and sunrooms overlooking the landscapes.

#### Interiors

A typical Dutch house has a living room with one or two sofas, a kitchen, bedrooms, a bathroom, and a small yard. Most people do not have a separate dining room but instead have a dining table in either the kitchen or living room. Guests are usually received in the living room. Middle-class family homes have a bedroom for each child, but it's common for children to share bedrooms in less wealthy families. Oak floors are popular, but laminate and carpeting are cheaper options. People commonly hang curtains in the windows.

#### Exteriors

Gardens are common for those who live on the ground level or in houses; they are very well cared for and sometimes elaborate, with small statues or manicured bushes. Neighbors who neglect their gardens are frowned upon, and those who do not enjoy gardening often choose to tile their entire backyard instead. Garages are rare.

#### Ownership

Because the Netherlands is so densely populated, available housing is scarce. The need for more houses competes with the desire to preserve natural spaces for recreation. New neighborhoods are often built on the outskirts of existing ones to preserve as much undeveloped land as possible. Housing is most expensive in the western portion of the country and cheapest in the northeast. The government subsidizes housing costs for low-income renters and offers home owners tax benefits and grants for some home improvements.

The majority of Dutch people own a house. Most young adults live in a rental house for a couple years before buying a house. The average middle-class Dutch person can afford housing, though urban housing is more expensive; a studio apartment in Amsterdam may cost as much as a house in a smaller town. Singles and the elderly tend to rent rather than

buy a house or apartment.

## Dating and Marriage

### *Dating and Courtship*

Teenagers usually start dating in secondary school. Girls often start earlier than boys. Couples usually know each other from a sports club, church, music club, or neighborhood, but school is the most common place for young couples to meet. Students at *Hogeschool* (higher vocational school) or university typically have the most active dating lives. Working Dutch singles usually date people they meet through work or work contacts. These singles also have less time on the weekend to socialize, so they increasingly turn to online dating services.

Engagement and wedding customs vary greatly throughout the country, in part due to the Netherlands' diversity. Typically, the man will propose to his girlfriend, though sometimes women propose to their boyfriends or make it clear that they want to be proposed to.

### *Marriage in Society*

Women often have their first child in their late twenties, before getting married. Men and women tend to get married in their thirties. Many young adults focus on their careers before getting married. Consequently, couples get married at an older age than their parents did.

Many couples choose to live together before or instead of getting married. A relationship where the couple chooses to live separately is also common. Many couples choose not to have children. Among those who do marry, divorce is generally accepted, though only around 10 percent of marriages in the Netherlands end in divorce.

There are also different types of legal partnerships. In addition to marriage, there is a registered partnership and an option to live together with a special contract. The different types of relationships carry with them varying financial obligations during or after a breakup or divorce. A couple may live together without a contract, but they will have no rights after a breakup. Same-sex marriage is legal and common, though a small but vocal minority of the Dutch population opposes it.

### *Weddings*

Before the wedding, many couples have bachelor and bachelorette parties. The couple's close friends are responsible for planning the parties, which are to be a surprise to the couple. Men often enjoy a night out for their party, whereas women often have a quieter party, such as a day at the spa.

Dutch wedding ceremonies are performed at the city hall. Religious couples usually also have a ceremony in a church afterward. Normally, only close relatives and friends attend. Brides often wear white and grooms often wear tuxedos, but many couples choose different apparel. After the ceremony, the wedding usually continues at a restaurant, with dinner and a party for close friends and family. More guests join in the evening, after the dinner, and everyone congratulates the couple. A live band plays, and guests sing or tell something funny about the couple. Guests give the newlyweds presents, most often an envelope with money.

## Life Cycle

### *Birth*

Most women give birth at a hospital, though about 20 percent of all births occur at home with the aid of a midwife. Other options include one of five specially designed maternity hotels (*kraamhotel*), with rooms designed to resemble regular bedrooms and professional obstetricians and midwives among the staff. Maternity hotels are popular among women who think that home birth is risky but do not want to give birth in a hospital, which is often seen as a place for sick people. The parents usually have a name chosen for the baby beforehand, though sometimes they decide on a name after the baby is born. Children are often named after grandparents, and classic Dutch names, such as Lotte for a girl and Daan for a boy, are common.

Once the baby is born, the parents send a birth announcement to family and friends. It often states when they would like to receive visitors, as well as whether visitors should contact them first. Family members, friends, and neighbors visit for weeks after the birth. Parents offer guests *rusk*, a type of hardened bread topped with either pink or blue (depending on the baby's sex) sugar-coated aniseed. In return, guests bring a little present for the baby. The father will often bring *rusk* to work after his two days of paternity leave.

A nurse will assist the parents with the care of their baby for around two weeks. Sometimes a mother or mother-in-law will sleep over and help with the baby. Women usually go back to work after two and a half months and work fewer hours than before; some mothers choose to stay at home full-time. Religious parents, including both Catholics and Protestants, typically have the baby baptized.

### *Milestones*

At 18, one is no longer considered a minor, and some move out on their own at this age. However, due to the housing shortage and increased university costs, many people must live with their parents. For their 18th birthday (or whatever birthday coincides with moving away from home), children receive presents that form part of a *uitzet* (a group of goods collected before moving out). *Uitzet* presents include utensils and china. Since one can get a driver's license at 18, driving lessons are a popular 18th-birthday present as well because they are expensive.

It is not uncommon for children to live with their parents until they get married, in order to save money and because housing is often unavailable. Many children who move out of their parents' home still sleep over on weekends, usually to visit their parents. Some also still have their mothers do their laundry, though most children are encouraged to become increasingly independent. At the age of 21, young adults are considered financially independent, and parents are no longer legally obligated to support their children financially.

Turning 50 is popularly called "seeing Abraham" (or "seeing Sarah" for a woman), as the birthday person is joked to be old enough to have known the biblical figures. The birthday person is given special presents, such as a cake in the shape of an elderly person. A homemade puppet that looks like a stern elderly person is placed in the front yard so that neighbors know of the birthday. People usually retire in their early sixties. Generally, the Dutch spend their retirement

going on vacation, traveling, or taking up new hobbies.

### **Death**

Upon the death of a family member, an obituary is placed in one of the national newspapers. A person may be buried or cremated, according to personal preference. The deceased will often have stated his or her wishes for the funeral and ceremony. In general, Protestant Dutch choose to be buried and Catholic Dutch choose cremation. Services are most often held in a church or a funeral home. After a funeral, family and friends gather informally for coffee and cake. Even though a large portion of people are not religious, many believe in some kind of life after death.

### **Diet**

Bread or toast with jelly, Dutch cheese or cold cuts, boiled eggs, and coffee or tea are the most common foods for a Dutch breakfast. The most popular breads include multigrain and dark-grain varieties. Most people eat something sweet on their bread for breakfast or lunch; *hagelslag* (chocolate sprinkles) or chocolate spread is most common. Children often eat hot cereal (porridge) for breakfast. *Krentenbollen* (raisin rolls) are also a favorite. Open-faced sandwiches are common for lunch, as is *kroket* (deep-fried beef ragout) and *frikandel* (a deep-fried sausage). A typical meal may be *groentesoep* (vegetable soup), *gekookte aardappelen* (boiled potatoes), *karbonade* (a pork chop), *bloemkool* (cauliflower), and *yoghurtvla* (yogurt pudding). Seafood is also an important part of the Dutch diet; herring and eel are particular favorites.

Dutch pastries are world famous. Favorite snacks include french fries (eaten with mayonnaise, not ketchup), *stroopwafels* (syrup-filled wafers), and many varieties of Dutch licorice. Restaurants in larger towns offer a wide variety of cuisines, and Indonesian food has become an established part of the Dutch diet. Dining out is not as common as it is in the United States. Families usually eat most meals in the home.

### **Recreation**

#### **Sports**

The most popular sport in the Netherlands is soccer, mostly played by men. Tennis is enjoyed by both sexes, and many women play field hockey. Tennis and hockey were once considered games for wealthy people, whereas soccer was for the less wealthy, but these distinctions have largely disappeared. Swimming, sailing, ice-skating, volleyball, badminton, and other sports are also enjoyed. The most popular forms of exercise for both sexes are cardio fitness and weight training at the gym. *Korfbal* is a sport in which teams score points by throwing a soccer-like ball into their opponent's hoop.

Local foundations offer financial assistance to lower-income families that cannot otherwise afford sports activities for their children. Some children also choose to play soccer or basketball in their neighborhoods instead of on organized teams. While Dutch primary and secondary schools do not include sports programs, *Hogeschool* (higher vocational school) and universities have school teams. Students in primary school take a gym class that introduces

them to different sports, and they join sports clubs in their neighborhoods. A popular game in gym class is a simplified version of baseball called *beebeest*.

In some areas of the Netherlands, people still play traditional sports. In the province of Friesland, for example, people play *kaatsen*, a sport similar to baseball where players hit a small, soft ball with the hand. Another sport in Friesland is *fierljeppen*, where players jump over ditches using poles. In the east, people play *klootschieten*, where participants try to throw a small ball underhand as far as they can.

#### **Leisure**

On the weekends, the Dutch like to go out with friends to dinner, the movies, the theater, or concerts. Many enjoy visiting relatives or eating out and going to bars with their friends. Families with young children enjoy going to *meubelboulevards* (outdoor shopping centers made up entirely of furniture stores) that provide entertainment for children, such as clowns or bounce houses. These shopping centers are found in suburbs and usually stay open on minor holidays.

The Dutch are famous for cycling; nearly every person old enough to ride a bicycle has one. The country is very flat and *Fietspaden* (bike paths) run throughout the country. If the weather allows, families and couples often go for rides on their bicycles for both leisure and transportation.

In the winter, young and old alike enjoy going ice-skating on frozen lakes and ponds, as well as canals. In years when the ice is hard enough, a day-long ice-skating race takes place on a route that encompasses Friesland's 11 main towns, many lakes, and parts of the sea. As many as 80,000 people participate.

#### **Vacation**

Many Dutch people enjoy going on vacations in the summer. The average Dutch worker receives a month of paid vacation each year. Workers often take one week at Christmas, one at Easter, and two in the summer.

Many families go camping, sometimes in large groups. The south of France is a popular spot for Dutch families who can afford camping abroad, and families who do not enjoy camping often spend summer vacations at resorts. If their parents allow, teenagers 16 and older choose to spend their vacations with friends at beaches in France or Italy.

Weekend trips to European capitals are also common since many are quite close. Budget flights are available to much of Europe, making travel accessible for teenagers and people who could not otherwise afford it. *Fietsvakanties* (bicycle vacations) involve touring the country, and occasionally neighboring countries, by bike. During the winter, people who can afford it go on skiing trips in Austria or Germany. Others stay at home to spend time with their family.

### **The Arts**

There are more than six hundred museums in the Netherlands. Some of the world's most famous artists are Dutch, including Rembrandt Van Rijn, Johannes Vermeer, and Vincent van Gogh. The Dutch school of painting was a major influence on the art world. Dutch artists now also explore such media as performance art and photography. The government provides significant support for the arts without limiting free expression. The prestigious Amsterdam Concertgebouw

Orchestra, the National Ballet at Amsterdam, and the Dutch National Opera Company are examples of the Netherlands' excellence in the performing arts. The Dutch also have a long tradition in literature, as well as folk art, music, and dance.

### Holidays

Official public holidays include New Year's Day, Good Friday, Easter (Sunday–Monday), Queen's Day (30 Apr.), Ascension, Liberation Day (5 May), Whit Monday, and two days for Christmas (25–26 Dec.). For many people, holidays are a mix of religious and secular elements.

#### *St. Nicholas Day*

Christmas festivities begin well before Christmas Day. Many families do not exchange gifts on Christmas Day, which is a day for families and feasts. Some families exchange gifts on Christmas Eve, but gift giving traditionally is associated with St. Nicholas Day (6 Dec.). *Sinterklaas* (St. Nicholas) is dressed in a red robe like a Catholic bishop and rides a white horse. In the days leading up to St. Nicholas Day, *Sinterklaas* arrives on a boat from Spain (where he lives), rides in parades, and visits children. His servants, the *Zwarte Pieten* (Black Peters), throw small pieces of *pepernoten* (gingerbread) candy for children.

Each *Zwarte Piet* has a specific responsibility, such as wrapping gifts. On St. Nicholas Eve, children are encouraged by their parents to put their shoes by the window or fireplace so that the *Zwarte Pieten* can fill them with *pepernoten* or a present. The presents must be presented cleverly, accompanied by an amusing poem about the receiver, supposedly written by *Sinterklaas*, and a chocolate bar in the shape of the first letter of the receiver's name. Because it is not a public holiday and parents and children both often have to get up early the next day, some families do not exchange gifts but instead have a special dinner together. This holiday is regularly scrutinized by some, particularly black citizens from former Dutch colonies (Curaçao, the Dutch Antilles, and Surinam) because of its racist connotation. The *Zwarte Pieten* were traditionally described as *Sinterklaas's* Moorish servants, though now their black faces are explained as being from soot in chimneys.

#### *Christmas*

Most people set up their Christmas trees sometime after *Sinterklaas* arrives, and once he returns to Spain, shops and streets are fully decorated. Meals are typically shared among close friends and family on the first and second days of Christmas. The main dish is usually venison or beef, though a common Christmas dinner is *gourmetten*, a meal where everyone cooks their own food on a special grill at the center of the table. Families who have exchanged gifts for St. Nicholas Day usually do not exchange again at Christmas.

#### *Other Holidays and Festivals*

Each region is known for local festivals held throughout the year, often in celebration of the harvest. *Vlaggetjesdag* (Little Flag Day) is celebrated in coastal areas. Held in May, it marks the beginning of the herring season. Ships leave the harbor, decorated with little flags.

In the south and other Catholic areas, Carnival (*Carnaval*) celebrations are popular. They begin on the Sunday before Lent and end at midnight on Tuesday. Typically, the people

take over the streets and party for three days. The highlight of the holiday is a massive parade through town, with floats, orchestras, and people in costume. The floats are built and decorated in advance by members of Carnival associations, and each float has a theme. All participants dress in special costumes, including the *boerenkiel*, a blue farmer-style outfit with a red scarf. Groups of people often decide together on a costume theme to wear to the parade. Carnival music is often sung in dialect. Businesses may close or cut back hours, and many people enjoy festivities in the cities of Den Bosch, Breda, and Maastricht.

Though not a holiday, the third Tuesday of September (known as *Prinsjesdag*, or Little Prince's Day) is the queen's opening of a new year of parliament; she sits in a golden coach and rides through The Hague, the seat of the government. Crowds of citizens gather on the streets to cheer as she passes; when she arrives, she gives a speech outlining the government's plan for the next parliamentary session.

## SOCIETY

### Government

*Head of State: King Willem-Alexander*

*Head of Government: PM Mark Rutte*

*Capital: Amsterdam*

### Structure

The Kingdom of the Netherlands is a constitutional monarchy. Amsterdam is the capital, but the government is headquartered at The Hague. The monarch is head of state and oversees the affairs of the kingdom, though in practice, the monarch's powers are mostly ceremonial. In addition to the Netherlands, the Kingdom also includes the countries of Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten, which have full autonomy in internal affairs, though the Netherlands is responsible for foreign affairs and defense.

The prime minister is head of government. The prime minister and other ministers are responsible to the bicameral parliament (States General). The prime minister is appointed by the king, usually from parliament's lower house (Second Chamber). A Council of State, of which the king is president, serves as an advisory body that must be consulted before legislation is passed. Legislation can be introduced either by the crown or the lower house of parliament.

Members of parliament's 75-seat upper house (First Chamber) are elected by the nation's 12 provincial councils. Members of the 150-seat lower house are elected directly by the people through a proportional representation system. Members of parliament serve four-year terms.

### *Political Landscape*

Many parties are active in the Netherlands, and several hold seats in parliament. Two major parties are the center-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the center-left Labour Party (PvdA). Coalitions are common in the Netherlands, even among parties with seemingly conflicting ideologies; for example, the VVD and PvdA currently comprise the ruling coalition in the government. Some political parties have adopted gender quotas.

**Government and the People**

Many freedoms are guaranteed by law, and citizens enjoy these rights in practice. The government takes active measures to combat discrimination of all kinds. Corruption is very low. Elections are free, fair, and transparent. Voter turnout in national elections was over 90 percent for two decades following the end of World War II but has since gradually decreased to an average of about 77 percent over the past two decades. The voting age is 18.

**Economy**

*GDP (PPP) in billions: \$699.7*

*GDP (PPP) per capita: \$43,300*

The Netherlands has a stable economy. Based on private enterprise, it is highly industrialized and efficient. The distribution of income is among the most equitable in Europe. Inflation and unemployment are moderate. Recent government efforts have reduced the budget deficit.

Although agriculture employs less than 3 percent of the labor force, the Netherlands exports food and large numbers of cut flowers and bulbs to Europe and other parts of the world. The Netherlands grows more than half of the world's flower exports. Ranching is a chief agricultural activity, producing meats, cheeses, and other dairy items. Leading industries include petroleum refining, machinery, chemicals, and construction. The Netherlands has also developed a strong economic base in computing, telecommunications, and biotechnology. Trade accounts for half of the country's gross domestic product. Tourism and banking are also key sectors of the economy.

In response to the 2008 global financial crisis, the government guaranteed Dutch bank loans and offered major Dutch insurance companies rescue packages. In 2011, the prime minister introduced budget cuts and reduced the country's budget deficit to be in line with eurozone standards. Prior to 2002, when the country adopted the euro, the currency was the *guilder* (NLG), also known as the *florin*.

**Transportation and Communications**

*Internet Users (per 100 people): 94*

*Cellular Phone Subscriptions (per 100 people): 114*

*Paved Roads: NA*

The public transportation system in the Netherlands is one of Europe's best. An efficient network of trains connects major and minor cities. Most people also own cars and prefer to use them for daily travel; however, the country's seven million cars mean traffic is a serious problem, and many choose to commute by bicycle or train to avoid traffic. Buses and streetcars are common in urban areas; Amsterdam and Rotterdam have subways. The country is divided into zones for public transportation. A universal ticket called a *Strippenkaart* may still be purchased at stations or from drivers or machines for use outside of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, though it is now almost completely replaced by the *OV chipkaart*, a card that has a chip onto which users can reload money through a variety of options, including online, at special vending machines, or at a select service desk. Users

may also choose to automatically reload their *chipkaart* when it reaches a low balance (around 5 euros). Students are entitled to a free *chipkaart*. Rotterdam is one of the world's largest ports and one of Europe's most important, handling close to one-third of Europe's sea transit.

The communications system is efficient and well maintained. Television and radio stations are privately owned, and there are dozens of newspapers and periodicals. The national radio and television associations affiliated with each station have certain backgrounds, such as liberal, socialist, Protestant, Catholic, or neutral. Cellular phone use is ubiquitous.

**Education**

*Adult Literacy: 99%*

*Mean Years of Schooling: 11.9*

**Structure and Access**

Dutch society considers education a high priority. At the age of two or three, children can go to *peuterspeelzaal* (preschool) or *kleuterschool* (kindergarten). Primary school starts at age five and ends at age twelve. Schooling is free and compulsory between the ages of five and sixteen, and partially compulsory until eighteen. If a student under eighteen misses too many classes, a civil employee called a *Leerplichtambtenaar* will talk to the student and parents to prevent it from happening again. If the student still does not comply, the family may incur heavy fines and a temporary freezing of government child support (*kindersbijslag*). In extreme cases, the child may be placed in a foster family. Public and private schools (some of them religious) share a standardized curriculum. There are also special education programs for students with serious disabilities.

Students are placed in one of four secondary school levels based on the results of a standardized test taken the last year of primary school. Secondary school begins with one or two years (depending on the program) of basic education; all students study the same 15 subjects in classes that emphasize practical application of knowledge. Some students stay at this level and take on internships to learn how to do unskilled labor, such as work in factories, supermarkets, and park departments. After this first year or two of basic education, students moving on choose among three different tracks: pre-vocational school, pre-university school, or a vocational school track that can also lead to university. Some people argue that Dutch children are forced to choose their profession too early, at an age when it is difficult to know what work they want to do.

**School Life**

Primary school children usually go home during lunch, but many schools also provide the option to eat lunch at school (called *overblijven*). Active and independent learning are emphasized in the Dutch school system. Dutch students often participate in group work and are encouraged to express and share ideas with each other. Students are also encouraged to think critically and evaluate lessons. It is generally acceptable for a student to question rules, and teachers grant students a certain amount of freedom. Students do not wear uniforms and may bring cellular phones to school (but must turn them



off during class). Students may get up to go to the bathroom whenever they need to, and teachers strive to create a casual and safe classroom environment.

Children in primary school do not have homework assignments, but secondary school students often begin with an hour of homework a day that builds up to three or four hours a day as the student progresses. Copying homework and cheating on tests are unacceptable and punished. Parents usually help children with their homework but gradually encourage them to become more independent.

### Higher Education

Depending on the program, students graduate from secondary school between the ages of 16 and 18. Overall, girls are more likely to attend higher education and are less likely to drop out than are boys. Only a small minority of Dutch students leave school without a degree. After graduation, a student can choose either to start a career or to continue schooling at a *Hogeschool* (higher vocational school) or university. The higher vocational degree is valued the same as a bachelor's degree. At 18, a student is entitled to at least partial financial aid from the government. Many students complain that financial aid is insufficient, especially for children of less wealthy parents. There are more than a dozen universities, the oldest of which, Leiden, was founded by William of Orange in 1575.

For *Hogeschool* and university, students usually move to another city, where housing costs can be expensive. They often move into student housing near their school. Student housing sometimes includes dormitories, though most Dutch students rent a room in a house with other students. In some major cities (most notably Rotterdam, The Hague, and Amsterdam), students may live in special housing made out of shipping containers (like those used for carrying cargo on trains). Working teenagers are more likely to get their own apartments, though some prefer to live in a student house with others.

### Health

Medical facilities are excellent and are subsidized by the government. Health insurance is mandatory; for people earning less than a specified amount, the government partially covers insurance and health care. Those making more than that amount must buy private insurance. The government also provides unemployment and disability benefits. The *huisarts* (family doctor) decides if a patient should see a specialist. For example, a woman cannot go to a gynecologist without permission from the *huisarts*. Cancer and heart disease are the two biggest health concerns.

## AT A GLANCE

### Contact Information

Embassy of the Netherlands, 4200 Linnean Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (877) 388-2443; web site <http://dc.the-netherlands.org>. The Netherlands Board of Tourism, phone (212) 370-7360; web site [www.holland.com](http://www.holland.com).

### Country and Development Data

Capital	Amsterdam
Population	16,877,351 (rank=65)
Area (sq. mi.)	16,040 (rank=133)
Area (sq. km.)	41,543
Human Development Index	4 of 187 countries
Gender Inequality Index	7 of 148 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$43,300
Adult Literacy	99% (male); 99% (female)
Infant Mortality	4 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	79 (male); 83 (female)
Currency	Euro

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