



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** The Netherlands is roughly the size of Massachusetts and Connecticut combined. It covers 16,036 square miles (41,532 square kilometers) and borders the North Sea. Western areas that have been reclaimed from the sea are called *polders*. In the past, windmills pumped water from the land, and dikes held back the ocean. Today, modern machines do the pumping, but about 930 windmills (out of an original 10,000) still dot the landscape. Close to 300 continue to function, mostly for tourists, but some mill grain or perform other work. However, because pumping has led to sinking land, water pollution, and problems with the water table, the government is buying large tracts of agricultural land in the reclaimed territory and returning it to nature. Some dikes are being destroyed, and marshes and wetlands are gradually being allowed to return to their original state. In the east, the land is above sea level and has a few hills. Grasslands used for grazing are common in the north. The climate 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.

**History.** Although its official name is the Kingdom of the Netherlands, some people know the country as Holland. However, calling the country Holland is not appreciated by the Dutch who do not live in either North or South Holland provinces. Until 10 B.C., there were Germanic tribes in the area who were ruled by the Romans. After the great European migrations at the time of the fall of Rome (A.D. 476), the Franks, Saxons, and Frisians settled there. They remained part of the Frankish Kingdom until A.D. 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 a Spanish monarch. 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 the world's leading maritime and commercial power. The Netherlands established trade stations and colonies in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Americas.

In 1795, French forces made the Netherlands a subordinate state, and Napoleon completely 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 Netherlands remained neutral during World War I but was invaded by Germany in World War II. After the devastations of the war, the country joined the United Nations (UN) in 1945 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. It also played an important role in European economic development and granted independence to most of its overseas holdings, including Indonesia and Suriname.

In 1980, Queen Juliana renounced the throne in favor of her daughter, Queen Beatrix, who is head of state today. The heir to the throne is her son, Crown Prince Willem Alexander. If he ascends to the throne, he will be the first male monarch since 1890. The United States and the Netherlands have enjoyed unbroken diplomatic relations since 1782.

## THE PEOPLE

**Population.** The Netherlands has a population of roughly 16.2 million, which is growing annually at 0.53 percent. More than

## Netherlands

40 percent of the 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 cities of the country: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague. The population is 82 percent ethnic Dutch. Much of the foreign population is made up of Turks (341,000), Surinamese (321,000), Moroccans (295,000), and Antilleans and Arubians (129,000).

**Language.** The official language is Dutch, a Germanic language. Frisian is also spoken in the northeastern province of Friesland. English, German, and French are commonly understood and spoken and are taught in the secondary schools. Flemish, a form of Dutch, is spoken in a region of Belgium called Flanders.

**Religion.** About 31 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Most Catholics live in the southern provinces of Brabant and Limburg. Another 21 percent are Protestant (mostly Dutch Reformed), 4.4 percent are Muslim, and 3 percent belong to other churches. The rest are not officially affiliated with any religion. The royal family belongs to the Dutch Reformed Church. The Netherlands, like many European countries, is a secular society, in which the role of religion has diminished steadily for some time. There is a strong tradition of maintaining the separation of church and state.

**General Attitudes.** There is a noticeable 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 good education. Social status is measured mostly by occupation. Dutch attitudes about society helped them create one of the world's most extensive welfare systems, which remains a high priority in the country despite the increasing difficulty of supporting it.

As a small trade-dependent nation, the Netherlands has recognized throughout history the importance of being internationally minded. It has a strong tradition of involvement in international affairs, primarily those in Europe since World War II.

Dutch openness to the world has made the people 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. Because of this feat and their pioneering spirit, the Dutch have a saying: "God made the earth, but the Dutch made the Netherlands." The Dutch value keeping their country clean. They separate organic waste from other garbage, which is collected in different containers, and they recycle paper and bottles.

The Dutch are 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 marriages.

**Personal Appearance.** European fashions are popular in the Netherlands. The Dutch enjoy stylish casual attire, as long as it is neat and clean. Traditional attire is rarely worn. The Dutch are famous for their *klompen* (wooden shoes or clogs). Traditionally, different *klompen* were created for different purposes, such as working in the fields, spending leisure time, and even getting married. *Klompen* are no longer worn 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 among 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, except among young people. Otherwise, the Dutch address others by their titles and family names. 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 to imply someone is crazy 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 and serve them 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. The visit usually goes 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 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 *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.** The Dutch have strong families, which are moderate in size. Most have only one or two children, but southern (Catholic) families tend to be a bit larger. Single parents are common. Grandparents live on their own or in a nursing home. People generally live close to extended family. Many holidays emphasize family gatherings. As is the case throughout Europe, both parents often work outside the home. However,

Dutch women are somewhat less likely to work outside the home than women in other European countries. Thirty-nine percent of the labor force is female. However, more and more younger women are entering the job market, partly because they have better access to education. Young people often leave home at age 18 to continue their education or to work. Children are expected to behave at home and at school. Parents help children with their studies but also encourage them in sports, music, and other activities.

**Dating and Marriage.** Dating habits are similar to those throughout Europe. Teenagers begin dating with group activities. Dancing, watching movies, and going to cafés are popular. Many young people get to know each other at clubs (sports, dance, film, etc.). Couples often live together before or instead of marrying.

For weddings, a large party (up to four hundred guests) in a restaurant is popular. A live band will play and guests will sing or tell something funny about the couple. Guests give a presents, which often include money because the bride and groom cover the expenses.

**Diet.** Bread or toast with jelly, Dutch cheese or meats, 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 for breakfast. *Krentenbollen* (raisin rolls) are also a favorite. Open-faced sandwiches are common for lunch, as is *kroket* (a deep-fried sausage). A typical meal may be *groentesoep* (vegetable soup), *gekookte aardappelen* (boiled potatoes), *karbonade* (a pork chop), *bloemkoel* (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 waffles), and many varieties of Dutch licorice. Restaurants in larger towns offer a wide variety of cuisine, 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.** The most popular sport is soccer. Tennis, field hockey, swimming, sailing, ice-skating, windsurfing, basketball, badminton, and other sports are also enjoyed. Many Dutch participate in cycling; nearly every person old enough to ride a bicycle has one. *Fietspaden* (bike paths) run throughout the country. People participate in sports through clubs. Games are organized locally, regionally, or nationally depending on the level of the players. Each sport has a national association that oversees its organization. *Football* (soccer) clubs have a million members; tennis clubs have 800,000.

Some people enjoy *korfbal*, a sport played on a grass field (or indoors) that combines some principles of soccer and basketball. Some residents of Friesland play *kaatsen*, a team sport similar to baseball in which players hit a small, soft ball with the hand. Poles were traditionally used for jumping over ditches, and pole vaulting (for distance, not height) is popular in the north. It is called *fiereljeppen*. 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 and parts of the sea. As many as 80,000 people participate.

The Dutch and tourists alike take advantage of sandy beaches on the North Sea, although it is windy and the water is often cold. Discos are popular among young people.

**The Arts.** There are more than six hundred museums in the Netherlands. Some of the world's most famous artists are Dutch, including Rembrandt, Vermeer, and 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's 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, Easter (Friday–Monday), Queen Beatrix's Birthday (30 Apr.), Ascension, Liberation Day (5 May), Whitmonday, and two days for Christmas (25–26 Dec.). Though not a holiday, the third Thursday of September is the queen's opening of a new year of parliament; she sits on a golden coach and rides through The Hague, the seat of the government.

Christmas festivities begin well before Christmas Day. The Dutch usually do not exchange gifts on Christmas Day; it 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 like a Catholic bishop, rides a white horse, and leaves gifts in shoes. Children place hay or a carrot in their shoes for the horse, and it is replaced with candy or a small present. *Sinterklaas* also rides in parades and visits children. His servant throws small pieces of *pepernoten* candy (gingerbread) for children to gather and eat. Family members and friends who exchange gifts at this time (evening of 5 December) must disguise or hide the presents. They are all anonymous (said to have come from *Sinterklaas*) and are accompanied by an amusing poem about the receiver. Good-natured teasing accompanies this festivity.

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, Carnival celebrations are popular. They begin on the Sunday before Lent and end at midnight Tuesday. Businesses may close or cut back hours, and many people enjoy festivities in Den Bosch, Breda, and Maastricht. The Dutch receive a month of paid vacation each year. Workers often take a week at Christmas, a week at Easter, and two weeks in the summer.

**Commerce.** Business hours are generally between 8:30 or 9 a.m. and 5 or 5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. Shops normally are open weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Saturdays from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Shops often close one morning each week, usually on Monday. Some also close at lunch, although not in large urban areas. Except in large cities, all shops close by 6 p.m. Amsterdam's so-called "night stores" are open later but charge higher prices. Many small shops are having to close. No businesses are open on Sunday, and there is no Sunday newspaper.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** The kingdom is a constitutional monarchy. The queen is head of state, but the prime minister (currently Jan Peter Balkenende) is head of government. A Council of State, of which the queen is president, serves as an advisory body that must be consulted before legislation is passed. Amsterdam is

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the capital, but the government is headquartered at The Hague.

Legislation can be introduced either by the crown or the lower house of parliament. The prime minister and other ministers are responsible to the bicameral parliament (States General). 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 (Second Chamber) are elected directly by the people. The voting age is 18.

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

Although agriculture and horticulture employ less than 6 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 accounts for 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. Banking and tourism are also key sectors of the economy. Prior to 2002 when the country adopted the euro, the currency was the *guilder* (NLG), also known as the *florin*.

**Transportation and Communications.** 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 six million cars mean traffic is a serious problem. 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* is purchased at stations or from drivers or machines. Rotterdam is one of Europe's most important ports, handling close to one-third of Europe's sea transit; it is the world's largest port.

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.

**Education.** Schooling is free and compulsory between the ages of five and sixteen. Children may be enrolled for an optional year at age four. Primary education ends at age twelve. Students may go to a Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, or "nonreligious" school, but the basic curriculum is the same. Secondary school begins with two years of "basic education"; all students study the same 15 subjects, which emphasize practical application of knowledge. After that, they can choose between different types of high schools, ranging from prevocational to preuniversity. The number of years varies with the program. Vocational schools train students in such professions as accounting, nursing, or teaching. Graduates of vocational and general high schools often enter apprenticeships. The govern-

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	5 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	7 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$27,190
Adult literacy rate	99 percent (male); 99 (female)
Infant mortality rate	4 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	76 (male); 81 (female)

ment subsidizes higher education; students receive financial aid according to their parents' income. There are more than a dozen universities, the oldest of which, Leiden, was founded by William of Orange in 1575.

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

### AT A GLANCE

#### Events and Trends.

- In September 2003, the Netherlands allowed doctors to begin prescribing marijuana for medicinal uses. However, laws governing cigarette smoking are becoming stricter. In January 2004, it became illegal to smoke in offices, trains, and many other public places.
- Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende's Christian Democrats won a majority of the seats in January 2003 parliamentary elections. Balkenende was initially elected in 2002, but fighting within his coalition party caused his government to collapse after only three months. The narrow win in 2003 allowed Balkenende to remain prime minister.
- Elections in 2002 were marred by violence as a gunman killed an anti-immigration politician in the middle of the campaign. However, the murder failed to silence debate over immigration. In February 2004, the lower house of parliament approved a bill that would tighten immigration laws and deport 26,000 asylum seekers. Large sections of society oppose the new plan.

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