

THE NETHERLANDS



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Holland: Windmills, wooden shoes, tulips, cheese, and great artists. In its 17th-century glory days, tiny Holland was a world power—politically, economically, and culturally—with more great artists per square mile than any other country.

Today, the Netherlands is Europe's most densely populated country and also one of its wealthiest and best organized. A generation ago, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg created the nucleus of a united Europe when they joined to form the Benelux Economic Union.

Efficiency is a Dutch custom. The average income is higher than in the United States. Though only 8 percent of the labor force is made up of farmers, 70 percent of the land is cultivated, and you'll travel through vast fields of barley, wheat, sugar beets, potatoes, and flowers.

"Holland" is just a nickname for the Netherlands. North Holland and South Holland are the largest of the 12 provinces that make up the Netherlands. The word Netherlands means "lowlands," and the country is so named because half of it is below sea level, reclaimed from the sea (or rivers). That's why the locals say, "God made the Earth, but the Dutch made Holland." Modern technology and plenty of Dutch elbow grease have turned much of the sea into fertile farmland. Though a new, 12th province—Flevoland, near Amsterdam—has been drained, dried, and populated in the last 100 years, Dutch reclamation projects are essentially finished.

The Dutch pride themselves on their frankness, and they like to split the bill. Traditionally, Dutch cities have been open-minded, loose,

How Big, How Many, How Much

- 13,000 square miles (a little larger than Maryland)
- 16.4 million people (1,250 people per square mile; 15 times the population density of the U.S.)
- €1 = about \$1.20

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and liberal (to attract sailors in the days of Henry Hudson). And today, Amsterdam is the capital of alternative lifestyles—a city where nothing’s illegal, as long as nobody gets hurt. From marijuana to prostitution, you can get it all—legally—in the Netherlands.

But contrary to nervous Americans’ expectations, Holland is safe. The buzzword here is “social control,” meaning that neighborhood security comes not from iron shutters, heavily armed cops, and gated communities, but from neighbors looking out for each other. Everyone knows everyone in this tight-knit neighborhood. If Magrit doesn’t buy bread for two days, the baker asks around. Unlike in many big cities, there’s no chance that anyone here could lie dead in his house unnoticed for weeks. Video surveillance cameras watch prostitutes, while prostitutes survey the streets, buzzing for help if they spot trouble. Watch the men who watch the women who watch out for their neighbors across the street

who watch the flower shop on the corner—"social control."

You'll find almost no language barrier anywhere in the Netherlands, as all well-educated folks, nearly all young people, and the majority of people in the tourist trade speak English. Still, take a few minutes to learn some polite Dutch pleasantries. Just like in Flemish-speaking Belgium, "Hello" is *hallo* (hol-LOH), "please" is *alstublieft* (AHL-stoo-bleeft), and "thank you" is *dank u wel* (dahnk yoo vehl).

In the Netherlands, you'll find basic Dutch fare, with plenty of cheese and bread. For some variety, try ethnic specialties from the country's former colonies such as Indonesia and Surinam. For dessert, sample a gooey, super-sweet *stroopwafel* (syrup waffle) or a dessert pancake (*pannenkoeken*).

Amsterdam is Holland's highlight. While the freewheeling capital does have a quiet side, travelers who prefer small towns can sleep in nearby Haarlem (see page *TK) and side-trip into the big city.

ACCESSIBILITY IN THE NETHERLANDS

Due to a strong commitment to equal rights, access for people with disabilities is generally good in the Netherlands.

The **Netherlands Board of Tourism** offers helpful resources. The Web site offers some accessibility information for people with disabilities, including a searchable database of hotels and other attractions (355 Lexington Ave., 19th floor, New York, NY 10017, tel. 212/557-3500, fax 212/370-9507, www.holland.com, information@holland.com).

Transportation

The Dutch Rail company publishes a leaflet called *Rail Travel for the Disabled*, available at larger Amsterdam stations.

To rent an adapted car or minivan, contact **Budget** (tel. 0800-023-8238) or **KAV Autoverhuur** (tel. 020/311-9811, www.kav.nl).

Organizations

The **National Association for the Handicapped** is available to answer questions about accessibility in Holland (Mon–Fri 9:30–13:00, closed Sat–Sun, tel. 020/291-6600).

Mobility International Netherlands provides information on international tours and exchanges for people with disabilities (Heidestein 7, Driebergen, tel. 034/382-1795, fax 034/381-6776, jaberend@worldonline.nl).

The Haarlem-based **Stichting Recreatie Gehandicapten** organizes travel in Holland for people with limited mobility (Boedapeststraat 25, tel. 023/536-8409, www.srg-vakanties.nl).