

# › Understand The Netherlands

## **THE NETHERLANDS TODAY . . . . . 252**

Netherlands is weathering the challenges in Europe well, walking the line between its stereotypical open-mindedness and tolerance and increasingly conservative pressures.

## **HISTORY . . . . . 254**

Wars, invasions, wealth, poverty, floods, gorgeous art and more mark the history of the Netherlands.

## **THE DUTCH WAY OF LIFE . . . . . 265**

Find out who the Dutch people are, with their dry humour and love of statistics.

## **DUTCH ART . . . . . 270**

Rembrandt, Vermeer and Van Gogh. And that's just the start of a rich legacy of masterpieces.

## **ARCHITECTURE . . . . . 277**

From cute gabled canal houses to the eye-popping designs of today, the Netherlands excels at architecture.

## **THE DUTCH LANDSCAPE . . . . . 282**

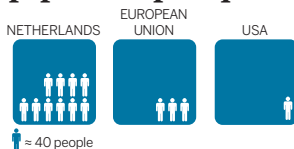
It inspired painters who found it anything but just flat. Find out how much of the nation should be under water.

## **DUTCH CUISINE . . . . . 287**

Food in the Netherlands is much better and more fun than you've heard. And the beer is superb.



## population per sq km



# The Netherlands Today

## Fast Facts

- » Population: 16.7 million
- » Area: 41,526 sq km
- » Land in tulip bulbs: 110 sq km
- » Per capita GDP: €40,040
- » Unemployment rate: 6.5% (2009)
- » Number of old windmills: 1200

Among the qualities the Netherlands is best known for is its famous tolerance. However, this idea of 'You don't bother me and I won't bother you' seemed under threat recently. Instead of a broad coalition government based near the centre of the political spectrum, the Dutch in 2010 shifted right. The coalition government formed that year included Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom, a far-right movement with a tough stance on foreigners living in – or immigrating – to the Netherlands.

During the next two years the government under prime minister Mark Rutte made a number of proposals that were a sharp break from previous Dutch policies. They weakened environmental regulations, slashed arts and culture funding and even passed what was thought to be a near-death sentence for the country's coffeeshops (where pot is sold legally). The formerly bedrock Dutch commitment to the European Union was openly debated.

But by the time an early election was called for in September 2012, it seemed that the Dutch political needle was heading back to the middle. Wilders' party went from 24 to 15 seats in the Dutch parliament and Rutte's centre-right Liberal party had to break bread with the left-leaning Labour party (led by a former Greenpeace activist) to form a government.

## Coffeeshops Saved?

In 2011 the Dutch conservative government passed a law that would have banned foreigners from coffeeshops and restricted their customers to a limited number of card-carrying locals. There was general alarm among marijuana users and civil libertarians and indeed a majority of the Dutch public. However, one of the reasons for its passage was the complaints

## Holland?

» 'Holland' is a popular synonym for the Netherlands, yet it only refers to the combined provinces of Noord (North) and Zuid (South) Holland. The rest of the country is not Holland, even if the Dutch themselves make the same mistake.

## Best In Print

» *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Anne Frank; 1952) A moving account of a young girl's thoughts and yearnings while in hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam. The book has been translated into 60 languages.

» *Netherland* (Joseph O'Neill; 2008) When a Dutch man faces the breakdown of his marriage in post-9/11 New York, memories of the Netherlands, cricket and a mysterious friendship complicate his life, yet repair his spirit, in this comically dark novel.