

Understand the Netherlands

THE NETHERLANDS TODAY 252

The centuries-old Dutch entrepreneurial spirit is thriving in the Netherlands, while tolerance remains a vital part of its politics.

HISTORY 254

At the heart of the country's history is its engagement with the sea: exploration, trade and keeping it at bay.

THE DUTCH WAY OF LIFE 264

Find out what makes the Netherlands such an open-minded, tolerant and successful nation.

DUTCH ART 269

The country's artistic legacy includes a roll-call of masters such as Rembrandt, Vermeer and Van Gogh.

ARCHITECTURE 276

Architecture in this design-savvy country spans from gabled Golden Age canal houses to eye-popping contemporary statements.

THE DUTCH LANDSCAPE 281

The Netherlands' famously flat, sub-sea-level landscape continues to shape life here today.

DUTCH CUISINE 286

The Dutch culinary scene is red-hot, with rising-star chefs, artisan producers and fabulous independent breweries.

The Netherlands Today

The Netherlands is one of the most upbeat, energetic and socially engaged countries in Europe today. Start-ups proliferate throughout the country, which is one of the world's leading enterprise hubs. Ecominded, tech-enabled initiatives such as solar-panelled bike paths converting energy for the electricity grid are getting off the ground, as are architectural statements that have unparalleled green credentials. And the nation is coming into its own as an epicurean destination, with sizzling-hot drinking and dining scenes.

Best in Print

The Diary of Anne Frank (Anne Frank; 1947) A moving account of a young girl's life hiding from the Nazis.

Amsterdam: A History of the World's Most Liberal City (Russell Shorto; 2013) An American transplant traces the evolution of his adopted city.

In the City of Bikes: The Story of the Amsterdam Cyclist (Pete Jordan; 2013) Amsterdam's evolution into the world's most bike-friendly city.

After the Silence (Jake Woodhouse; 2014) Noir novel in which an Amsterdam detective hunts a murderer in the city's tangled streets.

Best on Film

Oorlogswinter (Winter in Wartime; 2008) A boy's loyalty is tested when he helps the Dutch Resistance shelter a downed British pilot.

Zwartboek (Black Book; 2006) Explores some of the less heroic aspects of the Dutch Resistance in WWII.

The Paradise Suite (2015) A Bulgarian prostitute, a Swedish piano prodigy and a Serbian war criminal cross paths in Amsterdam.

Komt een vrouw bij de dokter (Stricken; 2009) Follows a modern Dutch couple after she discovers she's terminally ill and he goes on philandering.

Holland or the Netherlands?

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

Politics

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.

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 passed what was thought to be a near-death sentence for the country's marijuana-selling *coffeeshops*. The formerly bedrock Dutch commitment to the EU was openly debated.

But by the time an early election was called for 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.

The next Dutch general election, to elect the members of the House of Representatives, will take place no later than 15 March 2017.