

How Dutch are you?

Guides to Dutchness

Recently published by Xpat Scriptum Publishers are these two distinct and enjoyable handbooks to living in the Netherlands.

BY GIULIA
QUARESIMA

The Cycling Paradise

When it comes to the Netherlands, the bike or *fiets* is a key image. Riding a bike is truly the first stage to ‘Dutchification’.

The Cycling Paradise, written by Peter de Lange, is a fascinating introduction to cycling culture in the Netherlands. The book travels through topics such as how to get familiar with cycling, road rules, biking etiquette, and different types of bicycles—from traditional to electric, from shared to more quirky specialist bikes.

Newcomers to the Netherlands are often afraid to get on a bike, so this book collects expat testimonies of how many faced and overcame the fear and got their bikes out into the traffic. According to de Lange, it’s a matter of developing quick reflexes and learning the right body language—clearly communicate to others your intentions with eye contact, head and upper body movements, and use hand signals to indicate directions.

Learning this ‘language’ and becoming familiar with the traffic is worth it, as the bicycle is a great way to travel around the country. The book is full of colourful photographs that illustrate the Dutch cycling lifestyle, beyond simply as a means of transportation.



The *Cycling Paradise* contains a selection of beautiful cycling paths and routes edited by Robert van Weperen. A lovely example is the picturesque Winterswijk path (in Gelderland), a cycle tour through the landscape that inspired Piet Mondrian. The tour starts in front of Villa Mondrian where the painter spent his childhood and which now hosts many of his paintings and a pencil landscape drawing of the surrounding area. The 24 km route goes past the Strandbad natural pool to finish at the hamlet Het Woold, where riders can enjoy goat cheese, wines, distilled liquors, jams and chutneys.

This book is an essential guide to discovering the country beyond the well-known paths and becoming part of the cycling community.

The American Netherlander

Some internationals experience a cultural shock when arriving in the Netherlands. Seen by many as a liberal, tolerant and progressive country, newcomers may find certain Dutch conventions—or lack of—surprising. For some, the Dutch language is a hurdle for social interaction and job opportunities, while others find the unique work culture—particularly its lack of hierarchy or separation of work and personal lives—something to get used to.

A hilarious manual to understanding the country

Greg Shapiro's *The American Netherlander*, with its sense of humour and sharp eye for detail, is a good starting point to understanding life as an international in the Netherlands. The author is an American comedian, a member of comedy group Boom Chicago, presenter of the satirical Dutch programme *Comedy Central News* and author of two books now collected together in *The American Netherlander – 25 Years of Expat Tales*.

This book tells the story of Shapiro's personal cultural adventure and assimilation in the Netherlands, from when he first arrived 25 years ago and stayed for love. It is not a scientific guide, but a manual to understand and familiarise yourself with the country, using the author's personal anecdotes for a subjective and hilarious point of view.

Shapiro tackles Dutch common sense, a pragmatic approach to problem solving, openness and tolerance, multiculturalism, politics, education, and even customer service. While his personal experiences really bring out the humour and irony, he also shows understanding. For instance, the renowned 'Dutch directness' is really brutal honesty that isn't intended to hurt feelings.

Shapiro sees paradoxes and oxymorons in Dutch culture: How can Dutch identity be so independent-minded, yet also so obsessed with consensus? How can Dutch identity be so liberal and open, yet also so Calvinistic and conformist? How can Dutch identity be so proud, but then be so quiet about it? "Dutch police won't stop you for having an un-helmeted baby strapped to the front of your bike, like a human shield. In fact, Dutch police won't stop you if there is one kid on the front handlebars, one on the crossbar, two on the back rack, and another one standing on top of those for a playdate. But if they'd been riding at night without a light? That's a fine of 50 euros."

The second part of the book is a Dutch assimilation test, a collection of all the questions that should be included in the *Inburgering* exams. According to Shapiro, these reveal more than the exam ever intended. Give it a try and see how Dutch you are! «



About the author

Giulia Quaresima is from Italy and has lived in The Hague since 2018.