

Dutch customs and etiquette

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The Dutch have a code of etiquette which governs social behaviour and is considered important. Because of the international position of the Netherlands, many books have been written on the subject. Some customs may not be true in all regions and they are never absolute. In addition to those specific to the Dutch, many general points of European etiquette apply to the Dutch as well.

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The people

Dutch society is egalitarian, individualistic and modern. The people tend to view themselves as modest, independent and self-reliant. They value ability over dependency. The Dutch have an aversion to the non-essential. Ostentatious behaviour is to be avoided. Accumulating money is fine, but public spending of large amounts of money is considered something of a vice and associated with being a show-off. A high lifestyle is considered wasteful by most people and sometimes met with suspicion. The Dutch are proud of their cultural heritage, rich history in art and involvement in international affairs. Dutch manners are blunt with a no-nonsense attitude; informality combined with adherence to basic behaviour. This might be perceived as impersonal and patronising by other cultures, but is the norm in Dutch culture. According to a source on Dutch culture, *The Undutchables*, *Their directness gives many the impression that they are rude and crude—attributes they prefer to call ‘openness’*.^[1] Asking about personal information from others will not be considered impolite. *What may strike you as being blatantly blunt topics and comments are no more embarrassing or unusual to the Dutch than discussing the weather.*^[1] Phrases that are considered to be basic etiquette, such as saying ‘I beg your pardon’, ‘I’m Sorry’, ‘Excuse me’ or ‘Thank you so much’, are not so commonly used by Dutch people compared to people in other countries. This behaviour is considered to be rude by other cultures, but it is considered as normal behaviour by Dutch people.^[2]

Greetings

- Phrases saying hello or goodbye differ between regions, but are generally understood everywhere.

However, the use of dialectal forms, for example the Brabantian "*houddoe*", Limburgish "*haije*", and Gronings "*moi*", links the speaker to that region.

Conversation and language

The Dutch and foreign languages

- Internationally, the Dutch are considered to be proficient at speaking foreign languages. This is because the Netherlands has a high standard of language education which focuses on the international position of the country: teaching of English starts in the last 2 years of elementary (or primary) school, and is an obligatory part of the national exam in all high schools. German and/or French are also taught and are often chosen as an end subject in which a final exam is taken in high school. Spanish or Chinese are also chosen, by some students, as end subjects, in addition to other languages. In higher forms of high school education, Latin and Ancient Greek are also taught.
 - According to a census, about 85% of Dutch people are able to speak reasonable English although the accent can be marked. The fluency differs from individual to individual.
 - German is the second most common foreign language and is spoken by nearly 70% of the population, particularly in the East and the South.
 - French is the third foreign language, but it is considerably less common than English and German.
- Addressing the Dutch in their native language may result in a reply in English. This phenomenon is humorously discussed in White and Boucke's *The UnDutchables*: "*If you take a course in the Dutch language and finally progress enough to dare to utter some sentences in public, the persons you speak to will inevitably answer you in what they detect to be your native tongue. They love to show off the fact that they have learned one or more languages.*"^[3] An other opinion is that the Dutch want to make it more easy for you and want to get to the point quickly. This can be frustrating for those who wish to improve their Dutch, while those who are competent in Dutch may find replies in English patronizing. But Dutch people will perceive a foreigner trying to speak Dutch as someone who is having difficulty expressing himself, or may welcome the opportunity to try their English. They may also preemptively try to avoid miscommunication by speaking your native tongue, if they consider themselves fluent enough.

Humor

Dutch humor has changed over the centuries. In the 16th century, the Dutch were renowned for their humor throughout Europe, and many travel journals have notes on the happy and celebratory nature of the Dutch. Farces and joke books were in demand and many Dutch painters chose to paint humorous paintings, Jan Steen being a good example.

The main subjects of Dutch jokes at the time were deranged households, drunken clerics (mostly of the Roman Catholic Church) and people with mental and/or physical handicaps. A main theme was the reproof of immoral ethics: the 'Vicar's wagging finger'. However, at the end of the 17th century the Dutch

lost their sense of humor. The Dutch Republic was in decline, the Dutch Reformed Church denounced laughter and advocated sober lifestyles, and etiquette manuals appeared which considered it impolite to laugh out loud. This continued into the 1960s: during World War II, American soldiers were instructed not to tell jokes to the Dutch as "they wouldn't appreciate it".^[4]



"Fighting peasants" by Adriaen Brouwer.

Famous Dutch comedians include Hans Teeuwen, Herman Finkers, Wim Sonneveld, Toon Hermans, Bert Visscher, Youp van 't Hek, Najib Amhali, Theo Maassen, Kees van Kooten, Sara Kroos, Brigitte Kaandorp, Karin Bloemen, Claudia de Breij, Tineke Schouten, and André van Duin.

Traffic

The Netherlands has one of the lowest death rates caused by road traffic in the world.^[5] The Dutch driving test is one of

the toughest in the world and there is a mandated minimum number of hours driving with a licensed instructor. However, this does not necessarily translate into a pleasant driving style. Many Dutch drivers tend to be impatient or even aggressive, making Dutch traffic a somewhat daunting experience for many foreigners. Note that not all points mentioned here are true for all Dutch drivers.

- Somewhat rude gestures to point out perceived flaws in driving style are quite common in some parts of the Netherlands.
- Overtaking manoeuvres can take a long time due to the fear of spot checks by unmarked police cars in slower lanes.^[6] Similarly, lorries will attempt to overtake another lorry even if the difference in speed is minimal, often resulting in a long line of suddenly braking traffic behind the overtaking lorry if the road has two lanes.
- Dutch drivers change lanes often and will overtake and/or swap lanes often, even if mildly endangering or hindering other drivers.^[7]
- Lane change indicators are used rather randomly. Sometimes they're not used at all, at other times they're only switched on for a very short time and/or when already halfway through changing lanes.^{[8][9]}
- Traffic rules state that vehicles have to drive in the right-most available lane. Unnecessarily staying in the left lane for too long may lead to a fine. It may also result in tailgating and/or overtaking on the right-hand side, both of which are forbidden and therefore finable as well.
- Most Dutch drivers are careful with their own vehicles (even cosmetic damage is avoided and repaired as soon as possible), but can be somewhat inattentive to the property of others.
- Dutch drivers are very alert of trajectory speed controls (permanently installed on over-head beams) as well as other speed traps, and will, if necessary, rapidly slow down to the speed limit in all lanes when approaching one.^[10] Most radio stations will announce spot speed checks, but do not generally announce trajectory speed controls.
- Cyclists and pedestrians are well protected, and tend to treat traffic rules as guidelines. Cycling is

extremely common, and cyclists will overtake cars on the right hand side if they can (especially when cars are waiting for a traffic light, in which case it is legal to do so). In practice this means that at all times, a cyclist may be present or turn up on the right hand side of the car. This needs to be monitored carefully. As a consequence, Dutch drivers tend to drive somewhat removed from the right hand side of the road in urban areas. Under Dutch law, cyclists and pedestrians are weaker traffic participants and strong evidence of accident inevitability by the stronger party is required to avoid high claims/fines. Dutch law guarantees a minimum of 50% compensation to cyclists/pedestrians above 14 years of age and 100% for children.^[11]

Miscellaneous

- Many Dutch surnames start with a *tussenvoegsel*, i.e. a prefix such as 'de' (the) or 'van' (from). These are neglected in alphabetical order. So a Dutchman named 'de Vries' will say his last name starts with a 'V', and you'll find him in a telephone directory under that letter. In addition, if the first name or initial is mentioned, 'de' or 'van' starts with a lower case letter. If the first name or initial is absent, the prefixes start with capitals (Jan de Vries/J. de Vries *versus* meneer ('Mister') De Vries/De Vries).^[12]
 - In Belgium the prefixes are considered an integral part of the name and as such are written with a capital even when the first name is present^[12] (Jan De Vries), and names are sorted accordingly (under 'D'). Also, many names are written without spaces (Vanderberg *versus* Van der Berg).
- Weddings can range from small private affairs to elaborate parties, depending on the preferences of individuals. Dutch law only recognizes weddings as legally binding when performed by a government official, but a church ceremony may be included in the wedding festivities. Most people have a civil wedding, often conducted in the town hall. In the Netherlands there is a statutory requirement for couples intending to marry to formally register that intention with officials beforehand; allowing people who may object, time to learn of the intended marriage. This process is called "ondertrouw".
- The majority of the Dutch are irreligious and religion in the Netherlands generally considered as a very personal matter which is not supposed to be propagated in public.^[13]

See also

- Etiquette in Europe
- Intercultural competence

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- Dutch customs (<http://www.stevenroyedwards.com/dutchcustoms.html>)
- International site on etiquette (http://www.ediplomat.com/np/cultural_etiquette/ce_nl.htm)
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