The Netherlands (Nederlanden)

The Netherlands is a constitutional democracy comprised of the 12 provinces of Groningen, Friesland, Drente, Overijssel, Flevoland, Gelderland, Utrecht, North-Holland, South-Holland, Zeeland, North Brabant, and Limburg. Two of these provinces, North- and South- Holland, collectively make up Holland. Because of the maritime and economic might of these two provinces during the Dutch Golden Age in the 17th century, the Netherlands came to be known internationally as Holland. Although The Netherlands is still frequently referred to as Holland, the official name of the country is the (Kingdom of the) Netherlands. The name reflects that it is a low-lying country, with 1/3 of its territory below sea level. In the UK, The Netherlands is occasionally called the “low countries,” and the French and Spanish names for The Netherlands are a literal translation of that. In Dutch, the country is called either “Nederland” (pronounced NA-DEER-LAHNT) or its official name, “Koninkrijk der Nederlanden,” which means Kingdom of the Netherlands.

QUICK FACTS
Population: 16.7 million
Area: 16,033 square miles (Size of Maryland)
Capital: Amsterdam (780,000)
Languages: Dutch (official), Frisian (official)

GEOGRAPHY
The Netherlands is bordered by the North Sea (to the north and west), Belgium (to the south), and Germany (to the east). The country is split into two parts by three main rivers, which act as natural barriers between the fiefdoms and have created a long-standing cultural division.

ETHNICITY
Dutch 80.7%, EU 5%, Indonesian 2.4%, Turkish 2.2%, Surinamese 2%, Moroccan 2%, Caribbean 0.8%, other 4.8%.

RELIGION
Roman Catholic 30%, Protestant 20% (Dutch Reformed 11%, Calvinist 6%, other Protestant 3%), Muslim 5.8%, other 2.2%, none 42%. Although the Netherlands has undergone extensive secularization and a decline in church membership, religion continues to be a central part of Dutch society.

FAMILY & CUSTOMS
The Dutch see the family as the foundation of the social structure. Families tend to be small, often with only one or two children. The Dutch are disciplined, conservative, and private. They do not draw attention to themselves and do not value the accoutrements of success highly prized by other western societies. They dislike displays of wealth, as they run counter to their egalitarian beliefs. Even in hierarchical organizations, every person has a right to their opinion and to have it heard. The Dutch are highly tolerant of individual differences, and raise their children without gender biases.

Most Dutch only use first names with family and close friends. They shake hands with everyone individually, including children. Very close friends may greet each other by air kissing near the cheek three times, starting with the left cheek. Gifts are usually opened when received. Do not give pointed items, such as scissors or knives, as they are considered unlucky.

EDUCATION
In Dutch elementary schools, children learn Dutch, English, mathematics, social and environmental studies, citizenship, social and life skills, healthy living, political and religious studies, and sports and movement. Dutch secondary education prepares students for vocational or higher education. At the secondary level, students attend one of four types of secondary schools, ranging from pre-university education to practical training. Pre-vocational schools (VBO) offer programs in care and welfare, engineering and technology, business and agriculture. The government focuses on curriculum coordination between businesses and educational institutions to ensure that universities and vocational schools produce top workers and entrepreneurs.

The Netherlands has one of the world’s oldest and most respected systems of higher education which dates back to the 16th century. The 2012-13 QS World University Rankings include 11 Dutch universities in the top 200. According to the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) report, The Netherlands ranks number 10 in reading and number 11 in both science and mathematics out of 75 countries polled.

The Dutch Royal Family
The Netherlands: Relationship to Europe

The Dutch United Provinces declared their independence from Spain in 1579; during the 17th century, they became a leading seafaring and commercial power, with settlements and colonies around the world. After a 20-year French occupation, a Kingdom of the Netherlands was formed in 1815. In 1830, Belgium seceded and formed a separate kingdom. The Netherlands remained neutral in World War I, but suffered German invasion and occupation in World War II. A modern, industrialized nation, the Netherlands is also a large exporter of agricultural products. The country was a founding member of NATO and the EEC (now the EU) and participated in the introduction of the euro in 1999.

After the Second World War peace and stability in Europe were sorely needed. European countries decided to work together on economic matters, on the principle that countries that depended on one another would not go to war. In 1952 the Netherlands joined Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg and West Germany in establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).

In 1958, former Dutch Agriculture minister Sicco Mansholt was appointed European Agriculture Commissioner. He would spearhead the introduction of economies of scale in agriculture and the development of a common European agricultural policy. The Netherlands has always been a major beneficiary of these reforms. Thanks in part to the EU, it is one of the world’s largest exporters of agricultural products.

Every year the Netherlands issues a report, ‘The State of the European Union’, in which the government looks back on the most important developments during the past year and looks ahead to the European agenda for the year ahead.

There are 26 members of the European Parliament from the Netherlands. The Netherlands’ main export partners are Germany, Belgium and the UK, while its main import partners are Germany, China and Belgium. The Netherlands will hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU from 1 January to 30 June 2016. The key principles of the Dutch Presidency will be: a Union focused on essentials, innovative growth and jobs, and connecting with citizens.

DUTCH IN THE USA

Dutch settlement in the Americas began in 1613 with New Amsterdam, which was later conquered and renamed New York by the British. During the American War of Independence, the Dutch were active allies of the American revolutionaries. In fact, the Dutch were the first to salute the American flag, and thus the first to acknowledge the independence of the United States in 1776. According to the 2013 American Community Survey, an estimated 4.5 million Americans claim total or partial Dutch heritage. Today, the majority of Dutch-Americans live in Michigan, California, Montana, and, of course, New York.