



They're impossibly tall. They love bread. And they can be so direct, you'll spend your first months in Holland wondering why everyone is so mean. Ahhhh... the Dutch... it's a great culture in many ways (those dikes and legalized weed are pretty great!) but just like during any period of integration, you're going to come across peculiarities in this country that will leave you scratching your head. As one foreigner talking to another, let me guide you a bit, dear student, as you embark on another academic year here in the lowlands.

If you've flipped back to the English pages of this first issue of the new, academic year, it's a pretty safe bet that you're not Dutch. You're new here or at least new-ish and your home - its sights, sounds, tastes and, of course, your loved ones - is far away. It's a time of adaptation and adjustment - the time of the year when you have to re-shift your focus. And if you're brand new to Holland, it may also be a time of adjusting to a new campus, city and culture. I'm also a foreigner - an American girl who fell in love with a nice tall Dutchman in China - so I'm intimately acquainted with this process. With that in mind, I've created the list below from my personal collection of observations to help you be prepared for some of the quirks you might encounter in your time in the Netherlands.

It will rain. A lot. Get used to it. If you haven't done it yet, delay no longer. Go out and buy yourself a raincoat. And rubber boots. There will come a day when you're trudging across campus in a downpour of biblical proportions where you'll thank me.

Even though the weather is generally rainy, gloomy and downright awful, the Dutch are inexplicably optimistic about it. It's almost like they have no long OR short-term memory when it comes to their own climate. You will often hear expressions such as "Oh well, it's raining today but I heard it'll be beautiful by the end of the week!"

Don't believe them. I can't stress this enough when I say THIS IS THE WEATHER HERE! Don't be a sucker like me and spend your entire first year in Holland believing them and thinking it's an off year or something.

If you don't have a taste for milk, bread, cheese, peanut butter and little chocolate sprinkles, lunch time will be a challenge for you.

The Dutch are eye-wateringly direct

Let's talk about that directness, shall we? The Dutch are not only eye-wateringly direct, they also take great pride in stripping away everything from their communication with others that they deem unnecessary. They want to "tell it like it is" and that could mean you will one day be on the receiving end of some criticism that will feel pretty harsh. If you're from a culture where social communication is a bit more complex (I'm looking at you, Chinese students), the infamous Dutch directness might send you running back to your room to cry into your pillow. Fear not. One day, you'll probably come to appreciate this directness and even employ it more in your own dealings with others. (Which will then cause a whole host of problems when you return back home.)

Don't tell Dutch people that you eat two (or even three!) warm meals a day. They will look at you askew and firmly inform you that that's the quickest way to get fat. I'm not exactly sure what the relationship is between the warmth of your food and calorie content, but apparently it's something only explained in Dutch nutritional guidelines.

If we have a particularly harsh winter this year - freezing temperatures, snow, cold, pelting rain (please refer back to #1) - every Dutch person will start getting excited by the prospect that this will be THE YEAR to have an Elfstedentocht (11 city tour). This is another way they console themselves about the weather. They strap on ice skates and take to the canals to skate impossibly long distances in arctic temperatures. And they call it entertainment.

Frikandel tastes like meat-flavored bike tires and its origins are highly questionable. Do. Not. Eat. It. On the other hand, the French fries are amazing. Eat them as much as humanly possible.

The Dutch pride themselves on their mastery of other languages - particularly English - and it's true that you could spend your entire academic career here never learning a single word of Dutch. However, you're a world citizen, right? And as such, it's a good idea for you to learn at least three words of this guttural language. Those

words are: leuk, lekker and gezellig. (To pronounce that last one, imagine you need to clear an enormous ball of wet oatmeal from your throat.) You can almost have an entire conversation with a Dutch person if you simply occasionally nod your head and utter these three words, in turn, at appropriate intervals. Trust me... it works like a charm.

The Zwarte Pieten (Black Peters) are Sinterklaas's helpers and um... er... you know what? I'm just going to let you discover this one for yourself.

You now live in the south of the Netherlands and this is Carnival territory. In a few, short, months, you'll be expected - nay, required! - to dress yourself in a ridiculous outfit, get drunk and act like a complete idiot. Enjoy!

You will begin a love affair with your bike

No matter what your previous relationship was with bikes, you will begin a love affair with them in Holland. Really. I lived in China for 2 ½ years and what did I miss the most during my time there? Mijn stalen ros (my steel horse). Okay, so, biking in the rain is something we could all do without, but on a beautiful day (they do come, I promise) there's almost no better way to clear your head than to be

out on the handy Dutch bike paths criss-crossing this country. It's transportation, exercise and fun all wrapped up into one neat little package.

When we do have a break in the almost unceasing grayness of Dutch weather, the locals become sun-worshipping pagans. They will strip off layers of clothes, smile spontaneously at strangers and find any and every excuse to get to the closest terrace for a drink.

Those sunny days of unplanned drinks on a terrace are a rarity, so enjoy them. For most of your life here, you'll need to kiss spontaneity goodbye. The Dutch live their lives according to their agenda and impromptu social engagements rarely happen. Want to have a quick coffee with a Dutch friend? She or he will flip open their agenda and pencil you in for that meeting three weeks from Monday. I spent a solid year fighting this cultural norm, but I soon realized that if I wanted to have any sort of social life, I had to adapt. You will, too.

And there you have it! I could go on and on but, unfortunately, there just isn't time for it. I have a previously planned date with a friend for some French fries. I think I'll bike there.

Text | Angela Daley