



Judgement or curiosity? What the Dutch think of expats

By Patrice Postuma

How do the Dutch perceive and feel about expatriates? Curious, Patrice Postuma hit the streets to interview a number of passers-by to find out.

The interviews usually started with questions such as: are you familiar with the term expat/expatriate and how do you look at foreigners in The Hague? In some cases, responses led to discussion of in-depth political vision and Dutch perceptions about foreigners' behaviour.

One general conclusion drawn from the interviews is that the Dutch differ in their opinion of what is an expat and what is a foreigner. After the Dutch colonies of Indonesia and Suriname became independent (in 1948 and 1975, respectively), huge numbers of immigrants travelled to The Netherlands. Dutch interviewees no longer consider these two groups of immigrants as foreigners. Rather, they seem to have assimilated well into Dutch society. This is applicable to Chinese immigrants too: there are Chinese restaurants all over the country. In contrast, the Dutch look at Turkish and Moroccan immigrants quite differently.

So, in some cases, before the interview could get underway, I had to explain the term 'expat or expatriate'. Not all interviewees were familiar with the term, in some cases simply because they did not know any. This seemed to depend on which area of The Hague they lived in. As I anticipated, those who lived in Scheveningen/Statenkwartier and Wassenaar were very familiar with expats.

Interviewees who said they knew expats immediately mentioned the international companies that employ expats, such as Shell. The majority of interviewees have the perception of expats all living together in a community like Wassenaar. After all, the American School is situated there and the

My first interviewee found expats to be generally pleasant and respectable people. Another interviewee mentioned two expat families living in the same street she lives in, one French, the other Belgian, but noted they do not make any effort to learn Dutch culture or mingle with the Dutch. "When greeting them they do not answer," she said, adding that she never sees any locals visiting them, nor did they introduce themselves to neighbours when they first arrived. In contrast, she described an Iranian colleague, a former refugee, who had assimilated very well and became a teacher in a Dutch school.

A musician I interviewed responded to my questions by saying: what are we talking about? I work with foreigners constantly, every day, whether they are expats or not, I do not know and honestly I do not care, it works and that is what counts. He told me his partner is from overseas, but is not an expat.

In addition, the musician told me he lives in the centre of The Hague and the majority of the inhabitants of his street are from overseas. He could not tell who is an expat and who is not.

The Dutch also seem to differentiate between expats who make a living and contribute to the Dutch economy and those who do not. Those who do seem to be more accepted than those who do not. In general, however, expats are perceived as a population that is well-off financially. After all, the company pays! More Dutch entrepreneurs in The Hague area also discovered this phenomenon, which has encouraged them over the last decade to increasingly target the international com-

Interviewees responded enthusiastically when I asked them what they would like expats to experience. They unanimously mentioned *haring* (raw fish with onions) and *hagelslag* (chocolate sprinkles that the rest of the world only uses for cake decoration). Some also nominated *kroket* (a croquette made from mashed potatoes and meat), *gele vla* (custard that the Dutch eat for dessert) and – to celebrate a birth – *beschuit met muisjes* (Dutch rusks with sprinkles), specifically blue and white sprinkles for a boy and pink and white sprinkles for a girl. One of the interviewees visited her expat colleague who had just become a mother and was very disappointed not to be served the much-hoped-for *beschuit met muisjes* along with her coffee, having forgotten her colleague was not Dutch.

Other local traditions to be recommended are Sinterklaas (Saint Nic) and hutspot (mashed pot with unions and carrots). Visiting the Keukenhof, Kinderdijk, Amsterdam, het Binnenhof, de Veluwe. Painters Van Gogh and Rembrandt. The social system, hanging out the schoolbag and flag when successfully finishing high school exams, Dutch engineering and the water management. Interestingly, none of the interviewees mentioned wooden clogs, windmills or cheese.

Patrice Postuma is a freelance Human Resource advisor and business trainer. ppostuma@3pinternational.com. Patrice is also an ACCESS trainer (since 2005).