

THE AMERICAN NETHERLANDER



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25 YEARS OF EXPAT TALES

Greg Shapiro



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This book is a work of non-fiction, based on the life, experiences and recollections of the author. The author reserves the right to adapt or streamline details for the sake of privacy or expediency. Quotes, events and details are not a reliable source of journalistic accuracy; rather, they are subjective tools used to tell a story. The author has stated to the publisher that, while certain details may have been changed, the essential details are based on true experience. Portions of the text have appeared in stage shows at Boom Chicago Comedy Theater, as blog pieces on Dutchnews.nl, and in The XPat Journal. The author extends his gratitude for the help he received in developing the material.

INTRODUCTION

The American Netherlander is an anthology of my first two books. *How to Be Orange: an Alternative Dutch Assimilation Course* was inspired by my solo theater show. And *How to Be Dutch: The Quiz* was a collection of all the questions I thought *should* be included in the actual Dutch citizenship exam. By now, both printings have sold out, thank you very much. And since I'm celebrating 25 years in the Netherlands, I thought I'd do a rewrite of both books and include them in one volume.

If you're looking for an official guide to Dutch culture, this is not it. If you're looking for one man's completely subjective and utterly biased impression of Dutch culture, then you have come to the right place.

FOR INEZ

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PART ONE

PROLOGUE

Celebrating 25 Years in Holland... sorry, the Netherlands

I came to the Netherlands in 1994 to take a job for just one summer. Twenty-five years later, I'm still here. So, fair warning: the Dutch can be addictive. I suppose I am the classic definition of an expat. I grew up in one country, I moved to another country, and I stopped. I came here thinking, "Nice country. Shame about the language..." But I stayed anyway. I came for work, I stayed for love, and – when I have to – I speak the language called *Dunglish*.

I happen to live in Amsterdam, and a lot of this book takes place there. But I've spent time in all corners of the Netherlands, from Den Bosch to Den Helder, from Limburg to Leeuwarden, from Scheveningen to Schiermonnikoog. And I love it all! (Except Kerkdriel, sorry.) The fact is there are 12 provinces in the Netherlands, and 10 don't have *Holland* in the title. This gets pointed out within 1.5 seconds, when you perform a show in, say, Eindhoven. "Hello, Holland" quickly results in "Ja, hallo! This is Brabant!" I even had trouble when I performed in Friesland. I said, "Friesland is my new favorite province," and someone yelled: "It's not a province! This is an occupied territory!" (Don't mess with Friesland).

When I got here, the country couldn't make up its mind what to call itself. Interestingly, neither could I. Growing up, my name was *Greg Shore*. That was my step-father's name. But it was Dutch folks who



would interrogate me about my authentic name: “What’s your birth name? Shapiro? Then THAT’S your name!” I grew up thinking *Shapiro* sounded too ethnic, too Jewish. But Dutch people I encountered universally replied, “*Shapiro*: cool name.” What better way to say, “Welcome?” And my name was not the only one that would change.

When I came to the Netherlands, the country marketing said ‘Visit Holland.’ The logo of the tourism board was a tulip saying ‘Welcome to Holland.’ And the in-flight KLM magazine was called *The Holland Herald*. It’s no wonder most people fail to realize the name of the country is *the Netherlands*. Maybe it’s just too long, too clunky, not great for marketing. But then came a little viral video called ‘Netherlands Second,’ which turned out to be pretty good advertising for this country’s true name. Soon after that, came *the Netherlands winning Eurovision!*

And now – for the first time in at least 25 years – the Dutch government is ditching the term *Holland* from all official correspondence and re-branding as *the Netherlands*.

You’re welcome.

CHAPTER 1

AMSTERDAM DAY ONE

“Look at our legs! Look at our legs!”

– The Amsterdam Welcoming Committee

The question was: “Would you be willing to give up your acting career in Manhattan to do comedy in Amsterdam for a start-up theater called *Boom Chicago?*” Since I was living on tips and paying rent via credit card, the answer was an immediate YES. When you’ve tried being broke in New Amsterdam, you might as well try being broke in Old Amsterdam.

In 1994, my idea of Amsterdam was the one shared by most Americans, I suppose: Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Anne Frank – and then sex & drugs and downhill from there. In America, if we hear about the Netherlands at all, it’s that Dutch people are all drug-doing, drug-dealing, baby-killing, grandpa-murdering, left-handed pedophiles. Once I got here, I realized it’s not true! According to most Dutch people: “That’s Belgium.”

I remember getting off the plane at Schiphol Airport and thinking there must have been a mistake. It was such a modern, sleek, well-designed airport. And the baggage carts were actually larger – LARGER! – than their American counterparts. Not to mention they were free of charge. I had seriously misjudged the Netherlands. The signs were in English. The ads were for Samsonite. And the first thing I saw out of Customs was a Burger King. I thought I was in Pittsburgh.

And the charm offensive continued. Instead of having to surrender my baggage cart, I was able to take it right down to the train platform. It was my first time on a walkway escalator, and the handbrake on my baggage cart actually worked. Within one hour, I'd already started to redefine my definition of *Second-World Country*. That term was now reserved for JFK International in New York.

Before leaving Schiphol Airport, I took care of my To-Do List of Now-Anachronistic technology. I went to a place called the GWK Currency Exchange to trade my US Dollars into a totally made-up currency called *Guilders*. Even at the time, Guilders seemed whimsically antiquated. One of the coins they gave me said '2-and-a-half.' I supposed it was from back in the days when people counted on their two-and-a-half fingers. I also bought a public transport pass called a 'strip card,' since access to Dutch trams somehow involved 'stripping.' The alternative was 'Riding Black' – which to me sounded like a stripper name. And lastly, I procured a phone card for making phone calls at these things called 'public phone booths.' These triangular, glass enclosures were also known as 'phone boxes,' or – in Dutch – *pissoirs*.

CULTURE SHOCK

From the modern Schiphol Airport, I then took the train into Amsterdam Centraal Station, and there it was! The rundown former glory I'd been expecting. Stepping out of the train, I quickly realized the smoking section was 'Everywhere.' The smell of cannabis was not limited to the coffeeshops. And – instead of ferry boats on the water side of the station – there was a veritable junkie wasteland. Nowadays, on the water side, there are dedicated bike lanes and harbor-side cafés. In 1994, there was a busy road, urine-soaked concrete, and a waterfront no-man's-land. Locals deemed it "too dangerous even to buy a junkie bike." In the train pulling into Amsterdam CS, you could look down and see prostitutes performing live sex shows, and junkies shooting up. It was an urban Garden of Earthly Delights – the Amsterdam version of Hieronymus (from Den Bosch) Bosch.

After exiting the station on the Amsterdam Centrum side, I had to dodge a team of hotel hawkers. Hotel hawkers were from the era when hotels thought the best way to make a first impression was with shaggy, unwashed stoners pitching to tourists as they came out of the station. After the hawkers, came the Damrak. The Damrak circa 1994 was a messy barrage of tacky signs for tourist-trap shops, made worse by barricades from complicated street construction. So, basically the same as ever.

Outside Centraal Station, I remember my real first impression was the bikes. I had never seen so many bicycles in one place! It seemed like there were more bikes than people. ...And that was 100% accurate. It still is. We don't know how the bikes are repopulating. Government officials are constantly trying to thin the herd.

And then there were the people *riding* the bikes: they were so tall! I'd spent most of my life being the tallest one around. Now maybe I could feel more at home. And specifically, I was noticing the *women* riding the bikes. Was it me, or were they showing a LOT of leg?

I didn't realize it at the time, but it was the 4th of April and the first really warm day of the year – an occasion which is now known unofficially as *Rokjesdag*. 'Short skirt day.' The day that Dutch women collectively look in their closets and decide, "Yes. I'm going with the short skirt." For me, it was like a kick-line parade of Dutch legs saying, "Welcome! Welcome to Amsterdam!" How could I not stay?