

No One Is a Foreigner In Noord-Brabant Simply a New Neighbour

For anyone living in the Randstad, the term expat is all BUT unfamiliar. It seems that every street corner and service provider has added it to its marketing strategy. For the residents of Noord Brabant, according to Richard l'Ami of the North Brabant Development Agency (BOM), it is an unfamiliar word, and concept.

Newcomers are welcomed in the same warm manner in which Brabanders approach life itself - with curiosity, joie de vivre and the determination to find a way of balancing work and leisure. Much of this difference may well lay in the province's history, as well as a mindset which is particular to this part of the country.

You might be tempted to say; "Noord-Brabant I can locate on the map of the Netherlands, but where is South-Brabant then?" If you were in the early years of Dutch primary school the answer would be straightforward: "...there is no south dear, north is here in the Netherlands, and Belgium has only Brabant." With this answer a child is immediately satisfied -

the adult perhaps perplexed. Well, the non-Dutch adult that is, for the Dutch learn in their history the how and why of this particularity. For the non-Dutch, an overview of this how and why may well shed light on why Noord Brabant is so unique in the Netherlands, and more importantly on why today the term expat, or even expatriate, are unknown concepts in this part of the country.



A Little History

Geographically, Noord-Brabant once included territories and populations of what are today the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. Historically, Brabant is intimately linked to the history of the Burgundy and Hapsburg dynasties, as well as to that of The Holy Roman Empire, while it is also linked to the history and people of what were then faraway lands - France, Spain, Austria, Germany, Luxembourg - and their royals, religions, and wars, not the least of which was the 80 Years War. Underpinning all of this was an evolving tradition of industriousness, diplomacy, civil liberties and resilience. Until the 17th century, the area which is today Noord-Brabant was part of a Duchy on the rise, the Duchy of Brabant, which itself covered what is the present-day province of Noord-Brabant, the three

Belgian provinces of Antwerp, Walloon Brabant and Flemish Brabant, and the Brussels-Capital Region.

From the 11th to the 15th centuries, this Duchy, through conquest and diplomacy, extended its influence and became one of the most prominent regions of the Low Countries. Its capital was Brussels, while Antwerp was its central merchant port. In the late 16th century, Brabant became the battleground for the struggle between the Protestant Dutch Republic and Catholic Spain, which occupied the southern part of the Netherlands. Following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which ended the Eighty Years War between Spain and the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, attempts were made to introduce Protestantism. Noord-Brabant resisted this, however, and though today the role of Roman Catholi-



cism has been diminished, its influence on the character of the peoples and the region remains strong.

For many Dutch people, it is the Roman Catholic past and influence that gives the people in this part of the country, Brabant and Limburg, their particular manner of being - open, relaxed, welcoming, fun-loving and congenial - which is captured by the expression *bourgondische gezelligheid*. Yet, if one looks at the history and sees how many different people, rulers, and populations have been through and contributed to the history of the province, it may well be that this too has had its effect on their manner of being. As early as the 17th century, French and English historians were already expressing amazement at Brabant's 'pleasing mixture of joie de vivre and tolerance'.

With such a rich history of different cultures, and a long tradition of welcoming neighbours from different 'countries' into their province, its population tends to view newcomers in a different light; not as transients but rather as new neighbours, contributors to their own prosperity. In its modern rendition this means the province is used to the arrival of newcomers and that there are no 'expats' in Noord-Brabant - simply new neighbours who speak another language and bring with them new cultural habits.

Brabant Today

According to the BOM, in a publication entitled *Europe's Heart of Smart Solutions*, "...there are more household contents unpacked than packed for removal in Brabant." It is not

PROVINCE PROFILE

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