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Spring, Flowers and Lessons in Culture

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TheHagueOnline has asked me to write articles for their website, so here I am—Dutch, enthusiastic and having to cope with my own bluff on being able to write articles. What on earth should I write about?, I thought.

Now sitting here, with a view from my office desk overlooking the spring blossoms, what else can I think of than writing about spring weather and flowers, on a sunny day like this?

By the way, did you know that ‘the weather’, ‘vacation’, ‘diseases’ and ‘sex’ (rather than sexual diseases) are the most discussed topics among the Dutch during a birthday party? That is for the women. For men, there’s also cars and soccer. No really, what else can you do sitting in that funny circle of chairs in some Dutch person’s living room while trying the cheese with pickles and bitter balls that are passing by? (Culture lesson nr. 1.)

So the weather and flowers. Are you enjoying the Afrikaantjes, Spaanse Margriet and Franse Lelie in your Dutch neighbour’s garden? Pretty foreign names huh... for flowers that are usually being exported from the Netherlands. But prices for a bouquet of flowers are much lower than in your home country. (Lesson nr. 2: cheap is a key word for the Dutch.)

Well, let me tell you a little secret about flowers. Did you know that the tulip, which the Netherlands is renowned for, is actually not a Dutch flower? (Lesson nr. 3.) Around 1600, a Dutch professor imported the flower from Turkey. The area between Leiden and Amsterdam, the Bollenstreek, has many farmers growing tulips and other bulbs, and between March and May you can enjoy the colourful fields of these bulbs in blossom. If you’re lucky, you have a beautiful view of the multicolour carpet while landing at Schiphol Amsterdam Airport by plane.

Anyway, the Dutch became famous for tulips. So you cannot pass a flower shop without seeing them in all possible colours, usually having exotic names or names of famous people. Even Hillary Clinton and Mickey Mouse have their own tulip! Did you know (Lesson nr. 4) that tulips keep growing once you put them in a vase? Years ago I demonstrated it to an American friend by measuring the flowers on day 1 and day 5. Only then she did believe me.

I can tell you many more secrets about the tulip, but that will leave you nothing to discover for yourself. So buy some flowers every week to learn more. The Dutch usually bring flowers when they visit a friend (lesson nr. 5). In the meantime I will think about my next article for you. Perhaps not about culture but a bit more businesslike—we’ll see.

Tomorrow I will pay my Turkish stepmother a visit. I will probably buy her a bunch of flowers, perhaps tulips.

Enjoy the spring and the flowers!

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