

treatment

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THE HAGUE, Netherlands — Few would quibble with the view that the Dutch are generally well-liked around the world. But within the Netherlands, it seems some citizens have a particular view of their compatriots in the Hague that is less than flattering.

“They think we are snobs,” explains local guide Remco Dorr, a dapper 30-something gentleman, attired in a stylish cravat.

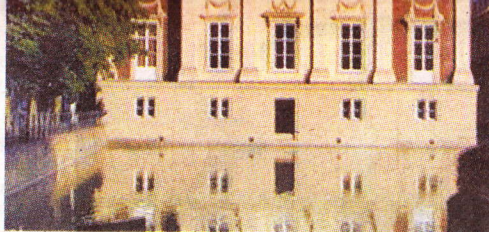
“You can tell by our language,” he says, drawing out every syllable for emphasis. “We speak what you call the Queen’s English, so it’s quite ... nose-in-the-air.” The Hague, seat of the Dutch government, and home of the International Court of Justice, is also where Queen Beatrix is based. Her home is Huis ten Bosch Palace (House in the Woods Palace), while she works from Noordeinde Palace, which we pass on a walking tour.

“We’re quite posh in the Hague, a-b-s-o-l-u-t-e-l-y,” Dorr emphasizes again.

That “posh” reputation is nothing new. Until the 19th century, the Lange Voorhout, still one of the most beautiful tree-lined boulevards in the city, was the place where the aristocracy regularly gathered in their finest apparel to see and be seen.

“This was the street you drove your carriage ‘round and ‘round,” Dorr says. “And if you look at old pictures of this street, it was really only a queue of carriages.” Apparently one German king so enjoyed the boulevard, he later created a similar version in Berlin.

Lange Voorhout Palace later became a working pal-



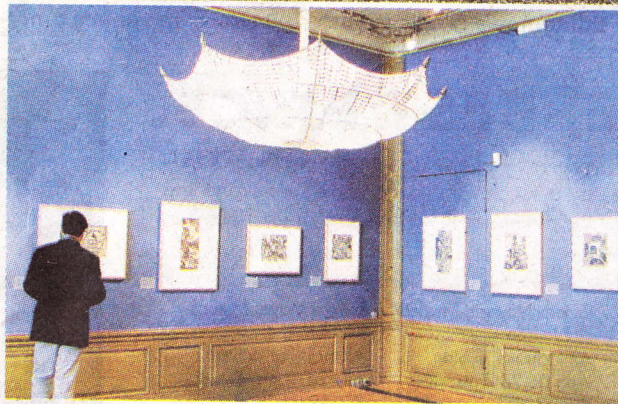
Despite its elegant exterior, the Mauritshuis Museum, above, gives off a homey vibe.

ace for three successive Dutch queens. Today, the 18th-century building, maintained in its original condition, is a museum (called Escher in the Palace) devoted to the work of the most famous Dutch graphic artist, M.C. Escher (1898-1972). If you like intriguing drawings that play with perspective, you’ll enjoy it. A chance to see the chandeliers alone is worth a visit. They’re shaped like animals and other objects.

If this truly is a city of snobs, as some assert, one would expect it to meet certain standards. It should have notable restaurants for example, and the Hague has several, including a few Michelin star-rated establishments.

Good hotels? For starters, there’s the historic five-star Hotel des Indes, which is the preferred accommodation of world leaders, and the Steigenberger Kurhaus Hotel, a palatial beachfront property that has hosted everyone from Marlene Dietrich to Harry Belafonte and the Rolling Stones.

World-class museums and galleries? Personally, I’d start at the Mauritshuis, with its renowned Golden Age masterpieces, including works by Rembrandt, Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Bregmel the Elder. Running through Aug. 22 is “The Young Vermeer,” which includes the three earliest paintings by Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer, the first time they’ve been shown



together in the Netherlands.

Although he was probably unaware of it, my guide’s constant references to snobbery had me looking for signs of it in people I met and places I visited. I found no hint of it,

however, at the Mauritshuis. Quite the contrary, it’s one of those rare galleries that exude a welcoming vibe reminiscent of home the moment you step through its doors. Perhaps, it’s the warm rich colours or the

fact it’s more skeptical about the claim of “460 public parks and gardens.” If that number includes all the green spaces hidden from public view, perhaps it’s possible.

Dorr shows me one such place, near Grote Kerk, called a *hojfe*. We enter through a dark green door that looks as if it would lead to apartments, but actually opens into a beautiful grassy courtyard bordered by trees, flowers and vines. Surrounding this tranquil green space, is a low-rise housing complex. It was established by a wealthy woman in the 19th century to provide her retired servant (and as it turned out, the servants of her friends as well) a place to live.

It’s something I never expected to find and Dorr tells me many locals aren’t aware of its existence. Yet there are more than 100 others like it throughout the city.

During the tour, I begin to wonder whether my guide carries a hint of that trait he commonly attributes to his fellow citizens. Let’s see, there is the matter of his attire — very elegant. His manner of speech? You could call it “upper crust” but I suspect it’s largely a put-on for my amusement.

And what about the fact he failed to show up at our appointed meeting time this morning? (I get it, real snobs don’t wait for others, they must be fetched!). He did appear promptly, however, soon after I made inquiries at the tourist office.

Engaging and knowledgeable, Dorr (or should that be Monsieur Dorr?) also has a sense of humour and I can’t imagine him taking offence. On second thought, he might even consider being labelled “snobby” or “posh” a badge of honour. Truth is I couldn’t have had a better guide.

IF YOU GO

to the Netherlands

MORE INFORMATION

For general tourism information, check denhaag.com or holland.com. For details on Steigenberger Kurhaus hotel, see kurhaus.nl. For Hotel des Indes, check luxurycollection.com/thehague.

One of the rooms at the Escher in the Palace Museum. Note the umbrella-shaped chandelier.

DIANE SLAWYCH PHOTO

fact it’s so easy to navigate.

Of course, there are plenty of other ways to spend time in The Hague: Browsing in trendy shops, lazing on the amazingly long, wide sandy beach in Scheveningen, or admiring the Art Nouveau architecture that was popular at the turn of the last century. The Hague has more examples of it than any other Dutch city.

“What’s quite strange here is that if you’re from the posh