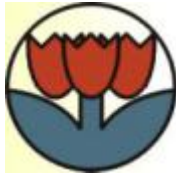


International Women's Club South-Limburg



Newcomers Handbook 2002

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Introduction

Welcome to Limburg! We hope these tips will be of help to you in settling in this little piece of the Netherlands. Our aim is to give you a few pointers based on our collective, practical experiences in this area. This handbook was put together by an English and an American IWC member, so some of the tips and information may or may not apply to you. There are of course a number of useful guides available about living in the Netherlands, but be warned – Limburg is not like Amsterdam!

Some things you will immediately notice are the innumerable dialects from village to village, the Limburg pie (yummy), incessant lateness (at least 15 minutes), the all encompassing Carnival (pre-Lent party time) and an obsession with window cleaning.

Much ado about Maastricht

(From the International Herald Tribune, March 3, 2001)

Tucked into the southernmost tip of the Netherlands and squeezed between the Belgian and German borders, Maastricht has a rich cultural heritage, varied architecture, excellent museums and, thanks to its large and vocal student population, probably more karaoke



bars than any other city this side of Tokyo.

Today, Maastricht's location makes it convenient for North European art collectors, but the town's geographical situation has been the cause of much marauding over the centuries. Founded in the fourth century on the site of a Roman bridge, Maastricht has been besieged 21 times. It was

sacked the by Spanish in 1579, annexed by the United Provinces in 1632 and besieged by Louis XIV 50 years later. Taken over by the French in 1748, Maastricht only finally became Dutch in 1830.

Tumultuous times Maastricht's warring past is evident in its substantial surviving fortifications, which can be visited by groups with a local guide. The heart of the city, meanwhile, houses several important museums. Looking like a stout metallic rocket ready for takeoff, the **Bonnefanten** museum opened on the eastern side of the Maas in 1995; the museum was deigned by the Italian architect Aldo Rossi. The Bonnefanten's collections cover German, Italian and Low Country painting, sculpture from the Middle Ages to the 17th century and contemporary works by European and U.S. artists, including Beuys, Broodthaers, Kounellis, LeWitt, Mangold, Signer and West. Small, charming and housed in a 16th century cloister, the **Spanish Government Museum** (Spaans Gouvernement) is as interesting for its architecture as it is for its contents—several room devoted to local 17th and 18th century furniture and decorative arts. Fossil-lovers can sate their curiosity at the city's well-furbished **Natural History Museum** while lovers of dolls and their houses may admire the 400 or so historical dolls on view at the Poppenmuseum at Grote Gracht 41. The **Afrikacentrum**, located in Cadier en Keer offers a display of masks and statuettes, as well as a workshop where visitors can make jewelry and toys. The Historic Printing Museum gives an overview of the process invented by Gutenberg in 1434. The Maastricht Wine Museum possesses a permanent collection of everything necessary for changing grape juice into wine and bottling it; a tasting session is included in its modest entrance fee.



Church treasures

Unlike the rest of the country, the south of the Netherlands remained predominantly Catholic. Maastricht has some particularly fine churches whose decoration survived the Reformation. Among them is Saint John's (Sint Janskerk) a 14th century Gothic church containing impressive frescoes and funeral statues of the city's great and good; in addition, Saint John's bell tower offers fine views. Saint Matthew's is another 14th century church; its interior, however, is more modern and subdued than Saint John's. The Basilica Our Lady (Onze Lieve Vrouwebasiliek) has a treasure of reliquaries, silverware and statues, as well as richly embroidered textiles—in particular, the cope said to have been that of Saint Lambert, a former bishop of Maastricht. The most singular and impressive exhibition in Maastricht however, is the treasure kept in the basilica

dedicated to Saint Servatius (Basiliek van St. Servaas), a bishop of the city who died in 384. The towered basilica stands on the western side of the large cobbled Vrijthof market square, in the heart of the old city, and its collection of Communion vessels, carved ivories, paintings, processional crosses, reliquaries and textiles is one of the finest in Europe. Several pieces—including a pectoral cross, staff, chalice and key in precious metal and semiprecious stones—once belonged to the patron saint of the city himself. Saint Servatius's reliquary, a large and magnificent 12th century casket in intricately worked repoussé gold and gems, is the undisputed star of the show.

Starting up?

The tourist information service is called the VVV. You can find their offices in many locations. The **VVV in Maastricht** is the key office for South Limburg.

More and more towns have their own websites that are worth investigating. Try [www.\(cityname\).nl](http://www.(cityname).nl) (some have English-language pages as well).

The **Gouden Gids** is the equivalent of the Yellow Pages. When used with your Dutch-English dictionary, you'll be amazed at all the information you'll find.

Each town or city publishes a free local 'city guide' (stadsgids) which has all sorts of useful, important information. They also print a 'community page' once a week in the local newspapers which you should check out regularly. They often use the papers as the key mode of communication (rather than sending out individual household letters). These should be delivered to your home. If not, check with your local town hall (gemeentehuis).



If you have an appointment at the town hall, or other governmental office, be sure to ask beforehand which documentation you need to bring with you. Don't expect

information to be volunteered! If you don't ask the right question you won't get the information - no matter how obvious it may seem to you. Therefore, especially when dealing with any bureaucratic situations, take the time to draw up a list of questions first. Never assume!!

Make use of your country's consulate. Most countries require that you register with a consulate once you move abroad (the majority of consulates are located in either The Hague or Amsterdam), so be sure to find out what is required of you. Many have websites and some will even send information about living in the Netherlands directly to you.

A list of television and radio stations will be included in your package of information from the cable company. What's available depends on where you live. TV guides can be purchased in the supermarkets and bookstores.

If you want to stop receiving the tons of advertisements that come pouring through your mail slot, you can pick up a special sticker from the town hall or post office. 'Nee/Ja' means no non-addressed ads, yes to free weeklies/papers. 'Nee/Nee' means you will receive mail specifically addressed to you, and nothing else.

You are expected to recycle on a serious scale! Paper is generally picked up at your home once a month, and every so often, a chemical pickup is made (check those free weeklies or ask at the town hall). Glass, tin (blik), juice packs (tetrapak), clothes and plastic need to be brought to recycling bins which are located near practically every supermarket. (Fizzy drink and most beer bottles for which you pay a deposit should be returned to the

supermarket for a refund.) If you cannot find an appropriate recycling bin, or for large items, get info about the dump (milieupark) at the local town hall office.

Language

Do your best to learn at least some Dutch. Look in the yellow pages (Gouden Gids) under Talenonderwijs. There are courses to suit everybody. If the times/days don't suit, ask around. Private tuition is often available. Tips: The Language Centre (**Talencentrum**) of the University of Maastricht has a very good program which is highly recommended.

Leeuwenborgh offers one of the least expensive Dutch courses (though time consuming) in South Limburg, though for some strange reason it is not listed in the yellow pages under talenonderwijs. It also offers computer classes etc.

English is not as widely spoken here as in Amsterdam, although many locals may answer you in English as an opportunity to practice their own language skills.

Once out of the big cities, a basic command of the Dutch language will work wonders in helping you mix with the local community and handling all the boring domestic chores that inevitably arise re builders, painters, plumbers, etc. And don't worry, your efforts will be appreciated.



Integrating

Ironically, in order to feel welcome in your neighbourhood, YOU need to invite your neighbours over first. There won't be a welcome wagon waiting for you. Though they are terribly curious about you, most of your neighbours will barely say hello until you make the first move. So, invite your neighbours over for coffee. The sooner the better. And if you bake, make something yourself. They will be terribly impressed and you'll earn precious 'brownie points' for later. Neighbours, while not necessarily being your best friends, can prove a valuable source of information and support, for example, if you are looking for a cleaning lady, a babysitter or a gardener. Neighbours are also always ready to explain why people put storks and straw men and women in their front gardens (ask them!).

Register with the office at the local town hall (you've probably already done this as part of your relocation set-up).



Check out the local libraries. Many have small but useful collections of English books (especially fiction) and offer a good opportunity for meeting people. The libraries in Sittard and Maastricht (**Centre Céramique**) are particularly worth investigating.

If you really want to integrate, then join a local club. The Dutch have clubs for everything, including sports, music, walking, drawing, etc. You name it, there's a club for it. If you speak a little Dutch, breaking into the 'circle' is naturally a little easier.

It takes a long time to make friends here, so be patient. Just keep smiling and saying hello and never be afraid to make that first move (over and over and over again).

Using the phone

Emergency numbers: 112 for serious emergencies and 0900 88 44 for reporting more minor things to the police.

Answer your phone with 'met' followed by your family name or '(your name) speaking'. Granted, if you answer with 'met', they'll most likely expect you to continue speaking Dutch, so only use it when you're ready. It is considered rude if you don't say who you are when you answer the phone as well as when you are calling.

Children

There are a few international schools in the area (English speaking). Two popular primary schools are the **Joppenhof** in Maastricht and **AF North International School** in Brunssum. The Joppenhof is an English language school, though it is part of the Dutch school system. The AF North school is a military school which admits civilians on a case by case basis. Both schools charge a fee. Check with your town hall for a list of all the schools in your area. Dutch schools are very good about dealing with non-Dutch speaking children, especially English speaking children. The goal is to fully integrate the child into the school, so the child will of course be expected to learn Dutch along the way (another

good reason to learn Dutch yourself!). Each school is different of course, so feel free to shop around.

School vacations vary from school to school, so don't assume that your children will have the same vacations if they are in different schools. Hang on to the schedule they give you when school begins and don't lose it!

Once children are 2 years of age (or 2 ½ in some towns), they are eligible to attend pre-school (peuterspeelzaal). There are often waiting lists, so sign up well in advance.

Childminders (gastouders) are available, but they do not go through the same security checks that you might expect in your home country. See Kinderopvang in the Yellow Pages for a full list of the options in your area. Babysitters are best found through the local grapevine. They can be as young as 13, so specify if you would like someone older.



There are plenty of play areas available both indoor and out. Some cost money, others are free, though they pretty much all close for the winter. Check out the Yellow Pages for those that stay open all year round. Belgian playgrounds are almost always open (Bokrijk, in Park Midden Limburg is a shining example).

There are not very many after-school activities for children under the age of 4. Occasionally, activities are available for 4 to 6-year-olds, but most clubs are open to children over the age of 6. Swimming lessons are very popular, but there are long waiting lists, so sign up early (some waiting lists are as long as a year!).

Health

Register with a local GP (huisarts). Ask for an explanation of the Green Cross office (Groene Kruis Consultatie Bureau). Each area has a Green Cross office which carries out routine health/developmental checks on children (including vaccinations) and offers a range of other ancillary health services to adults. Both the GP and the Green Cross are the best first-line sources of information regarding health questions. Dutch GPs tend to be 'reactive', not 'proactive'. If you prefer the latter, be prepared to get pushy and to know your rights! You are allowed to shop around somewhat for doctors, so if you're not satisfied, look into finding a different one.

Register with a dentist (tandarts). Check your insurance, as not all healthcare packages automatically include full dental care. Again, the trend is towards 'reactive' care rather

than 'proactive', so you need to request services rather than expect them to be offered to you.

Hospitals, insurance, etc. Check out where the First Aid/Emergency Department (EHBO) is at the local hospital – you never know when you may need it. Have your insurance details with you at all times as nothing happens without them. Once you've had dealings with a hospital, you will be given a medical ID card (poliskaart). Have it to hand every time you visit the hospital. The two key types of insurance are 'obligatory' (ziekenfonds) and 'private' (particulier). Ask your policy provider to explain the details to you.

Getting around

Buy an atlas/map of all the streets in Limburg (provinciale stratenplan). You can find one at petrol stations and some book stores (Bruna). It is invaluable when finding your way to other IWC members' houses for coffee! Maps for all villages in your region can be found in the Regional Guide (Regiogids) which should be distributed to your home along with other telephone directories. Also, at the entrance to each village in the Netherlands, you will find a street map (follow the brown 'info' signs).

In the cities it's often easiest to get around by bike. But be sure to have a good lock and an old bike. Don't bring your favourite racing or mountain bike into the city as it will go on a 'walk about'! Another option is checking your bike in at a guarded bike park (fietsenstalling). They are not always that easy to find, but they are reasonably priced (about 1€) and monitored by security officers. Inquire at bike stores.



The buses use a prepaid ticket system. Strips of tickets (strippenkaart) can be bought from post offices (which nowadays are often hidden in Bruna newsagents) and certain retail outlets. One ticket has a number of 'strips' that allows you to ride on the bus for that number of 'zones'. You can choose among various numbers of strips per ticket when you buy.

The more 'strips', the cheaper the individual strip is. The bus driver stamps the number of strips that you use on each bus ride. You can also pay cash to the driver, but then the price is slightly higher. A special Interliner service runs between the major cities. Check out their website for **timetable details**. It's in Dutch, so keep your dictionary handy.

Trains are an efficient and cheap way to get around with lots of deals for off-peak travel and discount cards. The system is afflicted by the same problems as most other cities in matters of delays/personnel shortages, etc., but overall it functions very well. Major stations may have an additional office for international travel/advice. There is a website which includes **timetables and travel information** (with an English page as well).

Walking is one of the national pastimes in this part of the country. You will see coloured poles all over the place. Visit any VVV to get a map of walks in the local area and explore. It's what Sundays are for!

When driving a car, you are expected to have your license and ID with you at all times (and if going abroad, for example, to Belgium, your passport too). You are allowed to drive here with a foreign driver's license, but only for a limited period. After that, you'll need to acquire a Dutch driver's license (sometimes requires taking lessons or even the test). The rules vary depending upon your country of origin. Check with your local town hall (gemeentehuis) for details. If you have a foreign car be sure to check how long it is legally allowed on the road with its original number plates. The police do have occasional blitzes and will check out your residency terms!

When parking, be sure to buy the right amount of parking time from the meter. The wardens are very strict and will give you a ticket with great pleasure. If a meter doesn't work, don't park there! They are within their rights to ticket you! Always check the time restrictions when you are somewhere new as the rules vary regarding shopping evenings (koopavonden) and Sundays. Some parking-meters only take the Chip card. This is a feature of many bank cards (gold, square shaped chip). Ask your bank to explain it to you (quite simple once you get the hang of it). 'Pay after you park' parking garages, which are few and far between, will give you a ticket when entering (at the Vrijthof you can even enter with your bank card and use it again on exit). When departing, before you even return to your car, you must pay (using your ticket) at one of the central parking-meters (parkeerautomaat).

Speeding tickets can be an unpleasant introduction to Dutch life. You will rarely get pulled over by a patrol car. Rather, a camera will take a picture of you (flash!) speeding along and then a ticket will arrive in the mail a time later (sometimes months later). Speeding tickets are very expensive, so be sure to watch out for, and abide by, the speed limits. Motorways are especially tricky as the limit changes from 120 to 100kph with some (but little)



warning. The motorways heading in to the Randstad (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht) area are particularly notorious.

The **ANWB** (the major road-users' association in the Netherlands) is a good starting point for information about maps, rules etc. Their website has many handy features, including a route planner (in Dutch, but very straightforward).

Shopping

Although it may not appear so, the shopping hours have improved radically in Limburg over the last five years. As a general rule, the shops are closed Mondays or Monday mornings, have a late night on Thursday, and are closed all day on Sundays. There are lots of exceptions to these rules, especially in smaller towns and villages, so be sure to note down the opening times when you first arrive and keep track of changes.

Cash is the magic currency in the Netherlands, but you can also 'pin' (the money is directly debited from your account on when bank card is swiped and personal code entered). Bills are often paid by giro slips (a payment slip attached to the bill); by bank transfers (overschrijvingen – a book of slips you can get from your bank to fill out as and when you need to make payments); and by direct debit (the increasingly favoured route). Internet banking is available, but not at every bank.



Credit cards are not widely accepted here (restaurants and petrol stations if you're lucky), and the terms of use may be very different from your home country, so check the small print carefully! Businesses will often have pictures of the cards they accept stuck to their storefront windows. When in doubt, ask.

Be sure to check how to pay **BEFORE** you purchase anything. It is not unusual to be asked for cash on very large purchases, including those delivered to your home (such as furniture, carpeting, etc.), ridiculous though it may seem. Also check beforehand what the delivery terms are (which can be very long).

Hema is a Dutch institution. They are famous for their low prices and their **WIDE** variety of products (ranges from sausages to underwear to lamps and makeup). Go in and explore. **Blokker** is a good all-round shop for domestic odds and ends. Drogisterij, (Chemists/drugstores) like DA, Kruidvat, Etos... sell body care products and 'over the counter' medicines but you will need to visit an apotheek for full pharmacy services.

You can find English language books at most bookstores, but usually only pocket fiction. De Slegte is a large bookstore chain (one in Maastricht is at Grote Staat 53) which sells new as well as second hand books, lots available in English. **Vroom & Dreesman** (V&D) has a selection of English language magazines (mostly British editions).

If you'd like an English language newspaper, there are two newsagents of note. One is opposite the train station in Maastricht and the other is off the market in Maastricht. Some English-language newspapers have home delivery service (pricey and not necessarily timely since they are usually via mail), such as the **International Herald Tribune**.

Dutch supermarkets are a breed apart. Explore them and accept them for what they are, otherwise you will expire from frustration! Service is zilch, so its find it yourself, pack your own bags, weigh and price your own produce, etc... All trolleys require a €0.50 coin.

If you feel you need more variety, try one of the Maximarkets in Belgium. Carrefour is a giant supermarket, situated just north of Liège. (Motorway E 25 towards Liege, turn onto E40 (ring) towards Brussels, take first exit (Haccourt) on the bridge and you can see it already on the right.)

Air Miles are very important to the Dutch, so expect to be asked if you want any when you are shopping. You need loads to get any benefit, but if that's your style, then collect away! Many common Dutch businesses make use of Air Miles, so check at any V&D, Albert Heijn, Shell or ABN Bank if you'd like to sign up (if they don't ask you first).



Most supermarkets have their own free discount saving card system. You may not be entitled to the special price displayed without it. (klantenkaart/spaarkkaart/bonuskaart)

Some supermarkets (Albert Heijn) will ask you at the checkout if you save stamps ("Spaart u zegels?"). These stamps are used as a sort of savings account which can later be used to buy products and/or get cash back. Don't say yes unless you know what you're doing – it costs money to 'save' them.

If you are stuck for food supplies on a Sunday, you can try the local gas station, or the Albert Heijn at the Maastricht train station. In Belgium they have little bread dispensing machines (broodautomaat)!

Most towns have weekly markets (some larger than others) offering a variety of things. Local markets are full of surprises and are one of the best places for people watching.

Most markets have a wide range of products ranging from avocados to bike parts, and some specialize in certain items. For example, the Maastricht market on Friday mornings is famous for its fish, the Sittard market on Thursday morning is famous for its selection of fabrics and the Geleen market on Saturday mornings is famous for its fresh produce. Go and explore them all!

Local farms are good places to find cheap and fresh produce, so be sure to check them out as well.

Speciality shops come and go and they tend to be on the pricey side, but they can be a gold mine when trying to prepare a favourite dish (or satisfy a homesick tummy).

Speciality stores in the area

Toko shops are places to find typical Asian ingredients. Some have lots of fun stuff, so be sure to check them out. Maastricht has Toko shops on the market and close to the train station. Check your local Regional Guide (Regiogids) for your area.



The Wereld Winkel (literally, ‘world store’) has an ever-increasing supply of ‘international’ foods, especially Indonesian, Indian and African. You can find one near you by consulting your Regiogids.

Reform Winkels are the Dutch health food stores and are a great place for teas, spices, organic foods, vegetarian supplies, etc.. Again, consult your Regiogids for one near you.

Felicetti Markt is a rather large Italian speciality shop. It’s address is: 579 Rijksweg, Maasmechelen, Belgium (main road between Lanaken/Maasmechelen). Telephone: 0032-89-764704

Stonemanor is an English food shop near Leuven. It’s address is: 28 Steenhofstraat, B 3078 Everberg, Belgium. Telephone: 0032-27-594979.

Graré is an American food store near Antwerp. It’s address is: Prins Boudewijnlaan 175, Wilrijk, Belgium. Telephone: 0032-3-4494118. There are also American stores in Amsterdam and Utrecht (and probably in other large Dutch cities as well).

Don't forget to check your local supermarkets. Many have international sections that change regularly. You never know what they'll stock next, so check it every now and then.

Free time?

There is plenty to do in your free time, but you do need to dig around. Again, the Internet, libraries and Yellow Pages are your best starting points. A few ideas to get you started are:

Music/Art

There are lots of art galleries in South Limburg; just keep your eyes peeled as you walk around. Some of them offer their own workshops/courses and host exhibitions by visiting artists. Kumulus is the main art/music centre in Maastricht and is the best place to start if you are interested in attending classes of any sort. Adults and children are catered for.



Sport

A Dutch fitness centre is unlike anything in the UK or US, and their idea of client-friendly opening hours leaves a lot to be desired. But, like everything else, if you shop around, you're bound to find one that fits in with your interests. Be sure to ask about the various types of membership as many of them offer a choice of daytime, evening or weekend membership. There are plenty of tennis courts around, a small number of squash courts, and lots of swimming pools. The latter are very much biased towards 'leisure' swimming, so if you like to chalk up a few lengths and have a decent work-out, be sure to ask if they offer a special period when the pool is divided into lanes.

Travel

Inland travel with buses and trains has already been mentioned. If you're thinking of hopping on a plane, bear in mind the little airport of Charleroi, in Belgium, only about an hour away from Maastricht (by car). The Dutch tend to book their holidays really early, i.e., in December/January for the following summer, so don't be surprised if your options are already limited by February. This definitely is the case if you are looking for foreign sunshine and would like to depart from Maastricht/Aachen airport.

Many shops, cafés and VVVs have a free monthly cultural guide available called 'Uit in Maastricht.' It lists films, theatre schedules, special shows, festivals, etc. Other cities have this same guide featuring activities in their regions, such as Sittard, Heerlen and Roermond.

If you want to understand why Limburg is so distinct from the rest of the country, it is definitely worth your while to discover its history. Take an English tour of Maastricht (organised by the VVV in the summer months). Visit the American War Cemetery in Margraten. Visit the local museums. Go to the library. Even ask your neighbours.

Recommended reading

For general background information on life in the Netherlands:

- **The Holland Handbook** published by X-Pat Media ISBN 9055942510
- Inside Information write to or call: Teylingerhorstlaan 16 2244 EM Wassenaar tel: 017 51 78951 fax: 017 51 77510 (lots of specific information, such as conversion charts, translation of food and shopping terms, etc. Written by an American living in Amsterdam)
- The Undutchables: An Observation of the Netherlands, Its Culture and Its Inhabitants by Colin White and Laurie Boucke (a funny take on Dutch culture and life)
- Culture Shock: Netherlands A Culture Shock! Guide by Hunt Janin ISBN: 155868400X
- Simple Guide to Holland, Customs and Etiquette Simple Guides: Customs and Etiquette by Mark T. Hooker
- Living and Working in the Netherlands by Pat Rush
- The Low Sky: Understanding the Dutch by Han van der Horst (an in-depth take on Dutch culture)
- At Home in Holland ISBN 9051668635 by the American Women's Club of The Hague Uitgeverij Eburon
- Here's Holland (formerly Roaming Round Holland) by Sheila Gazaleh-Weevers et al. (tips for trips for all ages and interests) ISBN 9080125520



Some of these books can be found at bookstores in the area (if not in stock, they can usually order them for you). You can always try ordering them via an online services, but beware of exchange rates and eventual import taxes.

If you compare the experiences related in these guides with those of your own in this particular area, you will quickly realise that South Limburg is a world unto its own.

Guides local to this area are few and far between but we recommend you get one key guide, available from the Maastricht town hall entitled “Moving to Maastricht: A Practical Guide for Expatriates”. Although this guide focuses mainly on Maastricht, it has a lot of relevant information for those of you living in other areas of Limburg.

Another increasingly good source of information for living abroad is the Internet.

To summarise...

Don't stay home - get out and explore. Talk to people. Limburg is a central location for Europe, so get out and see it! Make use of VVV's. Ask questions galore.

Expect it to rain and get inventive... Then enjoy the surprise of sunshine!

One last important tip, verbal agreements are binding in the Netherlands so keep a check on yourself when carrying out any business.

And finally, the **International Women's Club** is here for you.

Smile and enjoy your time in the Netherlands!



Disclaimer: All the information contained in this handbook was correct to the best of our knowledge at the time of publishing. If you do encounter incorrect information, or feel other changes additions need to be made to this handbook, please contact the IWC **webmaster**.

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