

*How the tulip helps to define
a nation of culture*

By John Church



THE NETHERLANDS traditionally conjures up images of bicycles, clogs, cheese and windmills spinning lazily over flat green fields adorned with brightly coloured tulips. While the icons remain, there is so much more to this advanced nation, qualities that allow it a reputation as a place where the old and new marry harmoniously and create a liberal culture rich in diversity.

Amsterdam provides a perfect example of this dynamic, a study in contrasts and one of the prettiest cities in Europe. Superb examples of what is called Amsterdam Renaissance style architecture, with its cornices, spires and bell towers, are prominent throughout the capital. The famous Oude Kerk, with an octagonal church bell tower that was once a beacon for mariners, stands solemnly right in the heart of the city, while patrician townhouses with manicured gardens proudly co-exist with some of the best examples of modern architecture and infrastructure in Europe.

The museums, Amsterdam has more than 50, are a tribute to the nation's past and an indicator of how the country, often referred to as Holland, has forged ahead to become one of the most liberal and tolerant societies in the world. While the massive bulk of Rijksmuseum, the nation's largest, is popular, it is places like Anne Frank House, where the little Jewish girl kept her tragic diary, and Van Gogh Museum, an altar to a tormented artistic talent the likes of which the world had never seen, that draw tourists and swell the hearts of proud locals.

Then there are the canals, and with almost 20 per cent of the country consisting of water, you are never far from one. In Amsterdam, the waterways with their charming houseboats provide a timeless feel, and it is said they are good purveyors of feng shui.

But perhaps the most famous symbol of all is a humble flower. The tulip has enjoyed a love affair with the Netherlands for centuries, and (forget the rose) the blood red version of the flower is supposed to be the symbol of perfect love. There are tulips with strong and pungent perfumes, tulips with petals like satin and tulips that blaze with all the vivid hues imaginable – flaming oranges and reds, subtle pinks, crimson-blacks to ivory whites, buttery yellows, burgundies... the array of colour and natural pattern is endless.

The Netherlands has enjoyed a love affair with the tulip for centuries.



FLOWER POWER





Flowers transform the countryside into a springtime symphony of colour.



NETHERLANDS FACT FILE

Population: 16.4 million

Area: 41,864 sq km (16,164 sq miles)

GDP per capita: USD38,600

Main exports: Metal manufacturing, chemicals, foodstuffs

Internet domain: .nl

Springtime is when these flowers transform the gardens and countryside into a blossoming symphony. Each October, before the onset of winter, growers plant bulbs in their millions in preparation for the spring bloom from March to May. The most famous tulip garden in the world is Keukenhof, which boasts some 7.5 million blooms in 100 varieties and claims to be the most photographed place in the world.

Keukenhof 2008 is the 59th year of the spring park's operation and this year a special treat is in store – the theme will be entirely devoted to China in recognition of the Beijing Olympic Games. From the opening day on 20 March to 18 May, the China theme will be expressed in various ways that emphasise the cultural and historic significance of the country, including an Olympic Exposition and a “Forbidden City” garden where a number of new flower bulbs with Chinese or Olympic names will be presented.

“This spring, visitors to Keukenhof will be dazzled by swathes of sheer and scintillating colour,” says spokesperson Annemarie Gerards.

China in Town, an event looking at the traditional and modern language of costume, will highlight the traditions of the various population groups in China. “The event was inspired by traditional handwork techniques and the role of symbolism in the patterns on Chinese national dress and costumes,” she says. “To offset the traditional costumes, headwear, jewellery and shoes from Chinese population groups such as the Dong and the Miao, contemporary designers have been invited to draw inspiration from China.”

Ms Gerards says the goal for 2008 is to attract approximately 35 per cent more visitors from China. Keukenhof is traditionally one of the five attractions most popular among Chinese tourists in Europe.

The cultural bonding is not limited to the flower festival. In December, the Netherlands will stage the Business of Design Week (BODW) in Hong Kong. Called Open Minds – Presenting Dutch Design, the programme covers fashion, architecture, communication and product design. The focus will be on three areas of excellence: water, food and flowers, and urban life. There will be a series of mas-

ter classes and exchange programmes for students and Dutch companies in Hong Kong will initiate local projects related to the BODW themes.

The tulips, meanwhile, are not just pretty to look at. They are big business. More than 53 per cent of the world's flower bulb production area is located in the Netherlands, according to Keukenhof. The trade in flower bulbs currently amounts to USD1.1 billion and the Netherlands is responsible for approximately 80 per cent of all flower bulb exports.

But raw figures alone do not do the story of the tulip justice. It is a tale of greed, desire and mystery that originates far from the Netherlands and one that Sjoerd van Eeden, son of a flower bulb grower, loves to tell. Mr van Eeden and two friends founded the Amsterdam Tulip Museum in 2005 in the heart of the city to give tourists a glimpse of how the tulip evolved from a rarity which brought a nation to its knees to the darling of the Netherlands that it is today.

Exactly where the flower originated is not clear, but Mr van Eeden says it graced the gardens of the sultans in Istanbul before making its way to the Netherlands, where it quickly became the object of unprecedented speculation in the 17th century.

"It was the period known as Tulipomania, when tulip bulbs

changed hands for the price of a house, leading eventually to a disastrous financial collapse," he says. "It is known as the first financial bubble in the history of capitalism. According to most historians, Amsterdam was the first true capitalist city in the world. The Amsterdam Stock Exchange is the first and oldest in the world and dates from the same time as the disaster known as Tulipomania. This speculation in tulip bulbs was an example of early capitalism going terribly wrong."

He says his museum attracts a large number of Hong Kong and Chinese visitors every week, with guided text also available in Chinese.

The curator also has some advice for gardening enthusiasts in Hong Kong. "Tulip bulbs must always be planted outside. As they come from Central Asia they do need a serious winter, and cannot be grown successfully in Hong Kong,"

he says. "If people visiting from Hong Kong want to buy tulip bulbs, I tell them the bulb that's best for them is no doubt the Amaryllis.

"It's a very large bulb that grows indoors in a pot with earth or just on water. Planted, it will bloom in about six weeks giving several two-foot stems, each carrying four to six large flowers. It is no doubt the best and most popular bulb for people from Hong Kong. And it never fails!"

The Amsterdam Stock Exchange is the oldest in the world



THE GATEWAY TO EUROPE

THE NETHERLANDS is internationally recognised as the gateway to Europe. Rotterdam is the world's biggest port with access to major centres so close that 170 million people live within a 500-kilometre radius of Amsterdam – that's a population density three times that of metro areas like New York or Tokyo.

Hutchison Whampoa Limited has realised its potential as a distribution hub and capitalised on it, according to Jan Westerhoud, Managing Director, Northern Europe for Hutchison Port Holdings (HPH) and chief of Europe Container Terminals (ECT), the main operator at Rotterdam's port, which HPH acquired in 2002.

"Hutchison has made a great difference to the operation here," he says. "We have learned and benefited from their enormous market knowledge and financial discipline. In the past four years we have experienced double digit growth. The market is absolutely booming."

Mr Westerhoud says a key component for harnessing this growth potential is expanding and improving inland connections via rail or barge facilities. He says the first phase of the new Euromax terminal, close to the existing Delta terminal, is scheduled for completion in September this year, while a barge feeder for Delta Terminal should be completed in June. Euromax is expected to bring an additional 2.3 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) of capacity to ECT's current six million TEUs per year in its first phase.

Hutchison's interests extend past ports, and its retail arm A S Watson operates in the Netherlands through Kruidvat, the undisputed national market leader in the health and beauty retail sector that is also well known in neighbouring Belgium.

While Kruidvat is famous for always offering value for money, it has also set the trend in the Netherlands for offering products that customers do not normally expect in a drugstore, such as classical music, books and electronics. "In everything we do and through all products we offer, we live up to our brand promise. That is, always value for money, always surprising," says Kruidvat's spokeswoman Jose Mes.

Other A S Watson retail chains that cater to the Dutch market include its luxury perfumery and cosmetics chain ICI PARIS XL and a second health and beauty chain, Trekpleister.

