

At Home in Rotterdam

Rotterdam is a city like no other in the Netherlands. For one thing, it is cosmopolitan, with its wide boulevards, skyscrapers and eclectic mix of modern and historic architecture. Yet, among the cities in the Netherlands, Rotterdam is not the first place that comes to mind in terms of choice to live in. But to residents, it is a well-kept secret.

Rotterdam is the sort of city that takes getting used to. Isis Spuijbroek is Creative Strategist at Rotterdam Development Corporation (OBR). “Rotterdam is for adventurous people. It’s like a painter’s palette, where everything is on offer somewhere in the city and it is up to the individual to pick and choose the colours they want. There’s something for everyone but you have to be proactive about making it happen.”

For the expat community here, Rotterdam is a home away from home. The city offers a variety of housing, including the typical Dutch terraced homes in neighbourhoods such as Hilligersberg, with its wide streets and old trees. “I like living here,” says Clare Millard, a British expat who has been in the Netherlands eight years. “It’s like living in a village that is attached to a big city. Going into the city is easy - even with young children. We get on a tramline and it takes no time to travel to the centre. But also driving in and parking is quick and easy - except when the Bijenkorf has their three-day ‘Crazy Days’ sale; then it seems like the whole country drives into Rotterdam. Other than that, there’s always parking space.”

Rotterdam is a sprawling metropolis, but the public transport is good - it has everything, including subways, buses, trams, the light-railway, water taxis, normal taxis and ferries, as well as an extensive network of cycling paths.

Kralingen is another district where many expats live. It is home to Erasmus University Campus and has lovely turn-of-

the-century architecture, and a large park and recreational area. Here there are good places to go out - such as Oostplein and along the Oudedijk. And there are, of course, modern and hip apartments in the city centre. For a reasonable price you can get a nice 2-3 bedroom furnished apartment in a nice area of Rotterdam. In the summer months there is a run on cheap accommodation because of students looking for small and affordable apartments. The rest of the year, the availability is quite good.

“Rotterdam is a convenient city to live in,” says Shinobu Abe from Japan. “At first I thought it was strange that Dutch people build houses so close to the water, but now I like it. The canals in the city make it very relaxed.” And, for a big city, Rotterdam is safe. “I feel comfortable here,” says Mrs. Shinobu, “because there are many nationalities and everyone is tolerant of others.” Mrs. Millard adds: “I am quite happy jumping on a tram at midnight.”

Few people realise that Rotterdam is the greenest of the four largest cities in the country. It has more than 2,000 hectares of public parks and gardens including Kralingse Bos, Euromast Park, Trompenburg Arboretum, Zuiderpark and Vroesenpark. It even has its own beach called the Hoek van Holland beach.

Rotterdam’s city council sees its role in supporting expats in the city. There are currently 350 American, 230 Asian and 550 European and other internationally-oriented companies which account for approximately 30,000 expats in the city. The City Council is actively looking to expand these numbers. In order to stimulate foreign companies to settle in Rotterdam, the OBR inaugurated the Expat Desk in October. The Rotterdam Development Corporation (OBR) is the point of contact for the economic and spatial development of Rotterdam. It manages the municipal strategy and puts it into practice.

The Expat Desk in the World Trade Centre is designed to be a first stop for expats with questions about any aspect of living in Rotterdam. It offers the facilities of a one-stop shop for registration procedures - like the recently opened desk in Amsterdam. Its aim is to facilitate the registration procedures for newly arrived knowledge migrants and the procedure is based on the experiences of the pilot project in Amsterdam. The resident permit procedure of the IND and the registration procedure with the city administration have been simplified, so that an employee can get on with their work, open a bank account and find accommodation very quickly.

But the goal of the Expat Desk goes much further. It also offers a friendly face and comfortable office for all other questions new residents may have. They provide information on many aspects of life in Rotterdam including education, housing, registration and legal issues, as well as sports activities and cultural life in the city.



CITY PROFILE



“We are starting small and practical, but our intent is to provide a central link for all expats living here in Rotterdam,” says Lilian van der Steen, who was instrumental in establishing the centre. “Ever since we announced our intention to create an expat desk, we have been inundated with mails and calls from people who were enthusiastic about the idea. Several expats have indicated that they would love to help us make this desk a success. Others in the service industry were keen to create a network of information and assistance to expats in Rotterdam. There was obviously a big need for this service.”

Lilian has experience with what expats need in Rotterdam. For six years she worked in the acquisitions department of the OBR as a first line of contact with companies that intended to or were in the process of considering establishing offices in Rotterdam. In a country that is not known for its level of service, Lilian offered personalised assistance. “I developed links with the IND, the GGD and the City Council. I learned about the difficulties that expats face case by case, helping out where I could, whenever I could. The expat desk is really a logical extension of what we’ve been doing unofficially for years.”

Many people have already made use of the service since the opening on October 9, and the desk has answered questions ranging from the availability of Japanese-language crèche services and information about birth certificates to the procedures for working in the Netherlands. The number of calls and e-mails received is an indication of just how useful this service is to Rotterdam’s international community.

For more information on the expat desk and on Rotterdam itself visit www.rotterdam.nl/expatdesk or contact Lilian van der Steen or the Desk’s director Frank Coomans.