

The Halls and the Netherlands

By Jenna Hall

My name is Jenna Hall and our family is stationed in the Netherlands. I feel very fortunate to be able to write this article about the incredible opportunity our family has been given to experience life in Europe. Having spent the majority of my life in the small town of Smithers, BC and the “big city” of Edmonton, Alberta, I hadn’t the least idea of what to expect, despite the fact that my hometown has a large Dutch community. In my mind, all I could picture was windmills and wooden clogs! On our house hunting trip, my husband got a good laugh at my reaction to the huge wind turbines and massive, speedy highways. This was just the beginning of the many things I would find amusing.

Our posting got off to a rocky start, with many mishaps and our family experiencing a traumatic loss. We spent forty-five days in hotels between Canada and the Netherlands, with our daughters and our two Boxer dogs Titan and Atlas. Adjusting to our new life was challenging to say the least, and it would get more complicated still; who would have thought that after three weeks of arriving in the Netherlands we would find out we were pregnant?! I have to admit that having only ever visited a civilian doctor’s office, visiting the MIR was different. The staff was great, although I found it quite strange discussing my pregnancy with a man wearing the same uniform as my husband. Even though our posting started out rough, against all odds we have made the absolute best of our time here and it has brought us closer together and stronger as a family. It has also given us a great appreciation of our military community and our beautiful country, Canada.

What was it like having a baby in the Netherlands? It was phenomenal and kind of crazy at the same time. The Netherlands’ medical system is very similar to Canada. The hospital we stayed at had the advanced medical equipment you would expect but most importantly the doctors and nurses were more than willing to speak English. Our medical team treated me like family and they had impeccable bedside manner. We gave birth to the best Dutch souvenir a person could ever wish for, our third baby girl, Juno. Having three girls in the Netherlands is a special thing, as the King of the Netherlands has three girls as well. Our nurse told my husband he could now join His Majesty’s secret club of fathers with three girls. It must be a top secret club as to this day I am not even sure if he is a member?! I will forever be grateful to my Aunt who made the long hop across the pond to take care of our girls, dogs and our house while we were in the hospital. Our landlords and the hospital welcomed our new baby girl by giving us “Beschuit met muisjes.” What in the what, is that? Don’t bother trying to translate it, as it’s not literally mice on rusk. It is a round toasted piece of bread/cracker (like Melba toast) topped with butter and little sugar coated anise seeds (referred to as mice). The anise seeds taste similar to licorice and come in blue and white for a boy and pink and white for a girl. This unique Dutch tradition is believed to have started in the 17th century. Anise seeds are known to help with a mother’s milk production and the Dutch believe this would give protection to the Mother and baby from spirits. When we arrived home, we were also welcomed by a large wooden stork in the middle of our yard, carrying a baby wrapped in a pink blanket with Juno’s name printed on it. In the Netherlands, this is a common way of announcing the birth of your child to your community.

On that note, what is it like living in a Dutch community? After living in a condensed neighborhood in Edmonton we decided to live in a very rural area. Our home, which at one time was an oil mill and the main employer of the village less than 1 km away, is older than Canada. It has a magical

fairy-tale feel to it with modern finishings on the inside and gorgeous exposed wood beams. Every day we are thankful for our amazing landlords, who have gone above and beyond to make us feel at home. Our neighbors include some cows, a hundred different species of birds including a massive majestic hawk and Stella and Penelope (our landlords' sheep who we have adopted as our special pets). One morning the girls and I were very concerned since our sheep were nowhere to be seen. After worrying all day they may have met their fate we asked our landlords where they were, and thankfully we found out that the sheep are pets (not food!) and they just went for a haircut. Phew, dodged a bullet on a tough conversation there! We have found the Dutch village next to us to be a very tight knit and close community and most families have owned their home for generations. They're polite, but not overly talkative, and most of our interactions are limited to short conversations while we walk the dogs.

Before we moved here, we weren't sure how well we would be able to communicate with Dutch people in general, but we soon found it amazing and convenient how many Dutch people speak several languages. When asked, they often say "my English is not very good," yet we can understand them perfectly and we are just thankful there is no need for us to butcher their language! We have found the younger generation especially to be quite pleasant and very fashionable. Thankfully, since we have found it challenging to integrate ourselves into the Dutch communities, we are within easy driving distance to both work and the Military Family Services Centre (MFS(E)) in Niederheid, Germany. Our girls attend an awesome Toddler and Parents program at the MFS(E), where I also get to enjoy visiting with the staff, who by the way, I think all of us posted here will agree are some of the most welcoming and helpful people. We are so lucky to have them! Additionally, I also run a weekly Mom and Tots playgroup at my husband's work. Both groups afford our girls the opportunity to play with children from many nationalities, which I believe is a great experience for them. I get to enjoy the company of other moms and I have really learned that no matter where us military moms are from, we are all in the same boat and experiencing many of the same things. Our oldest daughter attends an international school in The Netherlands. The cultural education and life experience she has gained from attending there is priceless.

What are Dutch holiday's like? December 5th is known as the most important day for children in the Netherlands. The children await the arrival of Sinterklaas and his helper Zwarte Pieten. Instead of setting up a Christmas tree for presents to be placed under the children place a shoe by the fireplace or windowsill. Similar to Santa, Sinterklaas keeps a book of all the things children have done throughout the year, but Sinterklaas isn't as forgiving as Santa as he doesn't leave coal for naughty children, he orders Zwarte Pieten to place the bad children in a sack to be taken to Spain for a year to be taught how to behave! The good children receive treats and small toys; a common treat he leaves is a chocolate letter for the first letter of the child's name. There is quite a bit more history to Sinterklaas worth looking up on the internet and he isn't just celebrated in the Netherlands. Our kids quite enjoy having two Christmas', one with this Royal looking Dutch Santa and the other with our traditional holly jolly white bearded Santa. We have learned the Dutch really know how to throw a party. Fireworks are usually not legal in the Netherlands but on New Year's and a couple other holidays, the ban is lifted; it is not uncommon for you to hear a constant stream of fireworks for 24 hrs prior to a holiday, lasting until about noon the holiday itself. Our first New Year's was a bit overwhelming as it's similar to living in a war zone, but with rave music constantly blasting. During Carnival, which begins six weeks before Easter Sunday, communities all across the Netherlands literally shut down and have a huge celebration for three days. They get dressed up and it's WILD!

This is another Dutch tradition worth reading more about. We are lucky to have experienced these Dutch holidays and traditions but I sure can't wait for our younger children to have their first Halloween back in Canada.

A very big challenge for me living in the Netherlands was getting used to driving here. After getting over the mental block and intimidation I find driving here a breeze. The Dutch take vehicle maintenance and driving very seriously. They drive efficiently and the traffic circles are hands down a hundred times better than our traffic lights. Biking in the Netherlands is a way of life and it's common for groups of teenagers to ride by with music playing as if they were driving in a car together. Another amazing thing about the Dutch is their attitude towards dogs. They treat them just like people and it shows, as it is very rare to see a misbehaving dog. We have sat in many restaurants to have a whole meal without knowing there is a fur baby under the table next to us. Often, I have looked into a stroller to glimpse a cute baby only to be surprised when a dog pops its head out. Good on you Holland! But we won't be taking our super excitable Boxers to any meals with us anytime soon, I could just imagine them jumping up onto tables and eating everyone's food while trying to lick their faces.

One of the best perks about being posted here is the opportunity to travel. The Netherlands alone has many places to visit including our favorite, a UNESCO heritage site, the Windmills at Kinderdijk. There are many beautiful cities, towns and beaches throughout the Netherlands too. We were very fortunate to attend the Knokke-Heist Liberation March which was an amazing experience. We are conveniently located in the centre of Europe, and many major cities and monuments are easily within driving distance. The chalet program (a travel subsidization program for CAF families in Europe) is a great way to get out and experience the continent. We won the Madeira, Portugal Chalet, which was quite the adventure. We were fortunate enough to join my husband on a work trip to Naples, Italy; and while there, had the pleasure of attending a CAF family beach day with some the remarkable Canadian families posted there. We were honored to be a part of a NATO awards ceremony and witness my husband receive the Allied Command Operations Military Member of the Year Award. If you're ever in this area, the ruins at Pompeii are an absolute must and I highly recommend spending an entire day there, at a minimum. As Canadians posted over here, we felt that doing a tour of Vimy Ridge, Juno Beach and Dieppe was a necessity, and they didn't disappoint. With my husband's forever connection to the PPCLI, being Airborne and having named our daughter Juno, these hallowed grounds held extra significance for our family. I can't begin to explain the feeling you get when you step on the grounds of Vimy, it is simply breathtaking. It was emotionally overwhelming with a heavy sense of solemn pride for our fallen Canadians and our Country.

Despite all our travels and the amazing experience of living in the Netherlands, I still miss Canada every single day. Experiencing many countries, different cultures and people, I have developed a new level of appreciation and gratitude for our people, our way of life and our beautiful country. I am excited for the day we move home to explore every inch of our great country. Being here and representing Canada has given me a sense of pride that can never be replaced. OUTCAN postings can be challenging but are extremely rewarding and I hope more young families like ours receive this type opportunity in the future.