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Where Dutch directness comes from

by Olga Mecking

I'd only been living in Amsterdam for a year when we met my husband's friends in one of the many cafes and bars in the city's famous Vondelpark.

We chose our seats and waited, but the waiter was nowhere to be seen. When he finally materialised, seemingly out of nowhere, he didn't ask "What would you like to order", or "What can I get you?". He said "What do you want?" Maybe it was the fact that he'd said it in English, or maybe he was just having a bad day, but I was shocked nonetheless.

My Dutch teacher later explained that the Dutch are very direct – and nowhere are they so direct as they are in Amsterdam.

Ben Coates, who wrote *Why the Dutch Are Different*, moved to the Netherlands from Great Britain eight years ago. He recalls similar experiences, specifically one situation when he got a haircut and a friend immediately pointed out that it didn't suit him at all.

"I think the Netherlands are a place where... no-one is going to pretend. [For example], when you say something in a business meeting that is not a very smart suggestion, people will always point it out," he said.

To Coates, the differences between his native Britain and the Netherlands were immediately noticeable. In Great Britain, he says, people tend to communicate and behave in a way that minimises offense to other people.

"You don't talk too loudly on the train because it's not too nice for the people in your compartment; you don't play your music too loud in your apartment because it's not so nice for your neighbours; there is this constant calibrating of your own behaviour," Coates explained. But in the Netherlands, there is "the sense that people have the right to say whatever they want and be as direct as they want. And if other people don't like that, it's their fault for getting offended."

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