

ESSAY 01

## Mind your head *Walking with giants*

On the streets of Amsterdam you won't struggle to identify the towering locals from the tourists. The country may be small in surface area but the residents are shooting up to rank as one of the tallest populations worldwide.

by *Pauline den Hartog Jager*,  
journalist

More than half of the Netherlands lies below sea level and, besides building better dykes to protect the country from the encroaching water, we Dutch have found a natural way to survive global warming: by making sure our heads are above water.

It's no secret that the Dutch are a lanky lot. With an average height of 1.83 metres, Dutch men are the world's tallest, while Dutch women (1.7 metres) are second only to their Latvian counterparts. If

you're still not convinced, the Club for Tall People in the Netherlands requires its female members to be taller than 1.8 metres and male members taller than 1.9 metres. There are about 900,000 people in the Netherlands taller than 1.9 metres and an astounding 60,000 of them are more than 2 metres tall.

Visitors to the Dutch capital can experience subtle knock-on effects from walking among giants. Bathroom mirrors and showerheads are almost unreachable and attending a concert can offer little more of a view than the shoulders in front of you. But don't worry, you're not alone.

I'm 1.78 metres tall and am by far the shortest in my family. My younger sisters are 1.83 metres and 1.87 metres, with my parents somewhere in between. To greet my cousins with the customary three kisses, I have to strain to reach their towering frames (1.97 metres and 2.05 metres respectively). It wasn't until I moved to the UK that I realised I'm not that short at all by non-Dutch standards. I often get asked to grab something from the top shelf in the supermarket and standing in a packed Tube is far less claustrophobic when you are able to catch some air.

Still, I have no reason to complain about my height: I fit most regular-sized clothes, my shoe size is about average, I can ride a bike with a regular frame and I won't hit my head when entering a house. Many Dutch

citizens, however, face height-related challenges on a daily basis. Where to buy shirts that aren't crop tops? How to find a zippy city car with enough legroom? The real issues start when we travel abroad: urinals are too low, showerheads neglect anything above chest height and beds are too short. It can also be a painful experience: I once ended up with concussion after smashing my head against a ceiling beam.

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Luckily for its giants, the Netherlands has solutions: bikes come in different frame sizes, more fashion brands produce longer jeans and higher kitchen tabletops are becoming the homeware shop default. There are also support groups, organisations, and magazines dedicated to the extremely tall. Among them, Stichting Lange Mensen (Foundation for Tall People) and Klub Lange Mensen (Club for Tall People) help support the rights of the Dutch giants, including their ongoing battle for more legroom on airplanes.

The Netherlands also ranks as one of the nations that produces the most top models but you won't spot many locals wearing killer

### High and mighty

- 01 Tijs Verwest, 1.88 metres**  
Famous DJ, known as DJ Tiësto.
- 02 Famke Janssen, 1.82 metres**  
Actress and former Bond girl in *Goldeneye*.
- 03 Rob Bruintjes, 2.21 metres**  
Chairman of the Dutch Foundation for Tall People.

heels; trainers are perfectly acceptable in most bars and pubs. Even the policymakers are helping out: in 2003 the minimum ceiling height for new-build houses was increased from 2.4 to 2.6 metres.

The Dutch haven't always been so lofty. The average male height today is 20cm higher than 150 years ago. But the cause of our long limbs is contentious. Is it genetics, fresh air or healthcare? Are we really evolving in reaction to those rising tides or is it simply our affinity with cheese and milk?

According to recent studies the answer is more obvious: genetics. Tall people tend to marry other tall people and tall men tend to have more children than their shorter countrymen. The curve hasn't slowed, which means plenty more opportunities for inventive solutions to cater to an ever-growing population. In height, that is. — (M)



**ABOUT THE WRITER:** Pauline den Hartog Jager is a London-based film-maker and journalist and was previously MONOCLE's video journalist. Whenever she returns to the Netherlands she picks up a block (or two) of Old Amsterdam cheese.