



Keukenhof: from tourist attraction to economic driver in 60 years

LISSE – Keukenhof’s mission now and in the future is to be the international and independent showcase and platform for the plant and flower-growing sector in the Netherlands, particularly bulbs. Keukenhof aims to welcome around 800,000 visitors a year, but external factors can get in the way. Like the SARS outbreak several years ago, the credit crunch is likely to have an impact on the number of visitors, not least because about 70% come from abroad and include the (international) guests of businesses and organisations, who are being treated to a taste of what the Netherlands has to offer. Keukenhof can always be relied on to provide an oasis of peace and inspiration in the middle of a hectic programme.

With such high attendance figures within a period of only eight weeks, Keukenhof can be regarded as a true showcase. But the visitors also generate a much-needed source of income, as Keukenhof receives no subsidies. The costs of operating the park are also defrayed by the growers, who do not charge for the bulbs.

With hundreds of thousands of visitors passing through its gates each year, Keukenhof has become a key driver of the regional economy. According to the statistics, day tourists in the bulb-growing region generate sales worth around 100 million euros. Another quarter of a billion is generated by long-stay tourism – 20% of which takes place in bulb country. The scarcity of other tourist attractions at that time of the year also plays a role. One could say that the bulb sector more or less determines the tourist image of the Netherlands.

The park acts as a magnet for international tourists, who increasingly come from the USA and Asia rather than neighbouring countries in Europe. The Asian and American tourists are particularly interesting, as they to spend more money during their stay. Each year, between one and a half and two million visitors visit South Holland, making it the second most important province in the country in terms of international tourism.

The bulb sector earns money and creates employment not only for its own sector and the tourist industry, but also for hospitality, retail and transport businesses, not to mention marinas, museums and other attractions and events. All in all, the bulb-growing region accounts for around 25% of the revenue and employment in South Holland and for around 25% of the total revenue from tourism in the Netherlands.

Popular attraction

International tourists come to the Netherlands for four main reasons: Amsterdam, mills/traditional crafts/cheese, Van Gogh, and bulbs and flowers. Keukenhof is the image-defining attraction in the fourth of these categories: for the growers, the region and the Netherlands as a whole. As such, it makes a key contribution to the national

image. The Dutch section on the website of the world-famous *Lonely Planet* travel guide opens, for example, with a paragraph of Keukenhof. Wikipedia features only one photo of the Netherlands, and it is of Keukenhof. And the first image that anyone who books a trip to the Netherlands in the spring via a worldwide booking site sees is an image of Keukenhof.

Unlike other tourist attractions, Keukenhof is open for only a few weeks of the year, but it far outstrips other attractions in the Netherlands in terms of visitors per week. In absolute terms it comes fifth in the hierarchy of regional attractions and events.

Every year Keukenhof faces a unique challenge, since it is open for only a few weeks during a period when there are very few other tourist attractions in the region. The organisers see this as Keukenhof's greatest strength. Initially, the priority was on flower bulbs, but Keukenhof has much more to offer in 2009. Not only can you feast your eyes on flowers, plants and cultivated trees, you can soak up art and culture at various exhibitions and workshops. Keukenhof also tries to inspire its visitors by presenting different styles for garden and interior design, with bulbs and blooms playing a central role. And there is plenty to keep the kids happy as well.

Unique culture

Keukenhof is a meeting place for nature, art and culture. When the weather gets warmer in spring and the bulbs burst into bloom, Keukenhof is the ideal place to get acquainted with the rich variety of garden design. It began with the English landscape garden, but over the course of time the historical garden with traditional bulbs, the natural garden with a special combination of bulbs, perennials and shrubs, and the Japanese country garden have carved a place for themselves and gained recognition.

Each year, the layout is redesigned to present Keukenhof in a new light. The composition is carefully planned, so that visitors can enjoy flowering bulbs throughout the season. Roughly seven million bulbs are donated by around one hundred growers, who have the best showcase imaginable for their products.

Alternating flower and plant exhibitions are accommodated in the pavilions, where visitors can find plenty of inspiration for their own homes and gardens. Demonstrations by well-known arrangers show original ways of using flowering bulbs and blooms in bouquets. The pavilions also serve as the arena for the flower-growing competitions. The contestants compete for the best performance per product and the winners go home with the Keukenhof Award.

The exhibition in the Oranje Nassau Pavilion focuses on bulbs in interior design, showing how bulbs can be used in all sorts of interiors, from classical to modern. The Juliana Pavilion, where art and nature converge in some exciting and imaginative encounters, provides the setting for works by upcoming and famous artists – all related in some way to the natural themes of Keukenhof. Space is also reserved for sculptures by Dutch and foreign artists, specially selected by famous galleries for their affinity with the Keukenhof style and atmosphere.

Short lines, open communication

The Stichting Internationale Bloemententoonstelling Keukenhof is run by a Board of Directors, which decides the overall policy lines. The members are selected on the basis of knowledge, skills, experience and contacts. The Board operates at a distance most of the time but is available when specific expertise is needed. The policy lines are fleshed out and implemented by the organisation.

All formal lines of communication converge at the management level. General Director Piet de Vries heads Keukenhof. He is responsible for the daily business and is in open communication with the Board. He also steers the management team. There is a constant flow of feedback through the organisation. Keukenhof also expects its personnel to come up with potentially interesting ideas.

Keukenhof leaves no stone unturned to ensure that the park dazzles the visitors with an extravaganza of colour in the two months that it is open. Needless to say, such high ambitions call for constructive cooperation which extends beyond official job descriptions. The keywords in this open corporate culture are clear communication and agreements, trust and respect. The positive mindset, so typical of Keukenhof personnel, creates an enjoyable and rewarding working environment, which in turn translates into a magnificent spring exhibition.