

AT HOME IN ALMERE

Expats like Almere. There are already more than 4,000 international employees living in the city and the number grows every day. Especially for these expats, there is the association International Almere. Says chair, Michel Daenen, 'Internationals should feel at home here - as soon as possible'.

TEXT NATHALIE ROOZE

Relocating and adjusting to a new country is not always easy. Michel Daenen, chair of International Almere, knows this first hand. He lived in Hungary for six years, where he not only had to deal with a new language, but also with a completely different culture. 'I joined an expat club in Budapest, where I experienced how important it is to meet like-minded people. The club gave me something to hold on to.'

Expats and staypats

Expats are temporary residents of the Netherlands. They have been sent by international companies to work here for a few years. Says Daenen, 'There are

Michel Daenen



PHOTO: ANDY WINDSE

Everything we needed was offered to us on a silver platter

also staypats. After a few years, expats leave for another country. Staypats, on the other hand, plan to stay here. They also often come to the Netherlands for other reasons. And because they want to settle here, they also have a different attitude. They want to make an effort to learn the language and meet the locals. They also think it is important that their children go to Dutch schools so that they integrate more easily. At International Almere we focus on both groups. We simply refer to both expats and staypats as internationals'.

Almere is blooming

Expats have traditionally lived in Amsterdam, but Almere has been blooming in recent years. There are several reasons for this, according to Daenen. 'Housing in Amsterdam is very expensive, while in Almere you can still find relatively affordable homes. You can get to Amsterdam from Almere within half an hour, which the average international experiences as around the corner. Moreover, Almere offers plenty of space. Good infrastructure, cycle paths, the green spaces and the modern city are also often mentioned.' He concludes, 'Increasingly more international companies are coming to Almere. And these also attract international employees'.



'Ik Spreek Nederlands' is a Dutch language cafe at Cafe op 2 in Almere on the second and fourth Saturday of every month.

Identifying with each other

It is clear from the figures that there is a need for an international club. Daenen explains, 'Our association gets five to eight new registrations every week. Early this year we had 1,200 members. That has already risen to 1,400. Most people like to meet others who are like-minded. As a newcomer in a foreign country it's great to exchange experiences with people who are in the same situation. Identifying with each other is very important'.

Large online community

The members work hard to help each other, says Daenen. 'We have a large online community. There's our Facebook page, for example, International Almere News. On which we publish national and local news in English. There is also a Facebook group specifically focused on housing. And we have a closed Facebook group, where members can ask each other questions about anything and everything. For example, which school should I choose for my child? Does anyone know of a nice sports club? Or, is the Filmwijk a nice neighbourhood?'

Help and support

The association receives help from various sponsors. Translation agency Courtesie is one, and they, together with the WTC, have ensured that the association has permanent office space in the WTC building. The other two sponsors of the association also offer practical help and support to members. For example, Expat Mortgages gives advice on everything involved in buying a home in the Netherlands, while Beacon Financial Education helps with

financial issues. 'We are very happy with our sponsors. All four actively contribute to the success of our association', says Daenen.

Language is crucial

International Almere also organises various meetings, events and other social activities. For the very youngest there is, for example, the ABCDE Playgroup - where children and their parents can meet other children and parents. There is also a monthly Quiz Night in English. And, twice monthly, the Dutch Language Cafe, where members can practice their Dutch. As Daenen says, 'Learning the language is crucial for social integration. Which is why we are working with Courtesie in order to offer our members still more opportunities to learn Dutch in the near future.' ●

I IMMEDIATELY FELL IN LOVE WITH ALMERE!

Katie Schmitz and her husband moved from Germany to Almere in 2017. 'Friends of ours had already moved to Almere. They showed us the city when we visited them, and I immediately fell in love with it. Everything is so well organised! After a few years we took the step ourselves. As a newcomer you don't know anyone and it's difficult to find your way, but with the help of International Almere we quickly settled in. There were gatherings, where we met other expats and an online community, where we could ask all our questions. Everything we needed was offered to us on a silver platter! We feel completely at home in Almere, thanks to International Almere.'