



# A Lady on a Mission

Representing the Netherlands, MARGRIET VONNO is one of eleven female ambassadors serving here in Singapore. But what does it really mean, to be an ambassador?

BY MELINDA MURPHY

**L**ife as a public servant is more than just a career for Margriet, the Dutch ambassador to Singapore. It's a calling. "I always knew I wanted to live abroad and do something big. I studied international relations and, after a few odd jobs, landed a role in the diplomatic corps. It was a lucky break, really. I was quite qualified, but 2,000 people applied."

The opportunity took her to New York to work at the United Nations as a Second Secretary. She held several jobs in the diplomatic corps before being appointed the ambassador to Singapore in 2017.

## An average day

"For me, the job really encompasses three practices: representing my country, negotiating and entertaining," says Margriet. "It's mostly working behind the scenes, making sure our country is seen in the best light. We have 10,000 Dutch citizens and 1,600 companies here."

All of which means very busy days for the ambassador, including a lot of meetings, and plenty of entertaining. While Margriet does spend time hobnobbing with the elite, she also feels privileged to meet people from all walks of life here. "I firmly believe part of my job is not only meeting with high-ranking officials, but also getting to know Singaporeans, to grow roots wherever I am; it teaches me valuable life lessons." For example, after meeting a woman named Auntie Annie at an event for the Cycling Without Age charity, Margriet went to her HDB to get a one-on-one lesson on how to make fish curry (which she admits she still hasn't quite mastered).

Because entertaining is an important aspect of her role, she added an extra job to her duties, overseeing a major renovation by architect Frank Brewer of the Dutch Ambassador's residency, bringing the 1934 Arts-and-Crafts-style good class bungalow into the modern world. The home now reflects Dutch contemporary design while retaining its Singaporean heritage and is a lovely spot for holding receptions, meetings, dinners and more. It's also incredibly sustainable, something very important to the ambassador, as taking care of the environment is one of her passions. "Living sustainably makes me feel like I'm doing my part. It might seem small, but it all adds up if my neighbours are doing their part, too."

## Women as ambassadors

Margriet is very proud of being a woman in her position, drawing from a myriad of skills depending on the situation. "I believe women are good diplomats because we have a natural empathy, and an important part of diplomacy is listening and then reacting to what's been said. People might think women aren't as tough, but I'm a very firm negotiator."

Margriet says diplomacy requires a wide range of skills, which can come to the fore on different occasions. "Sometimes you need to speak out in public; other times, you have to be in the background. You have to read the situation and react accordingly."

She also believes it's better to be more mature in age for the job, as some decisions are made based on a feeling in her gut that comes through past life experience. "I've lived a life. Sometimes I know what to do simply because I've dealt with it in my past, not because I read it in a book."

## Working with Singapore

The two countries have a long history; the Netherlands was among the first to recognise the newly-formed Singaporean nation. This past December, Singapore's President Halimah Yacob went on an official state visit to the Netherlands, her first official state visit anywhere. While there, she saw the famous Dutch tulips, learnt how Dutch innovation might be implemented in Singapore, and attended a white tie State dinner with the Dutch king and queen, a Disneyland-type event for those in public service.



“It was my once-in-a-lifetime moment. We’ve never had a visit like this from Singapore, though our renowned economist Albert Winsemius did visit Lee Kuan Yew.” (Winsemius played a major role in the formulation of Singapore’s economic development strategy.) “It’s a highlight for an ambassador, as these types of visits don’t happen often – maybe once in every 50 years.”

The two nations are discussing various ways to work together. The first big joint project is the construction of a S\$466 million polder on Palau Tekong for military use. What’s a polder? It’s where land is reclaimed from the sea using a series of dikes, technology the Dutch have perfected over the centuries.



Like many Dutch citizens, Margriet is an avid biker and, together with her EU colleagues, she helped organise the EU Cycling Event at Car Free Sunday last year. Another potential project near and dear to Margriet’s heart is the installation of more bike paths here in Singapore. She hopes the new paths will connect homes to the MRT, using Dutch engineering skills such as better lighting, bicycle parking spaces and more. There’s also talk about installing a lighted bike path that uses solar energy like the one in Eindhoven, which is not only practical, but a true work of art.

### On other women and family

“I truly admire my queen for three reasons. First and foremost, because of her amazing knowledge of the worldwide financial sector. She used to be a banker and she has helped a lot of people get out of poverty and develop financial skills. She’s also a fashion icon and, like her, I love clothes. I also admire her stamina and graciousness. She works very long hours, but always has a friendly word or smile for somebody organising events. I try to do the same.”

Margriet also really admires her 12-year-old daughter. “I’m very proud of what she’s doing and who she is. When you’re the child of an ambassador, you really have to adapt to the situation. Originally, she didn’t want to come to Singapore, but now she’s well adjusted. My best moment was when my daughter told me she was happy we came here.”

As for her partner, Margriet acknowledges that marriage is a bit like diplomacy. You have to find the right person and work together to make things work. “I can’t do this job without him. He always puts things into perspective for me.”

### What’s next?

Margriet’s term in Singapore runs until 2021. “I’m enjoying my time here, knowing I’m making a difference for my country. I’m not sure what’s on the horizon, but I know I’m not done yet. I have a lot to still offer.” ❧

## Want to be an Ambassador for a Day?

Would your daughter like to learn first hand what it’s like to be an ambassador? Then she should apply to spend a day with one of the 11 female ambassadors here in Singapore! Each has graciously offered to host one girl between the ages of 10 and 18 for a day. She can email us at [editorial@expatliving.sg](mailto:editorial@expatliving.sg) by 31 March and tell us why she wants this opportunity. The girls’ experiences will be featured in an upcoming Expat Living article.



All eleven female ambassadors to Singapore with Minister Grace Fu Hai Yien.