

Dear people,

Wageningen is almost paradise on earth. So this was also the conclusion drawn by Maarten and Vincent van Rossem after their visit to the city where they grew up. Sitting on a bench in the Arboretum, with the most beautiful view in the Netherlands. And, of course, we can only agree with these gentlemen. But what keeps me wondering is the question: how did we become such a heavenly place? More importantly, how do we ensure the beauty of Wageningen continues into the future?

If we know our secret, we can share it with the rest of our country.

Because the Netherlands could use a bit of Wageningen.

Before I take you on my quest, I would like to extend a warm welcome on behalf of the city council and the mayor and aldermen to our New Year's reception.

A beautiful tradition to come together at the beginning of the new year and wish each other all the best, happiness, prosperity, well-being, and health.

A new year with new opportunities, possibilities, and perspectives. With all the troubles in the world around us, it's good to approach the new year with a positive mindset.

Wageningen is almost paradise on earth.

King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima also praised our city during their visit to the SSR-W student association. And when, like the Van Rossems, I sit on that bench in the Arboretum, all that beauty comes to mind. We live in one of the most beautiful areas in the Netherlands. The Wageningse Berg is unique. Our river remains special, especially with the high water levels in recent weeks offering breathtaking views. We have the Binnenveldse Hooilanden, beautifully captured in a film by Melchert Meijer zu Schlochtern. Last month, this film drew full houses at our own Heerenstraat Theater.

Wageningen University & Research is a global top institute with its research on issues such as food security, climate, and sustainability. The challenges of our time.

MARIN is a globally recognized top institute for maritime research. This year, it worked hard on the construction of the new Seven Oceans Simulator Center. Remarkably, this was designed by the Wageningen architectural firm SW and built by the Wageningen construction company Van Swaay.

Last year, our city was declared the most sports-oriented municipality in the Netherlands. And not because we were forced to walk and cycle while

we were busy reconstructing our roads. No, our beautiful landscapes invite us to do so. We exercise because our many sports clubs are very active, and Sportservice organizes a lot of activities for the youth. We have unique athletes among us. Annemiek van Vleuten was rightfully named our honorary citizen last year. She also received an exceptional Royal Decoration: Commander in the Order of Orange-Nassau. And let's not forget Jan-Willem van Schip, whom we honored and awarded the Wageningen Silver after his world championship.

Our Historical Association Oud Wageningen celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2023, marked by the publication of Ajuuwoh, the Wageningen Dictionary. A great success, almost 2600 copies of this beautiful booklet were sold. The dialect festival was a fantastic event. Wageningen hosted even more unique events this year. On May 5th, tens of thousands of visitors came to our city for the Liberation Festival and the freedom parade. Local activities such as the Belmondo Festival, the Cultural Summer, Carnival, the LEEF Festival, the Rhinegold Festival, and Wageningen Celebrates Christmas make the city special.

Our library ranks in the top 5 nationally for most visits per resident. And we accommodate more than 1,000 refugees in our city. One of them is Omar Ali from Yemen, whom you will have heard playing music from his country as you enter the City hall this evening.

So that reception of more than 1,000 refugees can just be done we say to all those municipalities that do not give in.

I will continue to emphasize that if all municipalities did what we do in Wageningen, there would be no refugee accommodation crisis. In January, several dozen Ukrainians will join us in our city, finding a place above Pets Place on Stationsstraat. Because that war is still ongoing.

Just like the terrible conflict in Israel and Palestine.

This does not leave us unmoved, in the city of Liberation. We sometimes feel powerless but do good by making a difference for the people here. I give a big compliment to our city council, which unanimously came to a joint message: "Only by peacefully discussing what is happening in the world around us and in our city can we bridge differences. Everyone must feel safe and welcome in Wageningen."

All things we can be proud of that make Wageningen almost paradise on earth. But what is the secret? Many of these things succeed because a tremendous number of Wageningers dedicate themselves to taking smaller or larger steps every day toward an even more beautiful and better city. Often entirely selflessly as volunteers. Helping refugees feel at home. Organizing activities. Keeping our city clean. Ensuring sports clubs keep running. Making sure there's plenty to do in our community centers. The total number of volunteers is not precisely known, but there must be

thousands. Wageningen has over 400 organizations working with volunteers. They are the backbone of our society, deserving our pride and appreciation, making Wageningen almost paradise on earth.

In that context, I want to explicitly mention the emergency services tonight, our BOAs, the fire brigade, the police, and the ambulance personnel. I am impressed by how these professionals and volunteers do their work day in and day out, sometimes under challenging conditions. Even during the recent holidays, they were ready day and night to keep our city safe. Without their dedication, we wouldn't have such a beautiful city.

Wageningen is almost paradise on earth. Fortunately, the Van Rossem brothers used the word 'almost' in their praise. Because sadly, our city is not paradise for everyone. Imagine living in poverty and dealing with increasingly expensive groceries and rising energy prices. It's good that initiatives like the Food Bank and the Toy Bank exist in our city, but it's sad to think that hundreds of families unfortunately have to rely on them. Imagine looking for your own home and being forced to stay with your parents. Imagine being an entrepreneur fighting for survival for years. Imagine having children who need extra care.

We, as a municipality, want to be there for these people too. We do what we can to make life a little better for them. We take smaller and larger steps. Engaging in important discussions about income security and how meaningful work can truly matter for people. Providing laptops for children living in poverty. But we can't do this alone. We also need the national government. That's why we are anxiously watching the coalition talks in The Hague. Our municipal finances look good for this year and the next. But if nothing changes from The Hague, 2026 will look very different. We join forces with other municipalities. Because that money is necessary. Otherwise, our city will be a bit less paradisiacal.

However, we remain positive. 2024 will be a year with exciting things ahead. I already mentioned the new Seven Oceans Simulator Center of MARIN, which will be put into use this year. Our city poet Ellen van der Kolk, unfortunately having one of her last official performances tonight, will undoubtedly have an equally fantastic successor. For our rector Arthur Mol, who is saying farewell this year, we already know who the successor is. Professor Carolien Kroeze will become the new Rector Magnificus of Wageningen University & Research this year. I have every confidence that together with Sjoukje Heimovaara, the Chair of the Executive Board, and Rens Buchwaldt, she can lead the university to an even brighter future.

Perhaps we'll also have a new Olympic champion among us, as cyclist Jan-Willem van Schip is certainly a contender after his world title last year.

The Arboretum, where the Van Rossem brothers enjoyed themselves, will become even more beautiful this year with a new edition of Beelden op de Berg. The Freedom Quarter at 5 Mei Plein is taking shape more and more; this year, the Heerenstraat Theater will already show the first films, becoming the place to discuss and learn about what freedom means to us. Around the Grote Kerk on the Markt, the municipality, together with the city, will plant trees to make the city greener and cooler. And our library will be even more attractive to visit, as there is a plan for renovation and sustainability.

All smaller and larger steps toward an even more beautiful and better city.

And as I reflect on it on the bench in the Arboretum, this, in my opinion, is the secret: doing good every day. From volunteers at the associations to shopkeepers in our beautiful city center, to civil servants at the municipality. No grandiose plans or actions destined to fail, but all doing what we can to support people where needed and enrich our city. But it's also my advice to all of you: look at what you can do to contribute. It may be a smaller or larger step, but contribute in whatever way you can. Only then will we continue to be the Wageningen we can all be proud of.

And we should express and promote that pride a bit more often. Only then can we be an example for others.

Dear people, with your support, I am confident that Wageningen will remain almost paradise on earth in 2024. We, with over 40,000 Wageningers, will continue to work hard for that. Now, together with DJ Tijmen, I have chosen Coldplay's song 'Paradise' to appropriately welcome the new year. But before we hear the music, I invite you to raise your glasses with me and toast to the new year.

DJ, music!