When the King Served as Co-pilot

In the Netherlands, everything works a little differently. I'm not (necessarily) thinking of legal cannabis, the red-light districts or the obsession with bicycles – issues that immediately spring to mind when I return home from Rotterdam. Rather, I'm thinking about how leaders there place great importance on the image that they are one of the people, and they really are.

You often read news stories about how the Minister for Education, for example, gives talks in schools in the mornings before cycling to the ministry. King Willem-Alexander, currently aged 58, when he sets off on an official trip in the government aircraft – a special Boeing 737 BBJ with the registration PH-GOV – pilots it himself, holding the rank of captain.



King Willem-Alexander

Of course, this does not mean that His Majesty can do as he pleases; air traffic regulations are far less lenient than that. The King has also been an active pilot with the Dutch national airline, KLM, for decades. Although he ascended the throne in 2013, he has not given up his hobby or his profession: as a guest pilot, he regularly flies on scheduled flights operated by KLM, the Dutch national airline – he first spoke about this work in 2017, after he was, so to speak, *'got caught'*.

On KLM flights, he works exclusively as a first officer (co-pilot). The reason for this is that he flies as a "guest pilot" and is not a full-time employee of the airline, so within the professional hierarchy, he is subordinate to KLM's captains. He serves in the fleet of KLM Cityhopper (KLM's subsidiary responsible for short-haul flights), mainly flying between major European cities. He usually opts for morning flights. He takes off from Amsterdam to a major European city (such as London or Berlin), then returns to Schiphol Airport by the afternoon via a return flight. This means he can attend to state affairs at the palace in the evening.


The pilot is actually His Majesty himself; there’s a good chance the passengers have no idea of this.

Flights are strictly organised around official state programmes. If a diplomatic visit, parliamentary event or trip abroad is scheduled, the flight is postponed. As he is listed as a ‘guest pilot’ with KLM, he is not bound by the same strict rules as full-time pilots.

Although there had been rumours before, in 2017 he spoke out publicly in the Dutch newspaper De Telegraaf. The reason for this was that the old Fokker 70s, which he had been flying until then, were being taken out of service. In order to retrain on the newer, larger aircraft (such as the Boeing 737 or the Airbus A321neo), it was no longer possible to maintain complete anonymity due to the training sessions and simulator tests.

Surprisingly, in most cases, passengers were generally unaware that the co-pilot on board was the King of the Netherlands. According to him, his KLM uniform and pilot’s cap help him maintain his incognito, proving to be an effective disguise as he walks through the terminals. Furthermore, as first officer, he is not required to announce his name over the PA system; it is usually the captain who greets the passengers on behalf of himself and the crew. Another important point is that, since the events of 11 September 2001, security regulations mean that the cockpit door remains locked during the flight, so passengers cannot see the crew at work.

The main reason, however, was safety and peace of mind. Sándor Vilmos did not want passengers to panic or the flight to attract undue attention if it became known that the monarch was piloting the aircraft. Flying represents freedom to him. If the passengers were to find out, the constant presence of the press and security services would ruin the experience for him.



King Sándor Vilmos of the Netherlands at the Falcon Leap international airborne exercise at Eindhoven Air Base on 18 September 2025.

The majority of the Dutch people view the King's hobby extremely positively and with pride. Many believe that this also demonstrates that William Alexander is a *"down-to-earth, modern monarch"*who has both feet firmly on the ground when he isn't flying. It is also a matter of prestige for the Dutch national airline (KLM) that the monarch after whom it is named serves in its ranks.

Next time you happen to fly on a KLM Cityhopper, bear this in mind: the King of the Netherlands might well be the co-pilot himself.

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