

HAARLEM: BEST SHOPPING IN THE NETHERLANDS

A location this fabulous and so close to Amsterdam shouldn't have to wait a moment longer. So I'm letting the proverbial cat out of the bag to tell you about a town so charming, with shopping so fantastic, you'd be crazy to pass it up. It's called Haarlem, and yes, it's the original city that Harlem New York was named after.

Just take a 15-minute train ride from the hustle and bustle of Amsterdam, and you'll find yourself in a whole different world. No more cars, backpackers, and buskers to contend with. Stroll along the cobblestone streets of Haarlem and you'll feel like you're getting a true slice of Dutch life. Cars are banned here, but bicycles are everywhere.

Like Amsterdam, Haarlem has its share of scenic canals, gorgeous architecture, and even its own tiny (albeit much less conspicuous) red-light district. It also happens to be anchored on one side by a beautiful old windmill called "The Adriaan."

The people here are not only incredibly tall but also extremely welcoming. I'll admit, being a small-statured pixie in a town of giants was a bit intimidating at first, but I was pleased to discover the people here are indeed the friendly-giant sort. So friendly, in fact, that when my companion and I stopped to eat at a local café *where the menu was in Dutch*, our waiter offered to translate the entire thing into English for us right there at the table. Fortunately, we knew the Dutch word for "thank you," (dank je wel).

EATING TIP: The Netherlands is known for its delicious cheeses: Gouda, Edam, and Leyden being some of the more famous ones, so it's hard to go wrong with a cheese sandwich. Pair it with a local beer and you're good to go!

GROTE MARKT: This is the center of Haarlem where all the shopping happens! Haarlem has been voted many times as the best shopping city in the Netherlands, and for good reason. I enjoyed clothes shopping here even more than in Paris. Street after street of unique shops with everything from shoes to dresses to men's clothes as well as décor and housewares... oh, and don't forget the chocolate!

Although my favorite part of shopping in Haarlem was the abundance of one-of-a-kind independent clothing shops, I will admit there were indeed a few chain stores around that I recognized. However, those were few and far between. The stores that seemed to be exclusively European chains had styles I rarely see here in Los Angeles. Oh, and by the way, if you're partial to men's super-pointy hipster shoes... welcome to paradise.

What's especially exciting and surprising about Haarlem is how affordable the shopping is. I won't lie and say I didn't drool over a \$400 sweater in a specialty shop, but on the same street, just a few doors down I discovered an adorable dress for only \$35.