It’s on the wall of a converted attic B&B, above El Pincho tapas restaurant, that I find the best summary of Haarlem: ‘The river curvaceous/ And canals deserted/ The city feels like a blanket’. These words are part of a mural lovingly created by the owners who, like other Haarlem residents, are proud of their quiet but cultured city, with much of its architecture preserved, and world-class exhibits in its museums and galleries. This mini Amsterdam minus the crowds is little-known by international tourists, who follow the herd to the bright lights of the capital or the widely-praised pottery in Delft. They have no idea what they’re missing out on.

Take Haarlem’s hofjes, or almshouses: each is a little oasis of calm. I met few other people as I walked through, and it felt like I’d stepped back in time. Though privately occupied, most hofjes can be visited, or at least seen from the street. The city archive is based next to one of the oldest hofjes, as I learned from Wouter Schelfhout, a city guide since the 1990s. He also took me to the most modern hofje, a wood-clad contemporary development in stark contrast to its centuries-old counterparts. Though Haarlemers aren’t afraid of modernity, they’ve preserved the past with quiet pride.

Remembering the Siege of Haarlem
For eight months, from October 1752 to July 1753, Haarlem held out against Spanish invaders and bore the brunt of their force. Tactically speaking, the Spanish focus on Haarlem allowed other Dutch towns and cities to regroup and strengthen their defences during the Eighty Years’ War. Find the siege memorial on Stationsplein square, in front of the train station and the bus depot. It depicts city governor Wigbolt Ripperda with Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer, an aristocratic widow who supplied wood and fighting women to the cause.

Building on this history, the Dutch slang word kenau initially meant bravery and toughness, but evolved to become derogatory, similar to ‘bitch’. Historians from 1872 onwards have questioned Hasselaer’s role, arguing there isn’t enough
The Golden Age really was a golden time for Haarlem: merchants prospered; artists flourished with new techniques for more realistic portraiture; the city was at its most powerful worldwide for his dark and expressive paintings such as The Laughing Cavalier (1624). He spent most of his life in Haarlem and is buried in the Grote Bavokerk. Whilst his work would draw art-loving crowds on its own, the dual-site Frans Hals Museum commissioned contemporary artists to respond to his paintings and hung the works together for the exhibition Rendezvous with Frans Hals, which I caught during my visit. This dynamic approach breathed new life into Hals’ style, provoked debate amongst visitors and attracted a younger crowd, drawn to oil paintings by Kerry James Marshall. I particularly loved a tongue-in-cheek series of film trailers, Where is Rocky II?, by Pierre Bismuth, attempting to uncover the location of a lost Ed Ruscha installation in the unforgiving Mojave desert.

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children nearby. Above the shop, the ten Booms hid 800 Jewish people between 1942-1944, passing most onto other Resistance members when it was safe to move, but four Jews were hidden in a specially constructed ‘Hiding Place’ in Corrie’s bedroom. By day, they roamed the house, kept safe by an alarm system installed by the Resistance network to warn of unexpected visitors. A Dutch collaborator reporting to the Nazis betrayed the ten Booms in 1944; they were sent to prison, where Caspar died and Corrie was placed in solitary confinement. From there, Corrie and Betsie endured another prison and then the Ravensbrück concentration camp, where Betsie died. Fortunately, the four Jewish people survived, having fled 72 hours after the Nazi raid.

Corrie’s book of her family’s Resistance efforts, The Hiding Place, touched readers around the world, and put the ten Boom house firmly on the map for many visitors – myself included - since the museum opened in 1988. Be warned: entry is free, but by group tours only, pre-booked at least five days in advance. The Hiding Place has been faithfully recreated and seeing its scale brings home the desperation of those hidden here.

Hannie Schaft was another Resistance member who made her mark, known as ‘the girl with the red hair.’ Schaft supplied her many Jewish friends with false ID cards, and she carried out attacks on Nazis and Dutch collaborators, making her a major target. Executed just three weeks before the end of the war, aged just 24, Schaft’s defiant last words to her bumbling executioners were: ‘I could shoot better.’ I recommend visiting her statue in Kenaupark, a short walk from the station, followed by a calm riverside walk to the city centre.

Whatever your historical focus, or your cultural interest, Haarlem has you covered, but with less crowds and noise than its more publicised rival cities. As the saying goes, it’s always the quiet ones…
Travel tips for visiting Haarlem, the Netherlands

**THE ESSENTIALS**

**Time difference:** GMT + 1

**Language:** The Netherlands’ official language is Dutch but English is widely spoken.

**Culture:** The Dutch culture is very diverse and tolerant.

**Electrical current/ plugs:** 220 AC volts. Plugs are rounded two-pronged variety.

**Religion:** The Netherlands is one of the most secular countries in Western Europe with only 39% being religiously affiliated.

**Water:** Tap water in the Netherlands is safe to drink and is stated as some of the best water in the world, although bottled water is readily available.

**Politics:** The Netherlands has constitutional monarchy, parliamentary democracy and decentralized unitary system. The king is the head of state and the prime minister is the head of government.

**Money**

**Currency:** The currency in the Netherlands is the Euro (EUR; symbol €) = 100 cents. Notes are in denominations of €500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5. Coins are in denominations of €2 and 1, and 50, 20, 10, 5, 2 and 1 cents.

**Credit cards:** Major international credit cards such as MasterCard, American Express, Cirrus, Maestro and Visa are widely accepted but not everywhere. It is recommended to have some cash with you.

**Visas**

Visas are not currently required for citizens of the EU/EEA/Switzerland, and those from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the US and some other countries do not need a visa if visiting for less than 90 days. For more information check www.government.nl on all countries.

**Flying**

Amsterdam Airport Schiphol is served by many international airlines. There are direct flights from several European cities and from all continents except Australia. Air France, Delta and KLM link Canada to Amsterdam. Those airlines also have direct flights from the US to Amsterdam, as well as American, British and United Airlines. Check www.schiphol.nl for all airlines and destinations.

The best way to reach Haarlem is via Amsterdam – either by bus (30-40 minutes) or train (20-30 minutes with one change) after flying to Schipol Airport, or use Eurostar’s new London-Amsterdam route and catch a train from Centraal Station (15 minutes).

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Visas are not currently required for citizens of the EU/EEA/Switzerland, and those from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the US and some other countries do not need a visa if visiting for less than 90 days. For more information check www.government.nl on all countries.

**Getting around**

Haarlem is a walkable city: you can see all the main sights on foot, but buses are widely available. Bike hire is recommended for confident cyclists only. Boat trips along the canal are a sedate alternative. For more advice, see visitholland.com.

**Weather**

The weather is milder between April and October and most visit during summer when the weather is warm. If you want to see the Netherlands when it is less crowded, plan your trip in April-May or September-October.

**Useful information**

Discover Haarlem’s rich brewing legacy at the Jopenkerk (Gedempte Voldersgracht 2), a former church turned Jopen BV brewery, bar and restaurant. Jopen launched in the 1990s as a project to celebrate the city’s 750th anniversary; by the 14th century Haarlem was a major brewing city, and beer was transported down the River Spaarne in 112-litre barrels known as ‘jopen’. The first two Jopen BV beers were based on Haarlem recipes from the 15th and 16th century.

Check into Hotel Lion d’Or, a slick and recently refurbished hotel on the edge of Stationsplein which dates back to 1839 and is a 10-minute walk from the Grote Markt.

**Holidays**

(In 2018): January 1 (New Year’s Day), April 1 (Easter Sunday), April 2 (Easter Monday), April 27 (King’s Birthday), May 4 (National Remembrance Day), May 5 (Liberation Day), May 10 (Ascension Day), May 20 (Pentecost Sunday), May 21 (Pentecost Monday), November 4 (All Saints Day), December 25 (Christmas Day), December 26 (St Stephens Day).