Haarlem Dunes Cycle Route

Coast, polders and nature reserves
40 of 29 km

Haarlem Dunes Cycle Route

This route shows you two different sides of Haarlem: to the east typical Dutch polders and to the west sand dunes and beaches. Highlights of the route are the dunes of National Park Zuid-Kennemerland and the historic centre of Haarlem.

From the bridge over the Spaarne you get a view over the skyline of Haarlem. Leaving the city, you cycle through flat open polders to the villages of Penningseveer, Spaarnwoude and Spaarndam. You pass several fortifications of the Defence Line of Amsterdam which is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. From Santpoort the route takes you through the dunes of National Park Zuid-Kennemerland to the seaside resort of Zandvoort. Via the old tram track you return to the centre of Haarlem.

Distance: 40 km (2h40) or 29 km (2h)
Starting point: Haarlem train station
- Bicycle rental
- Car parking
Shorter alternative: From Zandvoort take the train back to Haarlem
Public transport to route: Train to Haarlem train station

The route follows the numbered cycle network:


Start: leave the station on the south side (direction city centre). Turn right and then right again to go under the railway bridge. Here you pick up the numbered cycle network to 23.

***: At 1 head towards 22. After the railway line, continue straight on (Zijweg changes into Zijlstraat) until you reach the Grote Markt. Cross the market square on foot (pedestrian zone!) to the other side, towards the Church of St Bavo, and turn left into Smedestraat. Here you pick up the numbered cycle network to 22 (See city map on page 6).

Finish: At 22 head towards 23 until you reach the station.

Windmill De Veer at Penningseveer
Bunkers of the Defence Line of Amsterdam at Spaarndam.

Defence Line of Amsterdam

At Penningseveer you pass Fort Penningseveer and further on, just after Spaarndam, you cycle past Fort Benoorden Spaarndam. These are part of the Defence Line of Amsterdam, a 135 km-long ring of fortifications built between 1874 and 1914 to protect the Dutch capital from enemy invasion. It uses a typically Dutch means of defence that dates back to the 16th century: water management. In times of danger, large areas of land could be inundated in a matter of days thanks to a complex system of sluices, dams, dykes and flood canals. The water would only have been around 40 cm deep, but that was enough to make it impossible for the enemy to cross by foot or by boat and advance to Holland’s major cities.

The weak points in this natural defence line were the higher grounds which could not be flooded, like the area around Spaarndam. These sections were strengthened with bunkers, group shelters, forts (46 in total!) and batteries. The defence line was never fully used and became obsolete with the introduction of airplanes that could fly over the inundated areas. Now the Defence Line of Amsterdam is on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Spaarndam

The picturesque village of Spaarndam is built around a dam between the river Spaarne and the IJ. The dam dates back to the 13th century, when the IJ was still connected to the open sea (the Zuiderzee) and the low polders were under constant threat of flooding. The Kolksluis - the oldest working sluice of its kind in Europe - was constructed

13th-century Kolksluis at Spaarndam
where part of the dam was washed away during a storm. The hole behind the dam was turned into a harbour.

To symbolise Holland's constant battle with the water, there is a statue of the fictional character Hans Brinker - the boy who stuck his finger in the dyke to prevent his town from flooding. You'll see this statue to your left as you enter the village. Unfortunately no dyke was ever saved by somebody sticking their finger into a small hole; the story is merely a romanticised invention of a 19th-century American novelist.

Dunes at National Park Zuid-Kennemerland

Dunes and coast
Holland is protected from the North Sea by sand dunes which have been formed over centuries by the wind. In many places along the North Sea coast the row of dunes is narrow, sometimes it's even non-existent and dykes are needed. But no such worries in National Park Zuid-Kennemerland, where the dunes are almost 5 km broad.

First you cycle through the oldest dunes which lie furthest inland. Here mature trees stand tall and proud. But as you come closer to the sea and the dunes become younger, the landscape changes: the trees, which are no longer tall, are gnarled and battered by the salty wind, you'll see sea-buckthorn (**hippophae rhamnoides**) with its orange berries in autumn and finally only European beach grass (**ammophila arenaria**) will grow. The long roots of this pioneering grass hold together the sand, allowing new dunes to be formed.

In many places ground water is pumped out of the dunes for drinking water, making the dunes dry and unsuitable for moist-loving plants. This is not the case in the national park. Here the wet dune valleys, which are grazed by Highland cattle and wild ponies, are the ideal habitat for protected species such as the Bog-star (**parnassia palustris**). You can see its white flowers from July to September.

Zandvoort
Zandvoort is one of the most popular seaside resorts in Holland. The first bathing house was built in 1827 when sea-bathing was all the rage under the elite. It was considered to be greatly beneficial to one’s health. Beach tourism boomed at the end of the 19th century when Zandvoort became accessible by train and by hypermodern electric tram. The famous Blauwe Tram (Blue Tram), which connected Zandvoort with Haarlem and Amsterdam, made it possible for ordinary Amsterdamers to visit Zandvoort for the day. The tram service was discontinued in the 1950s. Since then part of the old tram track has been turned into a cycle path.

Nowadays little is left of Zandvoort’s former grandeur. The old bathing houses and boulevards were torn down by the Germans during World War II to make place for the German Antlantikwall fortifications. After the war, Zandvoort was rebuilt again in a rather less grand style, catering for the masses that still flock to the beach on sunny summer days.

Cycling along the boulevard at Zandvoort

Haarlem
The Grote Markt is the big market square in the centre of Haarlem. In the Middle Ages, before the square was paved, it was known as ‘Het Sant’ (The Sand). The Grote Markt has always been the heart of the city. It’s where goods that were brought in over the River Spaarne were traded and people met. It’s also where the city’s government was located. The current City Hall, built in Dutch Renaissance style, dates back to the early 17th century, when Haarlem was still the second largest city in Holland. The City Hall is now used for civic weddings.

Haarlem city centre

Church of St Bavo
The Church of St Bavo is an important landmark that has dominated the Haarlem skyline for centuries. It features in various paintings by the great Dutch masters of the 17th century, such as Jacob Isaackszoon van Ruisdael and Jan Vermeer of Haarlem. But is wasn’t just the impressive late Gothic architecture that attracted visitors
from abroad. Handel, Mendelssohn and the 10-year-old Mozart came to play on the church’s famous organ by Christiaan Müller, one of the world’s leading organ builders. If you’re interested in hearing the organ, there are regular organ concerts you can attend. Some of them are free of charge. And while you’re enjoying the music, keep an eye out for bats flying overhead. The church is home to a protected bat colony!

The Church of St Bavo is open to the public. For opening hours and admission fees, go to http://www.bavo.nl/bladen/bezoeken.php.

Church of St Bavo at the Grote Markt in Haarlem