

NEXT NEIGHBOURHOOD HAARLEM, THE NETHERLANDS

A satellite becomes a star

With its mix of national park, beaches and affordable housing, it's no wonder that Haarlem is increasingly luring people from Amsterdam, says **Ian Bickerton**

According to excitable types on the local council, Haarlem, a mid-sized provincial Dutch town 7km from the North Sea coast, might one day merit a place alongside Paris and London as a European cultural heavyweight.

For the time being it will have to make do with quietly stealing the thunder of Amsterdam, its six-times-bigger neighbour 20km inland.

Before Karin Crolla moved here from the Dutch capital in 2000 she thought it a "small, dull place". There are a dozen larger cities in the Netherlands but with one child already, twins on the way and a tiny apartment, space was at a premium. "We wanted a house with a garden but in Amsterdam everything was either too expensive or too small," says Michel, Karin's husband, who is an urban planner.

Persuaded to visit Haarlem by friends, who had already decided to move, the Crollas spent a Saturday morning sipping coffee on Grote Markt, the main square, which the council describes as "one of the most beautiful in Europe", in the shadow of the towering 16th-century Gothic St Bavo church. The tomb of artist Frans Hals, who fled to Haarlem from Antwerp in 1585, lies beneath the church's floor and a 10-year-old Mozart played its Christiaan Muller organ. Then the biggest in the world, the instrument prompted an awe-struck Herman Melville to mention it in *Moby Dick*. "Would you not think you were inside of the great Haarlem organ?" Melville wrote of the whale's mouth.

The Crollas drove round, noting "the nice houses and the nice prices. Three [of us] had already made up their minds that they wanted to live in Haarlem," says Karin, a communications adviser with the Amsterdam council. "By chance, we had parked right outside an estate agent, so I said, 'OK, we need action, let's go in.'"

Every day four people just like her move from Amsterdam to Haarlem – a number significant enough on an annual basis to register in city statistics. They are in search of what the capital struggles to offer: space at an affordable price.

Timon Hogervorst, from the Huizenstede estate agency, has just sold a 1920s semi-detached house to a family that found in three months in Haarlem what they had unsuccessfully sought for three years in Amsterdam. The house, with three bedrooms and a large loft, is in the popular Ramplaan *kwartier*, west of the city centre, and cost about €500,000.

One in three house-hunters on Hoger-

vorst's books hails from Amsterdam – where prices are 25-30 per cent higher. They usually have between €600,000 and €1m to spend. More than a third of residents in Ramplaan came from the capital, he says.

"Most of Haarlem comprises family homes built in the first 40 years of the past century. Amsterdam is mostly apartments in this price range."

Saskia Olde Weghuis, who also works for Amsterdam council, and Marcel Evers, an account manager at Capgemini, moved to Overveen, between Haarlem and the sea, from Haarlem Noord in June last year as their family grew to include three boys.

"In one part of our old street there were six or seven families from Amsterdam. Here it's the same," says Olde Weghuis, seated at the dining room table in the large open-plan living room. The house cost €625,000 and another €100,000 to modernise, including knocking out the garage wall to extend the kitchen.

The waiting lists at schools in Overveen and Haarlem Zuid are bulging with the names of Amsterdam babies. Journalist Jeroen Wester and his wife Celia Wester-Vos bought their Haarlem home, which looks out on a sweep of landscaped park and canal, on December 1 2003, the day after their oldest son was born. They briefly considered relocating to 't Gooi, which includes the towns of Hilversum and Bussum, 20km south-east of Amsterdam, but dismissed it as "full of bored rich people wandering in the woods".

Haarlem, by contrast, is hip enough to have the recently opened Patronaat. Smack in the centre of town, this funky music venue features floating walls to dampen sound and bright red lavatories in plain view of the road.

A walk away is the Toneelschuur, a theatre, arthouse cinema and café that, when it opened in 2003, was praised by one magazine reviewer as "the most beautiful theatre in the Netherlands". The glass, brick and wood design was dreamed up by Joost Swarte, the Haarlem-born cartoonist known across the world.

Down the road is the restored Philharmonie, where Ravel and Stravinsky conducted in the early 20th century, while across town the Schouwburg, another monumental concert hall, is being renovated.

"If a local authority has that in the palm of its hand, it must be possible to build an incredibly strong image as a cultural city," wrote Jan Tromp, a respected Dutch critic, referring also to the 18th-century Teylers Museum, the oldest in the Netherlands and one of Haarlem's 1,600 listed monuments.

In the adjacent village of Bloemendaal, Evert Jan Stoel, an estate agent, has a theory to explain the attraction. "We are not selling a house but a lifestyle," he says. His journalist daughter and her partner have abandoned an 18-month hunt for a house in Amsterdam to try Haarlem too. "She has 50 sq metres and wants 90 for less than €350,000," Stoel

says. "There are 10 couples in the queue for that sort [of home] in Amsterdam and its €100,000 cheaper here."

Haarlem has more restaurants per resident than any city in the Netherlands and the best shops, according to national surveys. It is safer and greener possibility that Haarlem may one day catch up.

Jan Nieuwenburg, the alderman responsible for town development, takes the lift to the 10th floor of a new office building on the eastern fringe of Haarlem to point out Schiphol Airport and the high-rise towers of Amsterdam's new Zuidas business centre. The town's proximity to the capital and the airport is a further incentive to relocate, he says. Most of those who came from Amsterdam continue to work in the capital. However, Nieuwenburg is confident business will boom in Haarlem, not least because office rents are a fraction of its neighbour's.

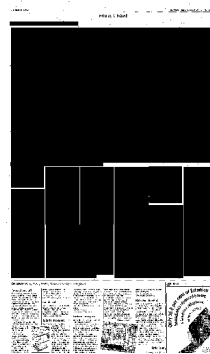
In the 17th century, more than 100 breweries lined the River Spaarne that threads its way through the town. The closure, two years ago, of the 19th-century Droste chocolate factory symbolically marked the end of Haarlem's industrial heyday. But the town is enjoying a spurt of cultural, residential and business renewal that Nieuwenburg says will deliver "a huge impulse".

Cavernous buildings, which once housed the turbines that provided the city's electricity supply, now offer exhibition space as part of a project called Nieuwe Energie. Microsoft, Sony and Royal Dutch Shell are among recent clients. The Droste factory will house homes and workspaces and its chocolate-making machinery is to be incorporated into the landscaping of a surrounding residential development, one of a series of projects across town to provide several thousand homes by 2010.

Nearby, another monument to Haarlem's past has never been busier. It was from the town's impressive art nouveau railway station that the first Dutch train ran to Amsterdam in 1839. Now the journey takes 15 minutes, there are six trains an hour and the traffic is heading in the other direction.

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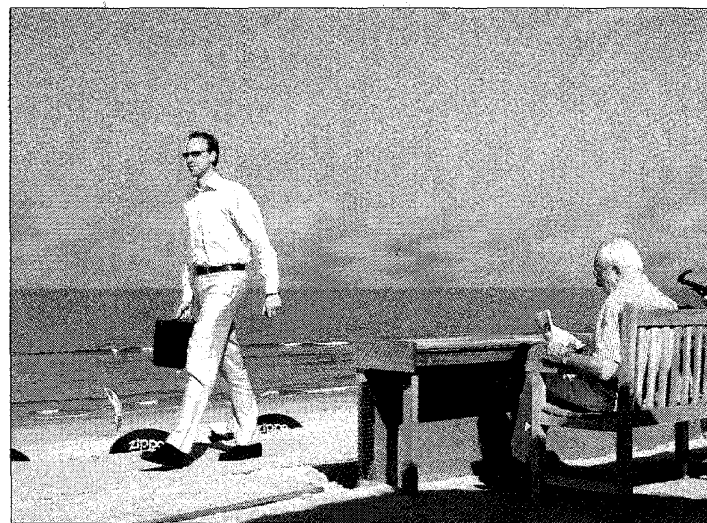


than anywhere in the densely populated western part of the country. "A street from a Sunday afternoon in the 1950s" was how Martin Bril, a columnist with the de Volkskrant newspaper, described Julianalaan, the tree-lined avenue that links Haarlem to the sea.

It is that connection that is the town's ultimate selling point. Haarlem's back garden is the 2,500ha Kennemerland national park, with wild horses, dunes and idyllic hidden bathing pools and a stunning beach. "I remember the beach from trips here as a teenager," says Olde Weghuis. "And it's why I always wanted to live here."

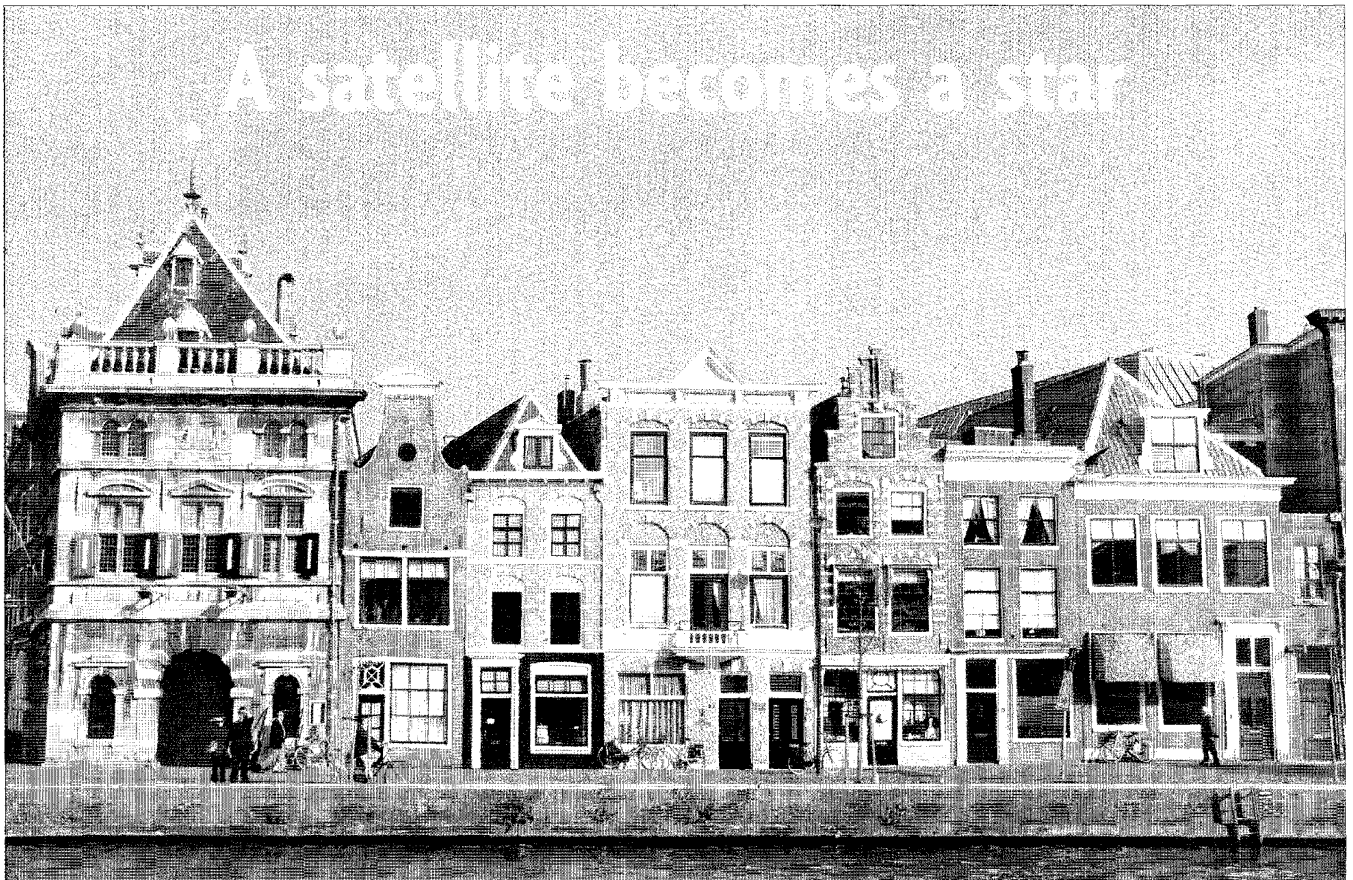
Mind you, with the population of 147,000 forecast to rise by more than 10,000 in the next decade, even an €800,000 budget does not guarantee a home, Hogervorst says. That is particularly true of much sought-after houses with original features such as stained glass windows, high decorative ceilings and a garden on the sunny side. "If you start viewings on a Tuesday, you will have sold the house by Thursday or Friday," he says.

House prices rose 5.3 per cent this year from 2005, compared with a national average of 4.7 per cent, according to figures from the Dutch Association of Estate Agents. While Amsterdam recorded a 7.2 per cent increase, agents do not discount the



Selling points: a beach and a national park are additional attractions

A satellite becomes a star



Little Amsterdam: Haarlem's ancient quarters are reminiscent of the Dutch capital but house prices are considerably lower