Over the centuries, Leiden, a short train ride from Amsterdam, has welcomed scientists, philosophers, students and freethinkers of all kinds.

All the Canals and Charm of Amsterdam. None of the Crowds.

Leiden, a city whose university is often called the Oxford of the Netherlands, features museums, gardens, murals and plenty of ways to stretch your mind.

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- Nov. 12, 2025

The story of how the Dutch city of Leiden became a global center of science and philosophy begins with an unusual tale of bravery.

With Spanish forces besieging the city in 1574, according to a local myth, Mayor Pieter van der Werff made a pledge to reassure starving residents: They could eat his arm, if it came to that.

Luckily for him, it didn't. Soon afterward, the Dutch cut the dikes, flooding the surrounding land and allowing ships to arrive with provisions. For their courage during the siege, William of Orange, a powerful prince, awarded the people of Leiden a university.

The De Valk Windmill Museum, along the Rijnsburgersingel canal, in Leiden.

> That university, founded in 1575, has become the Oxford of the Netherlands, the heart of a city that has drawn generations of students, academics, scientists and freethinkers, including René Descartes, Albert Einstein and the Mayflower Pilgrims. It is also the birthplace of Rembrandt.

Full of canals, cobblestone streets and murals, Leiden is just as picturesque as its much larger neighbor Amsterdam, about 25 minutes northeast by train. But it also offers opportunities for intellectual exploration, with 13 museums, botanical gardens and a convivial canal-side cafe culture where you may make a few discoveries of your own.

Birthplace of 'Tulip Mania'

I was cruising down a cobblestone street along the Rapenburg canal on a rented bicycle — what the Dutch call an omafiets, or "grandma bike," with a rack, friction-powered lights, wide handlebars and a bell that sounded with a satisfying "bringadingsdings" (day rental from Easyfiets, 15 euros, or about $17.30).

Riding along the canal, a medieval moat that has become the city's cultural center, I passed beneath lampposts adorned with trailing red and pink geraniums on my way to one of the oldest botanical gardens in Western Europe.

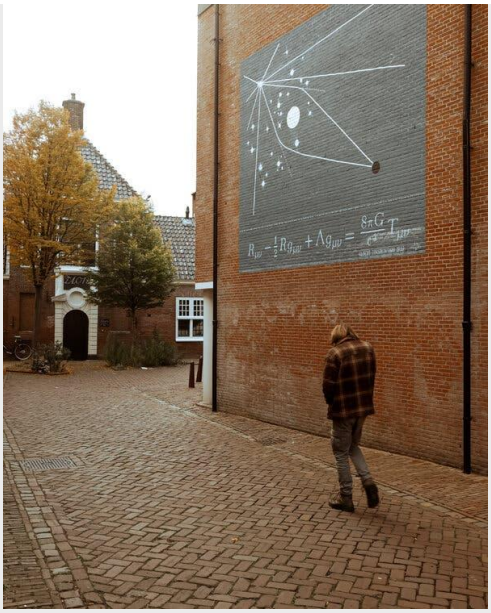
The garden, the Hortus Botanicus (entry, €11) dates to the 1590s, when plants like sage, rosemary and foxglove were originally grown there and used to train medical students.

The Hortus Botanicus, one of the oldest botanical gardens in Western Europe, once focused on growing medicinal herbs but now also features attractions like pitcher plants as well as traditional woven beehives.

I parked my bike along the Rapenburg and passed through the gate of Leiden University's Academy Building to reach the botanical garden, flanked by the Singel canal and academic buildings with metal lattice windows. The entrance garden has been carefully restored to its original layout and inventory of medicinal plants from 1590. The garden features an apiary with dome-shaped hives made of woven wheat as well as Japanese elm, walnut and chestnut trees imported in the 1800s. Greenhouses hold botanical wonders like orchids, water lilies and the titan arum, also known as the "giant penis" plant, which was in rare bloom during my visit.

The Hortus Botanicus holds another designation: It's where the professor Carolus Clusius planted the first tulips to bloom in the Netherlands, imported from Turkey. These flowers laid the groundwork for the intense speculation of "tulip mania" in late 1636 and early 1637, when some tulip bulbs sold for nearly as much as a house.

Leiden's Wall Poems murals include works, like Shakespeare's Sonnet XXX, in their original languages.



Many murals in Leiden focus on the city's scientific heritage, including this one featuring Einstein's theory of gravity.

> Leiden is a city of murals, as one painted just outside the buzzing cafe in the greenhouse reminded me. A citywide public art project called Wall Poems includes 110 murals with famous verses by the likes of Rilke, Yeats, Neruda and Shakespeare, all painted in their original language to capture the city's diverse heritage.

Some of the city's murals focus on science, Leiden's lingua franca. A mural visible from Hortus Botanicus shows how a drug or chemical can affect the body — a nod to the medicinal plants grown there. One wall displays a formula describing Snell's Law, which shows how light changes as it passes through different substances. Another

portrays the bending of light alongside Einstein's equation for gravity. Einstein, a regular visiting professor, did some of his work on relativity in Leiden with his friend and colleague Paul Ehrenfest before emigrating to the United States.

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The university's motto is "Praesidium Libertatis," or "Bastion of Freedom," a sentiment embodied by two stained-glass windows I passed in the Academy while leaving the garden. One commemorates William of Orange expelling the Spanish, an event that set the stage for Dutch independence. The other honors Rudolph Pabus Cleveringa, a law professor imprisoned for protesting the invading Germans' removal of Jewish professors in 1940.

A plaque along the Rapenburg near the Academy marks the original home of the upstart printer Louis Elzevier, who, in the 1600s, published the work of Galileo and others who questioned the Catholic Church's teachings. In fact, when Galileo was under house arrest in Italy, his manuscripts containing the theory that the Earth revolved around the sun were smuggled to Leiden, which was then a haven for academics who challenged Catholic orthodoxy. Other freethinking philosophers such as Descartes and Spinoza also published in Leiden, benefiting from its atmosphere of tolerance.

Home to Pilgrims and Painters

Café Barrera, on the Rapenburg, occupies a building where the Dutch World War II resistance fighter Erik Hazelhoff Roelfzema once lived.

Back on the Rapenburg, I took a left at the classic Café Barrera, which occupies a building that was once home to the World War II resistance fighter Erik Hazelhoff Roelfzema. Continuing down the lane, I reached Pieterskerk, a Gothic

church with roots dating back to the 12th century. Across the street is the spot where the house occupied by the minister John Robinson once stood, now marked by a plaque. He led a group of Protestants escaping religious persecution in England to Leiden. That group would board a ship called the Mayflower in 1620 and sail into American history. The Pilgrims worshiped in Robinson's house, many living in the small rooms off the small back courtyard, which is open to the public.

Image

The Pilgrim Museum Leiden shows how the group would have lived shortly before setting off for the New World aboard the Mayflower in 1620.

Image

A King James Bible dating to 1635 at the Pilgrim Museum Leiden.

Next to the church, the Pilgrim Museum Leiden (€9.50) includes period books, furnishings and tiles, showing how the Pilgrims would have lived in Leiden just before their voyage. On the ground floor, visitors tour a recreation of a 17th-century house, while the upper floor portrays what life was like in Plymouth Colony, now Massachusetts. One of the Pilgrims, Samuel Fuller, was a self-taught doctor who most likely used university resources like the botanical garden to prepare himself for the New World.

Not far away on Weddesteeg, a plaque marks the house where Rembrandt was born, and a short walk from there, you'll find the Young Rembrandt Studio, where he and his friend Jan Lievens learned to paint. At the studio (€2.50), you can catch a video installation about their formative years in Leiden.

Image

The Young Rembrandt Studio, where Rembrandt and his friend Jan Lievens learned to paint.

Leiden throws a birthday party for Rembrandt every July in the Pieterskerk district, where performers act out Rembrandt paintings, including "The Night Watch" and "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp."

In the Footsteps of Pioneers

Image

Vooraf en Toe, a cafe along the New Rhine River.

Image

The interior of the cafe combines elements of Art Nouveau and Soviet-style design.

Back on the bike, I wove through the narrow lanes on my way to lunch at Vooraf en Toe, a cafe whose interior felt like a combination of Art Nouveau and Soviet design. I ordered a flat white and grilled brioche topped with a poached egg, avocado and salmon (€21) and protected it from prowling sea gulls. On the left, I could see the charming Koornbrug, one of the Netherlands' oldest covered bridges, and on a wall mural across the canal, the words of an E.E. Cummings poem that began, "The hours rise up putting off stars and it is." The sun flickered on the canal.

There is a market here on Wednesday and Saturday, so, thinking ahead for dinner, I bought thick chunks of Gouda and Edam from a stall heavy with waxed wheels of

cheese, along with olives and apricots from a Moroccan stand arranged like a Marrakesh souk. Down the street at my favorite bakery, Mamie Gourmande, I bought a loaf of rich and heavy brown cereal bread.

I stowed my market treats in my bike panniers outside the Rijksmuseum Boerhaave, the Netherlands' national science history museum. Inside, its treasure trove of golden scientific instruments transported me to a time before the Scientific Revolution when we collectively knew very little about our bodies and the world around us — when humans thought the Earth was the center of the universe and bloodletting would help cure disease.

Image

A display of 19th-century glass eyes at the Rijksmuseum Boerhaave, the Netherlands' national science history museum.

Image

The museum's Anatomical Theater, dating to 1594, once allowed medical students (and the public) to learn how human bodies worked by watching dissections.

The centerpiece of the museum is a replica of the original Anatomical Theater from 1594, where medical students and the public could watch dissections of human bodies to learn how they worked. Here you can see early etchings of the interior of the human body, some of the first microscopes by Antonie van Leeuwenhoek and telescopes by Christiaan Huygens, which were the first to spot the rings of Saturn. The museum is named after Herman Boerhaave, a medical pioneer who developed doctor-patient interaction as a teaching technique, as well as the modern concept of doing medical rounds.

The very canals that encircle Leiden serve as a physical embodiment of Dutch ingenuity, so no intellectual exploration of the city is complete without getting on the water. I traded my bike for an elegant wooden boat with a small motor for cruising the canals (€140 from Boatnext; three-hour slots during the day, two hours in the evening). I glided past 17th-century gabled houses with restaurant terraces of friends chatting over beers, cargo bikes hauling children and the De Valk Windmill Museum, housed in a converted windmill.

And here, in the middle of this city that inspired scientists, artists and philosophers, I was content to enjoy a floating picnic with the bread, cheese, olives and apricots I'd picked up at the market. I'm sure Mayor van der Werff would have approved of this feast.