



ANTWERP: A GEM OF A CITY

BRILLIANT FACETS OF HISTORY, ART AND ARCHITECTURE,
IN A SETTING GILDED WITH DINING, DESIGN AND DIAMONDS.

By Jane McIntosh, creator of [Jane's Smart Art Guides™](#)

If you're attracted to art, history, design or excellent food, Antwerp is a terrific place to spend two or three days. It's a jewel of a small city, known to Europeans as wonderful weekend destination. But it's been largely undiscovered by Americans, although English is widely spoken: since so few people in the world speak Flemish (Dutch), many Antwerpans speak multiple languages.

While it's no longer "the Metropolis" of Northern Europe that it once was, Antwerp has a major port and a huge diamond industry: some 85% of the world's diamonds pass through here. Antwerp offers exceptional art, shopping, and an active night life. It's become an important fashion and design center – so much so that it's been called the Milan of northern Europe. Even the zoo offers more than you'd expect, with well-tended gardens and 19thC fantasy architecture, like the remarkable Egyptian temple: home to the giraffes.



The old town center, Oude Stad, has been well preserved, with its mediaeval and gothic architecture and narrow cobbled streets. It's a fascinating place to explore on foot, and "sensible" shoes are a good idea for negotiating the cobblestones. Pretty little squares and charming lanes, fascinating old buildings, art-filled churches, notable museums, stylish boutiques, plenty of excellent restaurants and friendly people make for a rewarding and totally pleasurable wandering experience.

There are no fewer than 18 museums in this bite-sized city (460,000 population). Interested in religious art? secular art? photography? fashion? diamonds? silver? the early days of printing? brewing? maritime history? ethnography? folklore? It's safe to say there's a museum in Antwerp that will appeal to you.

This was Peter Paul Rubens' home town, and a visit to his beautifully-maintained house and garden is a treat. The house includes a semi-circular gallery -- which Rubens based on the Pantheon in Rome -- where he displayed his collection of sculpture, as well as his studio with a mezzanine from which potential buyers were able to view his work. (museum.antwerpen.be/rubenshuis) Rubens is buried in St. Jacobskerk, with its heavily decorated, decidedly baroque interior. Rubens painted the *Our Lady Surrounded by Saints* especially to decorate his own tomb.



Less crowded yet equally interesting and well restored is the Rockoxhuis. This was the home of a close friend of Rubens, Nicolaas Rockox: burgomaster, humanist, patron of the arts, and numismatist who played a leading role in the public life of Antwerp for almost half a century. Two of the highlights are the restored



early seventeenth-century town garden in the inner courtyard, which contains plants that Rockox was known to have grown here himself, and a Pieter Bruegel the Younger's copy of his father's incomparably entertaining *Netherlandish Proverbs*. Plan on having some fun studying the details in this famous painting, with its rowdy peasant scenes depicting 100 proverbs ... many of which are recognizable as sayings we know in English. It's a must-see if you're traveling with kids. (rockoxhuis.be)

Across the Oude Stad, looming conspicuously on the edge of the red-light district - which, not surprisingly, was the skippers' quarter in the days of river transport -- is St. Pauluskerk. Until the French Revolution, its huge monastery housed as many as 1700 Dominican friars. Although the exterior of the church is late gothic, it has a 17thC bell tower and a baroque interior lined with the work of Flemish masters, including Rubens, Jordaens and Van Dyck. Just inside the church gate is a unique and rather

peculiar feature. It's an early-18thC sculpture garden containing dozens of life-sized sandstone statues of religious figures with, as its focal point, a strange mass of rocks depicting Calvary Mount: looking like nothing so much as an accretion of barnacles climbing 50 feet up the supporting wall! It was the brainchild of two Dominicans who went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and came back with the plan of creating a replica "little Jerusalem."



Restrained in comparison, St. Carolus Borromeuskerk presents a more refined baroque style. Modeled on the Gesù, the first Jesuit church in Rome, the Church of St. Charles Borromeo borders one side of a pleasant square about a five minute walk from the old town center. Rubens had a hand in the decoration of the façade, as well as contributing almost 40 paintings to the interior. Sadly, in 1718, lightning struck the church and most of his work, including the painted ceiling, was burned to cinders.

As you'd expect, there's a nice, although small, collection of Rubens' work at the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (Royal Museum of Fine Arts). This lovely and spacious 19thC neoclassical temple of art displays a fine collection of 14th to 20th century Flemish painting. A highlight is Jean Fouquet's *Virgin and Child Surrounded by Angels*, the mid-15thC dating of which defies credulity, distorting the chronology of artistic style. (museum.antwerpen.be/kmska)



The Mayer Van Den Bergh Museum, in a purpose-built 16th C-style building, houses a private collection of 14th through 16th C painting, sculpture, illuminated manuscripts, stained glass, and decorative arts. Not to be missed is Pieter Bruegel the Elder's masterpiece, "Dulle Griet" or "Mad Meg". (museum.antwerpen.be/mayervandenbergh)

Then there's the Shmidt Van Gelder Museum, the former mansion of a knighted collector who had a passion for eighteenth-century art. His was an elegant collection of furnishings, painting, sculpture, jewelry, oriental carpets, French tapestries and European, Japanese and Chinese porcelain.

The late-Gothic Butchers' Hall, where the Vleeshuis Museum is today, was originally the only place in the city where meat was legally sold. The venerable old building now houses archaeological finds, applied art and objects which document local history. Here you'll learn that Antwerp was once a leading producer of harpsichords and carved "retable" altarpieces.



There's one place at the heart of the old town that has played a role in every major event the city has seen since the middle ages: Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal, or Our Lady Cathedral. (dekathedraal.be) To learn the history of the cathedral is to learn the history of this city, which by virtue of its geographic position, and its adherence to Catholicism, was for centuries occupied by foreign powers and sat at the center of often-violent international and religious tensions.



This beautiful late-Gothic cathedral isn't as widely known as Notre Dame in Paris, for example, or Chartres, but it's a glorious repository of six centuries of Flemish artistic development. For starters, Our Lady Cathedral houses no fewer than four works by Peter Paul Rubens, an elegant marble Madonna of the 14th C, stained glass windows dating from as early as 1503, and some exceptional 17th century sculpture. It took more than 200 years to build, and over the course of time it endured a catastrophic fire, the Calvinist iconoclasm of 1566 and subsequent gutting by French revolutionaries in the 1790s. In the 20th century it faced neglect and wartime bombings. But entering Antwerp's restored Cathedral today will take your breath away! (janessmartart.com/antwerp)

If your appreciation of art leans more modern, you'll want to go to the MUHKA Museum, Antwerp's Museum of Contemporary Art, which is devoted to work from 1970 to the present day. It's housed in 43,000 sq. ft. of exhibition space in a converted grain silo and adjoining warehouse in the revitalized, lively 'Het Zuid' or South area of the city. A rooftop bar offers grand views of the River Scheldt. (muhka.be) Or stroll around the Middelheim open air sculpture garden with its audio guide to hear about the highlights among 300 works arranged by date, starting with Rodin. (museum.antwerpen.be/middelheimopenluchtmuseum)



Slightly further afield, near Berchem Station – calling for a tram ride on the # 8 or #11 -- is the Zurenborg Quarter. In the early 20thC, Antwerp's upper and middle classes lived in this chic village. Today this residential district remains a wonder of art-nouveau architecture, with more than 170 houses now designated on the historic buildings list.

Of course, you'll want to eat while you're in Antwerp ... and you may be in for a surprise. There is superb dining to be enjoyed, with an abundance of fine restaurants for a city of this size. Typically lunch is served from noon until 3, and dinner from 8 'til 11 or midnight. Clustered in the old town you'll find many restaurants, dressy and casual, up-scale and moderate, that serve traditional fare. The restaurants on the Grote Markt tend to be geared to tourists, but steps away from the square, in the side streets, you'll find some excellent places favored by the locals. One of my favorites is the somewhat pricey [Neuze Neuze](http://neuzeneuze.be), which is pronounced, roughly, "Noysuh Noysuh". (neuzeneuze.be). If you want to try horse -- which many Americans don't -- De Peerdestal, in a converted stable, is a local standard. The previously mentioned south district, 'Het Zuid', is known for its trendy cafés and restaurants.

There are hundreds of different Belgian beers -- each brand with its own special glass established by law -- and lots of pleasant places to try them, along with a plate of frites. Try De Pelgrom, an atmospheric tavern in a brick-walled mediaeval cellar, or the ever-popular Den Engel on the Grote Markt, named for the gilt angel that sits atop the building. Belgians claim that French fries are a misnomer -- that "frites" originated in Belgium and are to be eaten with mayonnaise.

And of course there's the chocolate! There are chocolate boutiques all over town, each featuring a fabulous selection, either hand-made or the almost-as-delectable machine-made brands. Of the machine-made, Neuhaus gets my vote, but Leonidas is a strong -- or perhaps I should say, sweet -- contender.

If you go:

The Travel Belgium website is a good planning resource: (trabel.com/antwerp)

Once you're there, you'll find the Tourist Office on the Grote Markt #13, Phone +32 (0)3 232 01 03

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