

Antwerp: a surprising visit

Antwerp is different from other cities. That's because the city and its people keep reinventing themselves. They go against the grain, in the belief that everything can always be 'newer' and 'better'. That's something from which you, as a visitor, only stand to gain.

CITY BY THE RIVER

Antwerp is divided by the River Scheldt, even though both riverbanks remain connected by the St Anna's Tunnel, or the 'underpass' as the locals call it. Walking through this tunnel that is several hundred metres long is quite an experience in itself. It starts with the wooden escalators, the oldest in Europe. On arrival on the Left Bank of the Scheldt, you are treated to the best view of the city.

Beside a river, Antwerp also has a sea port, which is a real bonus, because cruise liners moor at a stone's throw from Antwerp's historic centre. Inland and seagoing vessels are also happy to anchor at a port which is located 80 kilometres inland. Interested to find out more about this port area? There are several bus, boat and bicycle tours that will take you past the ships, quays, cranes and terminals.

The port has turned Antwerp into a bustling trading centre, where people shop, eat and live. In the *Eilandje* district, you can still soak up the port atmosphere of yesteryear. Even though the distinctive neighbourhood was recently given a trendy make-over, the MAS | Museum aan de Stroom (museum at the river) and Red Star Line museum show the history (and future) of the river, port and passengers.

INNOVATIVE KNOWLEDGE CITY

Antwerp has always been characterised by its innovativeness. Printing, for example, had its cradle in Antwerp, and the international diamond hallmarks, including 'Cut in Antwerp' also originated here.

Antwerp's innovative character can be felt throughout the city. You can stroll from one pop-up to the next, where budding entrepreneurs will amaze you with their concepts. Don't forget to take in one of the most successful urban renewal projects: Park Spoor Noord, a green oasis in a former marshalling yard.

Antwerp's innovativeness can also be tasted: you can catapult a little cocoa up your nose when you have a chocolate shooter or choose tapas from a conveyor belt. Or how about a launderette which also serves cocktails or lunch in a shoe store? Michelin-star businesses have also been known to colour outside the lines. That's how The Jane set up shop in a former chapel, where the cooker took the place of the altar. And even traditional establishments continue to innovate, such as city brewery De Koninck – which was founded in 1833 and brews the famous Antwerp Bolleke – has recently started serving a modern city beer, Wild Jo, in a completely new setting.

To move between hotspots, just jump on your bike. Antwerp has numerous city bikes ready for you in one of the many Velo stations. You can plot your cycling route with your smartphone: Antwerp shares all the tourist information online or via apps like 'This is Antwerp', 'Fashion in Antwerp' and 'Antwerp loves diamonds'. Thanks to the free Wi-Fi network in the city centre, you're hooked up in seconds.

CREATIVE CITY

Antwerp exudes creativity – ranging from Rubens, the Antwerp Six, right through to Luc Tuymans. Even the architects who have worked in Antwerp over the years left their creative mark. During a tour of the city, you will come across late Classical masterpieces, contemporary delights and anything in between. Many cities would kill for such a course, while Antwerp can just accommodate its shops in those architectural treasures – just check out the The (shopping) Stadsfeestzaal or the Palace in Meir when you get the chance.

As you take in culture during your shopping trip, you can also visit one of the many Antwerp museums, of course. They are all unique: the Middelheim Museum is a park full of sculptures and Plantin-Moretus was the first museum to feature on the UNESCO World Heritage List. And then there is The Rubens House, full of works by the famous master. His paintings can also be admired at the Cathedral of Our Lady. Its spire, the highest of the Low Countries, is also World Heritage, a fine achievement, if you consider that only one of spires was completed.

But Antwerp is more than historic buildings and old masters. Contemporary art, modern design and trendsetting fashion claim their rightful place in museums (make sure to pay M KHA or MoMu a visit) and public places: at the base of the MAS, there is a mosaic by artist Luc Tuymans, and well-known illustrators and cartoonists created cartoon-covered walls in the city.

METROPOLIS ON A HUMAN SCALE

The locals like to refer to their city as a 'metropolis' – you do well not to contradict them in this. They have a point, because the city accommodates no fewer than 174 nationalities. Fortunately, thanks to its modest dimensions, Antwerp remains a metropolis on a human scale: everything is easily accessible and always within reach.

Which is good news for visitors, because that way, visitors can get to know Antwerp very quickly, with all its flavours, styles and idiosyncrasies – and there are quite a few. Indeed, each district has its own perspective on trends, multiculturalism and history. No two parks are alike and each square is different. And during the Summer of Antwerp, there is something going on at every street corner, while Winter in Antwerp heats up the Christmas period. In Antwerp, your diary is always full – from Chinese New Year to an exotic BorgerRio parade. Now you also get one extra day to discover everything, because every first Sunday of the month, all the shops are open.

You're more than welcome to start your adventure. The jovial locals will receive you with open arms, and the city is happy to lay itself bare – layer by layer. Bet you won't want to leave?