

The Best of Brussels, Bruges, Ghent & Antwerp

This is a tale of two cities—and of two more, for good measure. Any country of the size and with the population of Belgium, which covers about the same area as Maryland and has 10 million inhabitants, would be proud to possess two cities of the character of Brussels and Bruges. Both are famed around the world for their wealth of historical attractions, art, culture, and cuisine. It is equally interesting to note that Ghent and Antwerp are scarcely behind their two better-known cousins in these respects, if behind at all, which their own residents would certainly dispute.

Ghent and Antwerp are often linked with Bruges as the “Three Flemish Art Cities.” Though just about everyone admits that Ghent and Antwerp can’t match Bruges for sheer good looks, many Belgians believe them to be the true heartland of Flemish culture. Both cities have a grittier, more lived-in feel compared to Bruges’s museum-piece air, and neither would yield a millimeter in any argument over relative historical importance, artistic heritage, and contemporary vibrancy.

If time is limited, I’d always advise choosing Brussels and Bruges ahead of Ghent and Antwerp. But just a few more days brings the latter two places within range, and you miss much if you don’t reach out and grab them. Around the big four twinkles a constellation of small towns, such as Mechelen, Ostend, and Lier, that add icing to the cake with their own decided merits.

1 The Best Travel Experiences

- **View the Grand-Place for the First Time** (Brussels): There’s nothing quite like strolling out of one of its unremarkable side streets onto the historic Grand-Place. You’ll never forget your first look at this timeless cobbled square, surrounded by gabled guild houses and the Gothic tracery of the Hôtel de Ville (Town Hall) and the Maison du Roi (King’s House). See p. 87.
- **Shoot *Manneken-Pis*** (Brussels): We mean with a camera, of course. The centuries-old fountain-statue of a small boy making water with a “what-a-clever-boy-am-I” look on his face, has become a much-loved symbol of the city, and a metaphor for its brand of irreverent humor. Nobody can resist this statue of a gleefully tinkling little boy. Why should you be any different? See p. 99.
- **Admire Art Nouveau** (Brussels): Brussels considers itself the world capital of Art Nouveau, and local architect Victor Horta (1861–1947) was its foremost exponent. You can view the master’s colorful, sinuous style at his

- former home, now the **Horta Museum**, and in buildings around the city. See p. 96.
- **Visit the Comic-Strip Museum** (Brussels): Cast aside any thoughts of Superman and Batman. Belgian comic-strip art is an altogether more sophisticated product, though its most famous creation, Hergé's Tintin, proves it can also be fun. See p. 105.
 - **Stand Under the Seven Giant Spheres of the Atomium** (Brussels): And hope that none of the giant spheres of this colossal representation of an iron atom will fall on your head. Next to this monstrous model, 165 billion times bigger than the real thing, you'll be the one who feels like a microscopic particle. See p. 103.
 - **Stroll Around Europe** (Brussels): Mini-Europe, that is. This collection of emblematic buildings from the European Union's member nations includes the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Big Ben, the Acropolis, the Arc de Triomphe, the Brandenburg Gate, and more, all in beautifully rendered 1:25-scale detail. See p. 104.
 - **Take a Hike** (Brussels): Nowhere has Brussels more green than in the Forêt de Soignes, which stretches from the Bois de la Cambre to Waterloo. This is a great place to escape maddening crowds and fuming traffic. See p. 105.
 - **Enjoy Opera at La Monnaie** (Brussels): Belgium's 1830 war of independence broke out during a performance at this graceful neo-classical theater—so you never can tell what an evening at the opera has in store. See p. 117.
 - **Refight the Battle of Waterloo** (Brussels): They actually do "refight" the great 1815 battle in a reenactment every 5 years on its anniversary (the next will be in June 2005). Otherwise, settle for climbing the Lion Mound on the battlefield south of Brussels for a magnificent view over this theater of war. See p. 124.
 - **Cruise the Canals** (Bruges): Those open-top canal boats can be scorching in hot weather and bracing in cold, but they're fun and they afford you a uniquely satisfying view of the city. There's even a stern-wheel paddle steamer that sails along the canal to the nearby village of Damme. See p. 158.
 - **Bicycle Through Town** (Bruges): Unlike most Belgian cities, Bruges has made bicyclists privileged road users, with rights of way that motorists would kill for. You can ride through the city, around it on the ring canal park, and outside it on fresh-air excursions. See p. 129.
 - **Skate the Canals** (Bruges): Whenever the canals freeze solid in winter—and sadly, this happens only rarely—you can strap on a pair of ice skates and tour the center of town. Be sure to wait until plenty of the locals are doing this, and only skate where they do, since they're likely to know when it's safe and where it's safe (not under bridges, for instance).
 - **Visit with Rubens** (Antwerp): Touch Antwerp's cultural heart at the Rubens House, where the great Flemish artist lived and worked. You can tour its period rooms, baroque portico, and Renaissance garden. Among a dozen Rubens works on display are a self-portrait and a portrait of Anthony Van Dyck as a boy. See p. 200.

compared to the great art museums in Brussels and Antwerp, Bruges's municipal fine-arts museum makes up in quality for what it lacks in size. How could it be otherwise when it houses the country's finest collection of works by the Flemish Primitives? This includes paintings by Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling, Rogier van der Weyden, and others. See p. 146.

- **Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen (Royal Museum of Fine Arts;**

Antwerp): Should you be an admirer of the great Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and all his works, you've come to the right place here, in the city where he made his home and his fortune. Antwerp's finest museum houses a gallery of his best works and backs this up with those of many other Flemish old masters, among them Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Dirck Bouts, and Hans Memling. See p. 199.

3 The Best Castles & Stately Homes

- **Kasteel Beersel** (Brussels): This 13th-century castle just 8km (5 miles) south of Brussels, looks to be the ideal place for pulling up the drawbridge and settling in for a siege—and if the owners have had the foresight to amply stock the rustic Auberge Kasteel Beersel restaurant inside, the proceedings need not be too burdensome. This is a castle just like Disney makes them, with turrets, three towers, a drawbridge, a moat, and the spirits of all those who have, willingly or unwillingly, resided within its walls. See p. 125.
- **Gravensteen (Castle of the Counts;** Ghent): Even more than

900 years after it was built, the castle of the Counts in Ghent can still summon up a chilly feeling of dread as you look at its gray stone walls. It's a grim reminder that castles were not all for chivalrous knights and beautiful princesses; this one was intended as much to cow the independent-minded citizens of Ghent as to protect the city from foreign marauders. Inside are the tools of the autocrat's profession: torture instruments that show that what the Middle Ages lacked in humanity they made up for in invention. See p. 176.

4 The Best Historic Sights

- **Hôtel de Ville (Town Hall;** Brussels): Both the inside and the outside of this magnificent Gothic work repay careful study. The sculptors who created its intricate exterior decoration had a sense of humor—or at any rate what passed for a sense of humor in the Middle Ages—as well as skill. And the interior is lavish enough even for the extravagant tastes of the imperial aldermen who ruled over the city from here. See p. 90.
- **Galeries Royales St-Hubert (St. Hubert Royal Galleries;** Brussels): One of Europe's oldest “shopping malls,” the Italian neo-Renaissance style gallery with three connected wings opened in 1847, and is still a fine place to shop and to stroll through window-shopping. See p. 112.
- **Prinselijk Begijnhof ten Wijngaarde (Princely Beguinage of the Vineyard;** Bruges): More commonly known just as the

Begijnhof, this conventlike ring of small houses surrounding a central lawn has been an oasis of peace in Bruges through the centuries since it was founded in 1245. See p. 148.

- **Belfort en Lakenhalle (Belfry and Cloth Hall; Ghent):** At the heart of Ghent, this superb Gothic monument with a soaring bell tower dates from 1425. See p. 179.

- **Stadhuis (Town Hall; Ghent):** A complex mix of architectural styles defines the exterior of a civic building that was centuries in the making. Inside, in the magnificent Pacificatiezaal (Pacification Room), a treaty was signed in 1567 that aimed—unsuccessfully, as it turned out—to bring an end to religious strife in the Low Countries. See p. 182.

5 The Best Churches

- **Cathédrale des Sts-Michel-et-Gudule (Cathedral of St. Michael and St. Gudula; Brussels):** Although more than a little plain to look at, both outside and inside, compared to the generally extravagantly decorated run of Europe's Gothic cathedrals, St-Michel's has much to commend it. A purity of line and lack of superfluous frills makes it seem like the distilled essence of a style that dominated European cityscapes for half a millennia. See p. 100.
- **Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk (Church of Our Lady; Bruges):** The soaring 122m (396-ft.) spire of this church can be seen from a wide area around Bruges. As a magnificent bonus, the church also holds a small but beautiful marble *Madonna and Child* by Michelangelo. The only work by the great Italian artist to leave Italy during his lifetime, and one of only a few outside Italy, it occupies a place of honor. In addition, there's a painting by Anthony Van Dyck, and the 15th-century bronze tomb sculptures of Charles

the Bold and Mary of Burgundy. See p. 147.

- **Sint-Baafskathedraal (St. Bavo's Cathedral; Ghent):** Notable enough in its own right, even if its combination Romanesque, Gothic, and baroque does lack a certain fluidity of form, St. Bavo's principal glory lies inside. Jan van Eyck's 24-panel altarpiece *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (1432), one of the most significant works in the history of art, is here for all to view, for a modest fee. See p. 180.
- **Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal (Cathedral of Our Lady; Antwerp):** You can't easily miss this towering example of the Flemish Gothic style if you visit Antwerp, or even pass close to the city. Its 123m (400-ft.) spire dominates the area. This is in fact the biggest church in the Benelux countries, with seven naves and 125 pillars. But oversize statistics are not Our Lady's only attraction—there are no fewer than three Rubens masterpieces inside, as well as paintings by other prominent artists. See p. 200.

6 The Best Hotels

- **Métropole (Brussels; ☎ 02/217-23-00):** This century-old hotel in the heart of Brussels maintains the Belle Epoque splendor of its first

days and combines it with modern furnishings and service. Its L'Alban Chambon restaurant is one of Brussels's best. See p. 61.

- **Welcome** (Brussels; ☎ 02/219-95-46): This is the best little hotel in Brussels. With only 17 rooms, it's small, but the welcome's a big one, and the standard of the rooms is high. Try to get Michel to tell you about his hotel's history, preferably over a glass or two of Kwak beer—but be careful: It's a long story and Kwak is strong beer. See p. 66.
- **Egmond** (Bruges; ☎ 050/34-14-45): You can think of the Egmond as your own country mansion, for not much more than a hundred bucks a room. There's

just one problem with this image: The Egmond is not actually in the country. In compensation, it has its own grounds and gardens, and is next to the Minnewater (Lover's Lake) and the Begijnhof. See p. 135.

- **Oud-Huis Amsterdam** (Bruges; ☎ 050/34-18-10): If all the virtues and character of the splendidly preserved, gloriously medieval city of Bruges could be encapsulated in a single hotel, this would be the one. You won't find a better welcome anywhere than in this polished gem of a place. See p. 136.

7 The Best Restaurants

- **Comme Chez Soi** (Brussels; ☎ 02/512-29-21): If Michelin were to introduce a four-star category, Comme Chez Soi would undoubtedly be one of the first to collect the extra star. The irony about this culinary holy-of-holies is its name: "Just Like Home." I definitely don't eat like this in my home, but perhaps this is standard fare at owner and master chef Pierre Wynants's place. A hallowed silence descends on diners as they sample their first mouthful of his French specialties with added Belgian zest. This being Belgium, the silence doesn't last long, but the taste and the memory linger. See p. 74.
- **In 't Spinnepokke** (Brussels; ☎ 02/511-86-95): For a different kind of Brussels dining experience, try this down-home restaurant dating from 1762. Here, traditional Belgian dishes are given the care and attention expected of more refined—though not necessarily more tasty—cuisine. See p. 82.
- **'t Kelderke** (Brussels; ☎ 02/513-73-44): Although it's just about

hidden from human ken, this traditional restaurant turns out to occupy a position that easily could be considered the best in town. It's in a downstairs brick-arched cellar on the Grand-Place. Convivial and cozy, it makes few concessions to this ultimate tourist location, but serves up fine Belgian fare and sticks firmly to its Bruxellois roots. See p. 78.

- **La Quincaillerie** (Brussels; ☎ 02/533-98-33): Should there be a criticism to make here—and it's far from being an onerous one—this fine restaurant in a beautifully converted hardware store is maybe just a little too taken by its own good looks and fancy attitude, and doesn't neglect to include a consideration for these on the tab. That said, it still seems like value for money, because the food is ace and the setting memorable. See p. 79.
- **Kasteel Minnewater** (Bruges; ☎ 050/33-42-54): An enviable location on Bruges's romantic "Lake of Love" is by no means the sole attribute of this chateau-restaurant. It achieves the worthy

feat of living up to its looks and retaining a touch of class, while keeping its prices well within the range you might expect in such a setting. See p. 140.

- **Brasserie Pakhuis** (Ghent; ☎ 09/223-55-55): A steady stream of locals in the know make their way to this stylish brasserie-restaurant, in a handsomely converted warehouse tucked almost out of sight down an unrepossessing side street (Pakhuis means “warehouse” in Dutch). Once inside, you’ll appreciate why. Pakhuis hasn’t merely got style, but content

too, in a range of Continental dishes backed up by some old-time Flemish favorites. See p. 178.

- **Sir Anthony Van Dijck** (Antwerp; ☎ 03/231-61-70): You can’t go far wrong in a place whose owner/chef once voluntarily turned in his Michelin star and decided to do what he, rather than a bunch of Paris-based restaurant inspectors, liked best. The result on the plate is invariably delightful, as is a location in an atmospheric 16th-century courtyard in the city center. See p. 198.

8 The Best Buys

- **Lace:** There are two kinds of Belgian lace: exquisite handmade pieces and machine-made stuff. Machine-made lace is not necessarily bad—indeed some of it is very good—but this is the form used to mass produce pieces of indifferent quality to meet the demand for souvenirs. The highest-quality lace is handmade. Brussels, Bruges, and Ghent are the main, but far from the only, points of sale. See chapters 4 and 5.
- **Pralines:** The Swiss might argue the point, but the plain truth is that Belgian handmade chocolates, filled with various fresh-cream flavors, are the finest in the universe. Those devilish little creations—handmade Belgian pralines—are

so addictive they should be sold with a government health warning attached. You can’t go wrong if you buy chocolates made by Wittamer, Nihoul, Leonidas, or Neuhaus, available from specialist stores around Belgium. See chapter 4.

- **Diamonds:** One thing is for sure, you’ll be spoiled for choice in Antwerp’s Diamond Quarter, which does six times as much diamond business as Amsterdam. Much of the trade here is carried on by the city’s Orthodox Jewish community, whose conservative ways and traditional black clothing make a striking contrast to the glitter of their stock-in-trade. See p. 203.

9 The Best Shopping

- **Shop for Antiques in place du Grand-Sablon** (Brussels): You’ll need luck to score a bargain at this weekend antiques market—the dealers are well aware of the precise worth of each item in their stock and are calmly determined to get it. But it’s still fun to wander the market, browsing and haggling, and who knows? You just might

stumble on that hard-to-find affordable treasure. See p. 95.

- **Snap Up a Bargain at the Flea Market** (Brussels): Each day from 7am to 2pm, the Marché-aux-Puces in place du Jeu-de-Balle offers everything from the weird to the wonderful at rock-bottom prices. See p. 113.

10 The Best Cafes & Bars

- **Le Falstaff** (Brussels): This cafe deserves the highest accolades for its eclectic, accomplished mix of Art Nouveau and Art Deco and its extensive drink list. This is self-satisfied, bourgeois Brussels at its best, even if its cachet has slipped a shade since the establishment's bankruptcy a few years back. Try out a typical Brussels brew, such as gueuze. See p. 121.
- **A la Mort Subite** (Brussels): "Sudden Death" is its name, but most customers at this great traditional Brussels bar seem more intent on experiencing life than on dicing with death. The range of beers sold here is large and the commitment to old-time values is strong. See p. 120.
- **'t Dreupelkot** (Ghent): Ghent has no shortage of fine cafes, and you can just about guarantee that any one you enter will provide pleasant memories. 't Dreupelkot adds a particularly warm glow of appreciation, however; its stock-in-trade is *jenever*, one of the most potent alcoholic liquids known to humankind. Actually, some of the 100 varieties are fairly mild, while others have been flavored with herbs and spices. The atmosphere in the cafe is great—it's filled with cultured *jenever* buffs rather than with drunks. See p. 188.
- **De Engel** (Antwerp): There are cafes in town with a lot more action, but for a genuine Antwerp brown-cafe-style bar, it's hard to beat De Engel (The Angel). Its location on a corner of the Grote Markt adds to the attraction, but to experience De Engel's crowning glory, order a glass of Antwerp's own, lovingly poured De Koninck beer—a golden-brown liquid in a glass called a *bolleke* (little ball) that glows like amber in the sunlight streaming through De Engel's windows. See p. 207.