

TOP 10 THINGS TO DO IN ANTWERP



Once one of the financial capitals of Europe, today Antwerp is known for its thriving port, its vibrant artistic community and its traditional role as Europe's diamond market. If you're planning a visit to the city, here are some things you shouldn't miss.

The Market Square

Surrounded by well-preserved medieval guild houses, Antwerp's central square preserves a piece of the old city. The City Hall's combination of Renaissance and Gothic influences is particularly striking. The square is in the triangular shape. This unusual form originates from the municipal ground created during the era of the Franks.

The Diamond District

No trip to Antwerp would be complete without a walk around the diamond district. Watch out for shops that prey on the tourist trade, though; even though prices may seem low, there are better elsewhere. 'Antwerp Cut' and also 'Antwerp Quality' are internationally recognised terms that are synonymous with top quality diamond products.

Het Steen

Simply called "the stone," this fortress was once Antwerp's castle; it now serves as a naval museum. Originally built to protect the city against Viking raiders, the castle has been remodelled and updated several times. It was once part of a much larger fortification, the outlines of which can still be seen in the city's street plan.

The Antwerp Central Railway Station

The Antwerp Central Station is one of the world's most impressive railway stations. Dubbed the 'Railway Cathedral', it is one of the main landmarks in Antwerp. The station was built between 1895 and 1905. The whole complex is over 400m long and has two entrances.

There are three levels of tracks and a shopping center. The shopping center includes a diamond gallery with about 30 diamond shops.

Plantin-Moretus Museum

Based in a 16th century bookbinder's home, this museum is one of the world's foremost printing museums. Collections of early books and printing presses illustrate the history of printing and the important role this house played in it. Soak up the atmosphere of Renaissance Antwerp amid beautiful old books in this lovingly-preserved house.

Antwerp Zoo

Apart from the fun of seeing elephants, hippos, penguins and more, Antwerp's zoo draws crowds because of its history. One of the world's oldest zoos, the site is classified as a historical monument but combines traditional architecture with up-to-date animal habitats. Even if you're not going to go in, it's worth taking a look at the magnificent entrance gate. If you do, be sure not to miss the "Egyptian Temple," built in 1856, and the faux-Oriental okapi building. More modern structures include Hippotopia, built in 2003.

Het Muntplein

The southern region of Antwerp is known for its Bohemian culture and lively art scene. Het Muntplein is one example of this area's culture. This square is an open-air art park where graffiti artists can showcase their work without fear of interference from the police. The result is a free array of street art that's never the same twice.

Boerentoren

Also called the KBC tower, this building is one of Europe's oldest skyscrapers, although at a mere 97 metres it hardly competes with its American contemporaries. Nonetheless, it's still a remarkable sight, with well-preserved 1930s Art Deco design. The spectacular view from the 25th-floor observation deck takes in most of the city, including a fantastic view of the nearby cathedral.

Carolus Borromeus Church

Located on the Conscienceplein square, which is worth a look itself, this church's relatively simple exterior conceals an elaborate Baroque interior, with decoration by the studio of Antwerp's most famous artist, Peter Paul Rubens.

Rubenshuis

Speaking of Rubens, this museum based in the painter's former home is one of the city's most famous tourist destinations. It's fascinating both as a monument to Rubens' life and work and as a glimpse of city life in Antwerp during its golden age. Be sure to pick up the free audio guide, but bring your own headphones.

One of the nice things about visiting Antwerp is that the city's relatively small size makes it easy to get around by foot or public transportation. Just be sure to bring comfortable walking shoes along with your camera. A rain jacket is another good idea -- even in summer, Antwerp can be rainy, with July actually being the wettest month of the year.

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