

WORDS ALBERT EHRNRÖOTH



Antwerp

ALBERT EHRNRÖOTH FINDS A BELGIAN CITY ABLE TO INDULGE HIS LOVE FOR ART, MUSIC AND CHOCOLATE

Antwerp is getting a lot of attention in the media. I am not referring to the huge amounts of cocaine that pass through the port or even the racist undertow that the Flemish find so hard to stamp out. No, Antwerp is considered to be a seriously hip travel destination.

It is true that Antwerpen (in Flemish) lacks the canals and the instant picturesque charm of Bruges or Ghent, but there is much more for tourists to see and do. Anvers (in French) also has a richer and more dramatic history than any other Belgian city.

Its seaport lies 50km inland from the North Sea on the bank of the river Schelde. Antwerp profited from early colonial trade and by the end of the 15th century was a mercantile metropolis. In 1531 its stock exchange was inaugurated, well before the cocky Dutch East India Company started to issue shares.

Culturally Antwerp was particularly influential with a flourishing school of painting led by the Brueghel family, innovative cartographers like Mercator and the unrivaled printing house of the humanist Christophe Plantin (which today is incorporated in the Plantin-Moretus museum). Try to envisage this wealth when you walk around de Grote Markt studying the photogenic Guildhalls with their golden statues. City Hall, with even richer ornamentation, is an imposing example of Flemish renaissance incorporating and virtually crushing its Italian inspiration. Bankruptcy, the Reformation and the

invading Spanish forces brought about a steady decline and massive brain drain in the 16th century, but it can't have been too damaging when you consider that in the Baroque era many splendid churches were built, Moretus kept the print press going and painters like Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck and Jacob Jordaens began to establish themselves.

Admittedly there is a bit of lull between the 17th century and the late 19th century when many of the narrow, winding streets were broken up and the broad and elegant boulevards, which now dominate the cityscape, were created. In 1920 Antwerp organised the Olympics and 24 years later the Nazis tried to obliterate the port.

Today Antwerp is one of the world's major seaports and finding entertainment to suit lonely sailors has never been a problem. I was a student in Antwerp in the 1980s and even back then it was a more happening party town than Amsterdam. Today, there is still so much for the discerning traveller.

The best way to arrive in Antwerp is by train. You are transported by escalator from the modern underground platform two levels down, only to slowly emerge into the cathedral-like hall of the Centraal Station (1905). Louis Delacenserie succeeded in creating an eclectic pantheon with gothic flair, which became one of the most memorable railway stations on the planet.

This splendid edifice is only a couple of streets away from the world's most important



TRAVEL INFO
Average Temperatures:
 Winter: -1°C-5°C Summer: 12°C-22°C
Currency: Euro (AUS\$1=€0.80)
Best time to visit: The city is buzzing in the summer, but there's plenty happening all year round

TOURIST INFORMATION
 www.visitantwerpen.be

Brabo Fountain on the Grote Markt in Antwerp

MUSICAL JOURNEY

diamond centre where Indian and Jewish (mainly Hasidic) diamantaires are based. You wouldn't notice anything exceptional other than that there are more diamond shops than usual around the Hoveniersstraat. Amazingly 80 per cent of the world's rough diamonds pass through Antwerp.

When you walk from the station towards the river Schelde and the centre of town, you will pass the Vlaamse Opera. A recent thorough renovation has restored the neo-Baroque facade to its former pompous glory. The main entrance introduced (a century ago) the rather democratic concept that the hoi polloi in the upper circles could enter through the same doors as the toffs in the stalls and dress circle.

"Nothing can prepare you for Rubens' Baroque masterpieces"

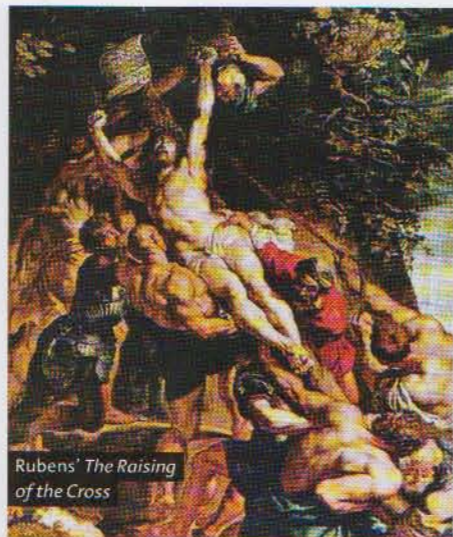
The Royal Ballet of Flanders is based in the same building but the Australian-born artistic director Katherine Bennetts resigned in June in protest against severe budget cuts. The Flemish Opera company operates in both Antwerp and Ghent, which means the two cities share the performers, orchestra, choir and conductor Dmitri Jurovski (see box). I attended a spirited performance of Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* directed by former Monty Python member Terry Gilliam.

A stone's throw away from the opera

is the pedestrianised Meir where people stroll, shop or find a café terrace to drink a "bolleke" (usually a De Koninck beer). The neo-classical Festival Hall was rebuilt after a fire and turned into a rather gaudy retail haven. The gold leaf practically drips off the reliefs, dome and iron railings. I much prefer the Paleis op de Meir, a neat rococo palace created for a wealthy merchant in 1760. Napoleon took possession in 1811 and turned it into an imperial residence, without ever moving in, and later the Belgian Royal family used it for receptions. You can now dine in splendour inside or in the courtyard. The real treat is the chocolaterie in the other half of the building. The Belgians produce pralines to die for and the Chocolate Line is mentioned in the Michelin food guide. I had to suppress my chocoholic gene when I was witnessing the craftsmanship involved in shaping bonbons in Napoleon's kitchen.

No matter where you stand in the city, the 500-year-old Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal still dominates the skyline. This is where Gothic glory meets the sublime with stone lacework providing the icing on the spire. The interior is an opulent mixture of styles but nothing can prepare you for the awe you will experience when faced with the two altarpieces by Peter Paul Rubens that define the Baroque: *The Raising of the Cross* and *Descent from the Cross*.

There are Catholic churches galore in this town and it is no surprise that some of them are in use for concerts. AMUZ (Kammenstraat 81) is a permanent concert hall in an Augustine monastery church. Ignore the ordinary entrance; the Baroque interior is the real deal. There are two



Rubens' *The Raising of the Cross*

artists in residence, plenty of education programs and usually the performances are historically informed and in keeping with the church setting.

Finally, if there is one museum not to be missed it is Rubens House, not for the (average) art collection, but for its evocation of a luxurious 17th-century household. Equally fascinating are the large studio where countless pupils would have been taught and the garden with its portico that looks like a self-congratulatory arc de triomphe.

Rubens is still Antwerp's figurehead – and why not? He was an industrious artist, accomplished architect, good businessman and a diplomat who could teach UN negotiators a thing or two.

Rubens' sweeping, self-confident and yet often sensuous brushstrokes seem to define a city that effortlessly combines the mercantile with the cultural.

Making music in Antwerp

DeFilharmonie (Royal Flemish Philharmonic) is based in Antwerp and De Singel (on the outskirts of the city) is now its home venue, but its more intimate concerts take place in either the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe-kapel (a church) or the old art deco cinema Roma, which has been lovingly restored.

Belgium's foremost conductor Philippe Herreweghe is an expert on early music and the Romantic repertoire. He is still the principal conductor and tries to incorporate the marvellous early music choir Collegium Vocale Gent, which he founded, whenever he is in charge of the DeFilharmonie. Edo de Waart became the orchestra's Chief Conductor this season.

Thirty-three-year-old Dmitri Jurovski (left) was appointed Chief Conductor of the Vlaamse Opera last year. Dmitri is the youngest member of an incredible dynasty that has produced a very well-respected composer and three generations of conductors. His brother Vladimir, eight years older, heads the London Philharmonic, and is famous for his intense and intellectual conducting style. Meanwhile, his father Mikhail is a living conducting legend in Russia.



LIMELIGHT

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