

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

BRUSSELS AND ANTWERP—TWO OF BELGIUM'S LARGEST CITIES—OFFER BIG BAGS OF ENTERTAINMENT TO ART AND FASHION LOVERS. ANANYA BAHAL EXPLORES THEM TO SCOUT SOME EXPERIENCES YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO MISS



Grote Markt, Antwerp

Beer, waffles, frites, and chocolates—just when you thought Belgium’s list of loved goodies was getting long enough...there’s more! On a tour of two of its famed cities: the capital, Brussels, and diamond-central, Antwerp, there are many pleasant finds waiting to be encountered that include, and go beyond, the list mentioned above. Here’s a lowdown of artsy and en-vogue experiences you can’t ignore the next time you’re in this part of the world.

SURREAL TALES

This first stop is a must-visit whether or not you’re a lover of art. The Musée Magritte in Brussels is an apt ode to the work of Belgian surrealist artist, René Magritte. By way of

paintings, sculptures, drawings, gouaches, advertising posters, and photographs, the museum aims to offer visitors a peek into this visionary’s work and various stages of his life. A whopping 250 exhibits make it the world’s largest collection of René Magritte’s work. The beauty of the experience is that there is no “right” and “wrong” in art and an afternoon spent decoding his various paintings is delightful for even those uninitiated into the world of fine art.

There are paintings like the one depicting baseball players with a black flying tortoise overhead and a woman peeking in a clandestine manner through a window, a lady’s portrait surrounded by objects that are seemingly unrelated to each other, a

thought-provoking poster for a film festival, and scores and scores of personal photographs, letters, and other memorabilia.

In the words of the man himself: “To be surrealist is to banish the notion of déjà vu and seek out the not yet seen.” These words ring true for this museum.

ROYAL SQUARE

Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the La Grand-Place, also called Grote Markt, in Brussels is a square comprising commercial and private buildings that boast a homogeneity in architecture dating back to the 17th century.

Throwing it way back to the prolific commercial success of Brussels as a merchant centre of





Building in La Grand-Place, Brussels



Burie (chocolate shop in Antwerp)



Street art in Brussels



Chocalicious, Antwerp



The inside of a Cathedral, Antwerp

importance in the medieval era, it is an architectural and artistic testimony of grand proportions. In 1695, it was ruined by Louis XIV in just three days and, instead of rebuilding it in a modern fashion, the Belgian people and City Magistrate chose to retain its traditional flavour. The imposing City Hall is the most impressive structure in this square, displaying a Brabant Gothic style of architecture. Opposite it is the King's House, another famous Gothic structure. Surrounding it are buildings that were owned privately and home to Belgian bourgeoisie. They flaunt baroque architecture, embellished by gold fittings, depicting cherubs and gables, hearkening back to the fact that really rich people owned these buildings. An interesting aspect is that it is one of the few, rare squares in the world that had no religious place of worship: a facet that truly brings to light its importance in terms of trade and commercialism. Spend some time walking through this square and soaking in all the fabulous architecture.

SWEET ART

It's a criminal offence in our books to leave Belgium without ample time spent eating chocolate. There's everything you could ever want: dark, milk, white, praline, and even the avant-garde! A walk through Brussels's Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert will take you to Neuhaus—the inventor of the praline or "filled Belgian chocolate". There's also Wittamer in the Place du Grand Sablon with flavours like black ganache with Madagascar pepper, Earl Grey-infused chocolate, and champagne truffle: not to forget that each piece of chocolate is a work of art.

In Antwerp, a visit to the Chocolate Line by Dominique Persoone is unmissable. Renowned as the "the number 1 in the world" he is known to create some intriguing flavour combinations that make your taste buds do a happy dance. Not just this, his "chocolate pills" with conventional flavours as well as ones like coffee and rice are a hit, as are his "chocolate lipsticks" which he calls his "Dame Blanche" with a twist.

Finally, there's the "chocolate shooter" that was devised for the birthday party menu of the Rolling Stones: all you have to do is breathe in some of the chocolate goodness for a heightened experience!

Give in to the sweet, velvety, serotonin-inducing, heady sensation of this sweet treat the next time you're in Brussels or Antwerp.

A WALK TO REMEMBER

Brussels is a centre for comic book art. The city pays homage to these great characters and stories on its walls. The best place to see these are in the city centre or Pentagon:

There are other murals strewn across the city of famed comic book characters like Tintin, Blake & Mortimer, Gaston, and Billy the Cat among many others. Do also make some time for the Brussels Comic Strip Museum.

A DATE WITH RUBEN

In Antwerp, there is the Rubenshuis: the home and studio of the versatile Flemish artist, Peter Paul Rubens. He is famous for his great knowledge of art, work as a diplomat, and interest in science. A visit to this palazzo offers visitors a chance to get a glimpse of his work, where he worked, and snippets of his moments

town clerk noted in 1620, "His house will elicit the astonishment of strangers, the admiration of travellers" which is what it will do to you as soon as you step foot in it!

SHOP TILL YOU DROP

Antwerp isn't called a fashion capital for nothing. It was the home of the "Big 6" (Walter Van Beirendonck, Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs, and Marina Yee) – all alumni from the city's Royal Academy of Fine Arts who, through their radical work, put Antwerp on the fashion map in the '80s. Today, you can shop various classic and modern things at places



Brussels



Sculpture of famed artist Breughel, Brussels

its by-lanes provide much "comic relief" as you never know at which turn you will be greeted by a familiar character. There's the Angoulême prize-winning François Schuiten's "Le Passage" which peeks through Rue du Marché au Charbon. Close by is a mural by Frank Pé of Broussaille and his girlfriend, Catherine, as they roam the streets of Brussels. There's also an ode to Victor Sackville, a spy of His Majesty in the first World War—you cannot miss this larger-than-life work of art near which a café casually goes about its daily business, untroubled by this unique piece right next to it.

with family.

Make sure to spend time admiring some of his masterpieces like "Adam & Eve", "The Annunciation", "Henry IV at the Battle of Ivry" and his self-portrait among paintings by other great artists.

He bought a house and land in the Wapper district of Antwerp in 1610 and made drawings for its extension, so that the house, portico, and gardens could please his artistic, business man, family man, and art collector sides. Its garden is nothing but tranquil bliss and as an Antwerp

like Arte Antwerpen, a shop whose alternative fashion is inspired by the city. Head to DENHAM The Jean Maker for a cool pair of jeans, Rains for funky raincoats, and Rosier 41 for second-hand or "pre-loved" clothes by designers like Dries Van Noten, Dior, Balenciaga, and Martin Margiela.

Do go to the Quartier Latin area for top-end brands and Meir for retail therapy in Stadsfeestzaal, a shopping plaza within the restored festival hall.

