

Travel the Benelux

Experience Ghent, a city to be seen

by **Tim Clark**

USAG Benelux Public Affairs Office

As a tourist destination, Ghent has it all. Discover medieval history, Flemish food and canals lined with picturesque historic buildings. See panoramic views of the city from the top of a 300-foot bell tower, art masterpieces and a massive stone-walled castle. Drink with trolls, shop at small boutiques and stay at five-star to budget hotels.

The capital and largest city of the East Flanders province, Ghent started as a settlement at the meeting of two rivers, the Scheldt and the Leie. Evidence of human habitation in the area goes back to the Stone Age. Ghent's historic center was originally built in the 13th and 14th centuries when the city was flourishing financially from the cloth trade. Success in the cloth trade led Ghent to become the second-largest city of the medieval era in Europe, second only to Paris.

One of Ghent's most picturesque streets, the Graslei is lined with re-

stored guild houses along the Leie River. Among them, the Spijker (staple house) is the oldest, dating from the 12th century. The staple house was used for hundreds of years to store the city's grain supply. St. Michael's bridge at the end of the street is the perfect place to take a photo of three of Ghent's most iconic buildings- the bell tower, St. Nicholas church and St. Bavo's Cathedral all lined up in a row.

In a city full of outstanding art, one piece stands above the rest, "The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb" in St. Bavo's Cathedral is one of the greatest cultural treasures of Europe (see page 10). While many of the churches in town contain amazing works of art, the city also has two great art museums, the Museum voor Schone Kunsten or Museum of Fine Arts (MSK) and the Museum voor Actuele Kunst or Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art (S.M.A.K.).

MSK houses artwork from the middle ages pre-World War II. The collection includes works by Flemish painters, Peter Paul Rubens, Rogier van der Weydan and Anthony van Dyck. Just across the street, S.M.A.K. features international artists at the cutting edge of contemporary art.

Completed in 1380 Ghent's bell tower rises 300 feet above the city where a copper dragon perches on the tip of the spire. Restored in the 20th century, this famed landmark offers an elevator to its parapet for great views of the city.

A classic medieval castle Gravensteen was once Ghent's main military stronghold. Parts of the castle date back to the 1100s. In the upper rooms there is a collection of medieval instruments of torture.

Eat at the Great Meat Hall, built in 1419, which features only products made or grown in East Flanders. While you are there,



pick up a jar of Tierenteyn, a spicy mustard that has been made in Ghent for two centuries. Enjoy a local beer at the Troll House, a bar with a troll-themed décor. Ghent has many restaurants, bars and cafés where you can take a relaxing break and sample the local cuisine.

Parking is limited in the historic district. Consider parking on the outskirts and taking a bus or taxi to the center of town. From there, everything is within an easy walking distance.

(clockwise) St. Nicholas church as seen from the top of the bell tower. • A Tourist checks out the view from St. Michael's bridge. • Restored guild houses stand along the Leie River.

From:
Mons: 110 km
Brussels: 56 km
Schinnen: 173 km

For your GPS:
Ghent
Belgium 9000



Flemish masterpiece on display in Ghent

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“The Mystic Lamb’ is without a doubt the world’s most besieged and coveted artwork,” according to art historian Noah Charney.

This painting has been endangered and coveted since the paint dried in 1432. It has been plundered by Napoleon, moved to safety at the last minute as Protestant iconoclasts were breaking down the church doors, censored, pawned by the Diocese of Ghent and then sold, taken by the Germans in World War I, rescued from a fire, one of its 12 panels stolen in a heist in 1934 and never recovered, seized and hidden by Adolf Hitler in World War II.

The great Flemish artist Jan van Eyck and brother Hubrecht painted one of the greatest cultural treasures of Europe, “The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb,” for the

altarpiece of St. Bavo’s cathedral in Ghent.

Considered by art historians to be one of the most important paintings in the history of art, it was the first major oil painting in history and inspired centuries of painters to take up oil as their preferred medium. Jan van Eyck was the first to demonstrate the true potential of oils, which permit far greater detail than the opaque tempera paint that was preferred before the Ghent altarpiece made oils popular.

As you enter the impressive cathedral of St. Bavo with its stone walls, stained-glass windows and art treasures you may be overcome with a feeling of awe. “The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb” is displayed in a side chapel behind bullet-proof glass. The room is quite dark when you enter,

but as your eyes adjust you can see the intricate details of the painting.

The polyptych (paneled painting) offers compelling composition, unrivaled realism and mystical meanings. A translucent use of color shows off van Eyck’s masterful use of light. If there’s one masterpiece of painting you shouldn’t miss during your time in Europe, this

is it.

Undergoing a seven-year restoration project (2012-2019), most of the original panels are on display at St. Bavo’s. You can visit the Museum of Fine Arts and see the restoration work in progress behind glass walls. When one panel is finished it’s returned to the display at St. Bavo and another is moved to the museum.



Outside the gate

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- **NASCAR championships at Circuit Zolder in Belgium, Oct. 4**
- **Alsace Wine Route, Oct. 10 to 11**
- **Amsterdam with optional guided tour of Van Gogh Museum, Oct. 17**
- **Rotterdam, Oct. 24**
- **Harry Potter studio tour, Nov. 4**
- **Flanders Field WWI Tour of Ypres, Belgium, Nov. 7**
- **Carolus Thermen spa in Aachen, Germany, Nov. 14**
- **Paris: Moulin Rouge, Nov. 21**
- **Snow & Ice Sculpture Festival and medieval dinner in Brugge (Bruges), Nov. 28**
- **German Christmas markets overnight, Dec. 5 to 6**
- **Alsace Christmas markets overnight in Triberg**

im Schwarzwald (Black Forest), Dec. 12 to 13

- **Aachen and Monschau, Dec. 20**
- **Paris in winter, Dec. 28**
- **London New Year's, Dec. 30 to Jan. 1, 2016 (Register by Nov. 16.)**

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- **Belgian Trappist and Countryside Tour, Oct. 6**
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- **Antwerp and Red Star Line Museum, Nov. 19**
- **Cologne Christmas markets, Nov. 24**

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- **National Liberation Museum 44-45, Sept. 26**
- **NFL Games at Wembley Stadium in London, Book your tickets now for Oct. 3 to 5 (Jets vs. Dolphins), Oct. 24 to 26 (Bills vs. Jaguars) and Oct. 31 to Nov. 2 (Lions vs. Chiefs).**
- **Express Trip to Paris, France, Nov. 21**