



Cobbles and castles in Ghent



Glorious Ghent
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by **Patricia Blades** - 30/07/2008

The late French president Francois Mitterand called Ghent one of Europe's best kept secrets. And I have to agree.

This compact city with a largely pedestrianised centre, smart shops, charming canals, cobbled streets and historic buildings has so much to offer for that long weekend.

It sits in the north west of Belgium with Dutch as its official language but the Ghent people are a multi-lingual breed with an impressive grasp of English.

Just a 90 minute drive from Calais, the city is clean, compact and jam-packed full of history, with charm oozing out of every corner.

Locals are fiercely proud of Ghent. As one said: "We'd like more people to visit, we just don't want too many."

Despite its genteel demeanor, the Ghent people are notorious for their dislike of authority, and have a long history of civil revolt. On May 3, 1540 Emperor Charles V humiliated his protesting subjects by forcing them to wear nooses around their necks in supplication to him and beg for mercy. The people of Ghent still wear those nooses as a matter of pride at the city's festival parade and Ghent people are still nicknamed "noose-wearers" by fellow Belgians.

Ghent's 12th century Castle Of The Counts was built not to defend against invading foreigners but to protect the city chiefs from the civilians. The castle still stands in the city centre and is worth a visit if only to view its display of weapons of torture.

Our visit corresponded with the Ghent Music festival – a 10 day event from July 19 around the city offering all kinds of sounds from pop, hip-hop to jazz. The festival attracts around 1.5m visitors with music going on until the early hours – so be warned if it's an early night you're after.

The city is most gorgeous at night when its buildings are sympathetically illuminated in pretty hues. Despite the beautiful backdrop our evening tour evoked the darker side of Ghent's past – narrow alleyways and courts which once housed brothels and unruly drinking houses - still stand.

The tour included a unique dining experience, beginning with an aperitif at a tiny bistro, La Malcontenta, salmon starter at De Foyer, main course of duck at Buikse before ending the meal with dessert and coffee at the ChambrePlus – a charming B&B whose owner is a master chocolatier, running workshops to the public in the basement. The ChambrePlus is a labour of love for its owners, with just three guest rooms, one of which is accessed via a modern garden with water features and an outside Jacuzzi.

It's relatively cheap to eat out, and the locals are great socialisers, so restaurants and cafes to suit all wallets are in abundance. Modern European dining is on offer along with regional cuisine. Expect to find lots of shellfish. Street food is plentiful with frites and mayonnaise on offer for a couple of euros or a punnet of Escargot if you're feeling adventurous.

There's great wine available, no-one does a frite like the Belgians and the beers are pretty good too.

There's plenty for art lovers with the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Arte, Design Museum and Museum of Fine Arts all within walking distance.

Guided tours, appealing to all tastes are available through the Ghent tourist board - take your pick of a pub crawl with the town crier, a visit to St Bavo's Cathedral or for the more macabre, a look over the city's cemeteries.

The Prinsenhof tour took us slightly away from the centre to the birthplace of Emperor Charles V (surely the ugliest emperor ever?). His palace no longer stands but a statue of him resides in the area. The emperor suffered from an over-large lower jaw but mercifully the statue was made to flatter. And despite his extreme ugliness, Charles was a renowned philanderer who fathered more than 30 children out of marriage.

On Sunday morning we visited the colourful flower market, a well thought out area with gorgeous blooms for sale at reasonable prices. An antiques market nearby yielded some interesting items but all this browsing can work up an appetite.

So off to lunch to Groot Vleeshuis (Meat House) built in the 15th century to ensure fair trading of meat to the city. This cavernous building with vaulted ceiling includes a chapel which still contains a 15th century wall painting depicting a worship service. The majority of the food and drink served here is locally sourced – from its Ghent Genever (Belgium gin that's weaker and sweeter than London Gin) to its cold meats and wonderful cheeses.

A canal ride is a must, especially if it's a fine day – just sit back and enjoy the beauty of passing buildings, each façade prettier than the last, get into the mood and wave back at the landlubbers – what is it with boats and waving?

*P&O Ferries offers day trip fares between Dover-Calais from £29 return for a car and up to nine people. Priority Boarding available at £12 per vehicle and pre-bookable Club Lounge costs £12 per person with complimentary glass of champagne, beverages and newspapers. See www.POferries.com for details and bookings or call 08716 646464.

* Ghent is 97 miles from Calais. Visit www.visitflanders.co.uk for comprehensive information on the region. Live operator line 020 7307 7738 (Mon - Fri)

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