

48 HOURS IN...

# Ghent, Belgium

**With a fine mix of museums, shops and ancient architecture, this Flemish city has something for everyone, writes William Cook**



*The city's historic riverside*

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## Why go now?

From 28 February to 2 March, Ghent hosts the Blue Note Records jazz festival, featuring international stars such as Wynton Marsalis, at the Bijloke Music Centre (1) (00 32 9 233 6878; [www.debijloke.be](http://www.debijloke.be)), a medieval hospital that now houses Ghent's main concert hall. Even if you're not a jazz fan, it's a good time to visit this charming Flemish city; the winters are mild and the streets aren't overrun with tourists. Ghent is often overshadowed by Bruges and Antwerp, but it actually combines the best elements of both its brasher neighbours – with more historic sights than Antwerp, and better eating and drinking options than Bruges.

## Touch down

A ticket from London St Pancras to Brussels-Midi on Eurostar (08705 186 186; [www.eurostar.com](http://www.eurostar.com)), from £59 return, is automatically valid to any other Belgian station, including Ghent Sint-Pieters (2). Connecting trains depart three times an hour and take half an hour.

From Sint-Pieters station, two kilometres from the city centre, the number 1 tram (00 32 3218 1411; [www.delijn.be](http://www.delijn.be)) leaves every 10 minutes and takes 10 minutes to reach Korenmarkt (3), Ghent's central square. A single ticket costs €1.20 (90p) from ticket machines, or €1.50 (£1.15) on board. A taxi costs about €9 (£7). A day ticket for trams and buses costs €5 (£3.80) if you buy it in advance from a ticket machine; you can also buy it on board a tram for a euro more, but you probably won't need one – Ghent is a compact city, best explored on foot.

For information in advance, contact Flanders Tourism (020-7307 7738 [www.visitflanders.co.uk](http://www.visitflanders.co.uk)). Ghent's tourist office (4) is at Botermarkt 17A (00 32 9 266 5660; [www.visitgent.be](http://www.visitgent.be)) – in the Belfort, the flamboyant bell tower. It opens 8.15am-5.45pm (weekends 9.30am-4.30pm).

### **Get your bearings**

In the 14th century, Ghent was one of Europe's biggest cities. Today, its population is a modest 250,000, but it still contains a wealth of ancient architecture within the outline of the old city walls. The city's medieval core is cradled within a loop of the River Leie, which surrounds the old town like a moat. To the north is Patershol, which contains a lot of Ghent's best restaurants. To the south is the Kunstenkwartier, the cultural quarter, where most of Ghent's 50,000 students congregate. The hub of this area is the Boekentoren (5), the stark art deco tower of the university library.

To the east, the red light district around Brabantdam (6) has been smartened up, and contains some stylish bars and cafés, though it's still a bit seedy after dark.

### **Check in**

Ghent's Marriott Hotel (7) at Korenlei 10 (00 32 9 233 9393; [www.marriottghent.com](http://www.marriottghent.com)) is in an ideal spot, on the waterfront, in the heart of the old town, yet cleverly concealed behind the brick façade of a 17th-century brewery. This spacious new building offers doubles from €159 (£122) a night, including breakfast.

A more intimate option is Hotel Harmony (8) at Kraanlei 37 (00 32 9 324 2680; [www.hotel-harmony.be](http://www.hotel-harmony.be)). This sleek boutique hotel occupies two handsome 18th-century merchant houses, both tastefully decorated in modern, minimalist style. Doubles from €120 (£92) including breakfast.

If you're on a tighter budget, the Ibis Gent Centrum Kathedraal (9) at Limburgstraat 2 (00 32 9233 0000; [www.ibishotel.com](http://www.ibishotel.com)) is a bright and breezy chain hotel only 100 metres from the cathedral square. Doubles from €75 (£58), including breakfast.

### **Take a view**

The best views across the city are from the battlements of Gravensteen (10) at Sint-Veerleplein (00 32 9 225 9306). Built in 1180, this knights-in-armour castle has been used as a mint, a cotton mill, a courthouse and a jail. Restored in the 19th century, it now houses a museum, chronicling its chequered past, and a gruesome torture chamber. Open daily, 9am-5pm, admission €6 (£4.60).

### **Take a hike**

Pedestrianised and flat, Ghent is ideal for walking. One of the nicest hikes is through the winding alleys of Patershol and Prinsenhof.

Start at Huis van Alijn (11) at Kraanlei 65 (00 32 9 269 2350; [www.huisvanalijn.be](http://www.huisvanalijn.be)). This is a quaint folk museum located in a cluster of 14th-century almshouses. It opens 11am-5pm daily except Monday (Sunday from 10am), admission €2.50 (£1.90). Cross the canal at Lievebrug, then walk through the narrow lanes to Oud Begijnhof (12), where a community of independent women lived and worked during the Middle Ages, free from the dictates of men. Many of their original houses are still there.

### **Lunch on the run**

Groot Vleeshuis (13) at Groentenmarkt 7 (00 32 9 223 2324; [www.grootvleeshuis.be](http://www.grootvleeshuis.be)) is a vast 15th-century butcher's hall that at one time, astonishingly, served as an indoor car park. Today it's a spectacular dining room and delicatessen, selling Flemish specialities to eat in or take away. The classic dish is Gentse Waterzooi, a creamy chicken and vegetable stew. A big bowl of this local favourite costs €13.50 (£10.40). A bottle of Belgian beer to wash it down will cost you €2.40 (£1.80). Open 10am-6pm daily except Monday.

### **Window shopping**

Ghent's principal shopping street is Veldstraat but for a more unusual shopping trip, walk along Mageleinstraat, Kalandestraat and Koestraat. Van Hecke (14) at Koestraat 42 (00 32 9 225 4357; [www.chocolaterievanhecke.be](http://www.chocolaterievanhecke.be)) is a

family-run chocolatier that's been going strong since 1937. Delicious home-made chocolate costs €6 (£4.60) for 180g. Open daily except Sunday and Wednesday, 9.30am-6pm.

Koffiebranderij Sao Paulo (15) at Koestraat 24 (00 32 9 225 4411; [www.saopaulo.be](http://www.saopaulo.be)) is an atmospheric coffee shop that's been in business since 1913; 250g of aromatic South American coffee costs €2.90 (£2.20). Open daily except Sunday, 9am-6.30pm.

### **Cultural afternoon**

The Museum voor Schone Kunsten (16) at Fernand Scribedreef 1 (00 32 9 240 0700; [www.mskgent.be](http://www.mskgent.be)) is one of Belgium's best art galleries, with a fine array of Flemish Masters, including St Francis of Assisi by Peter Paul Rubens and Christ Bearing the Cross by Hieronymus Bosch, plus some superb works by more modern Belgian painters such as James Ensor and Magritte. Housed in a palatial neoclassical building on the edge of the leafy Citadelpark, this spacious museum is the perfect place to while away a few contemplative hours. Open 10am-6pm daily except Monday, admission €2.50 (£1.90).

### **An aperitif**

The Belga Queen (17) at Graslei 10 (00 32 9 280 0100; [www.belgaqueen.be](http://www.belgaqueen.be); daily from 7pm) is a 13th-century warehouse, converted into a swish riverside bar and restaurant by Portuguese restaurateur Antoine Pinto. The attic lounge is a dramatic mix of modern and medieval, with a robust vaulted ceiling, leather armchairs and a futuristic backlit bar. Early in the evening, you can unwind over a Belgian beer or a Havana cigar. Later on it's a suave nightspot, with live jazz, and DJs at the weekends. Cocktails from €8 (£6.15), beers from €2.20 (£1.70).

### **Dining with the locals**

"Prayer without an End"; that is the translation of 'T Gebed Zonder Eind (18) at Walpoortstraat 13 (00 32 9 329 0397). This cosy bar/restaurant is traditionally furnished, like a wartime Belgian café from an old film noir. The food is a nourishing blend of French and Flemish, though a lot of regulars just come in to drink a beer or coffee at the bar. A plate of venison ragout costs €18.50 (£14.20); tarte tatin is €5 (£3.80). Open daily except Sunday for dinner.

### **Sunday morning: a walk in the park**

The castle that gave the Citadelpark (19) its name was demolished in the 19th century, but the wooded ramparts that surrounded it are a pleasant place to wander, at least during the day. The park's old casino is now home to SMAK (20) (00 32 9 221 1703; [www.smak.be](http://www.smak.be)), Ghent's adventurous contemporary art museum; open 10am-6pm daily except Mondays, admission €6 (£4.60). One of the artists whose works are on show is the American Jessica Diamond. Elsewhere in the city, she has decorated the cobbled square of Kouter (21) with beautiful sculptures of huge metal leaves. This is also the location for Ghent's Sunday morning flower market. As well as all the flowers, there are brass bands playing in the ornate bandstand.

### **Out to brunch**

You can dine out on delicacies such as champagne and oysters at the refreshment stalls around Kouter (21). Alternatively, the grand fin-de-siècle Schouwburg (22) at Sint-Baafsplein 17 houses Ghent's leading Flemish speaking theatre. It also contains a debonair restaurant, De Foyer (00 32 9 234 1354; [www.foyerntgent.be](http://www.foyerntgent.be)), with splendid views across the cathedral square. The Sunday morning buffet breakfast (from 10.30am to 2pm) costs €18 (£13.85).

### **Go to church**

Sint-Baafskathedraal (23) on Sint-Baafsplein (00 32 9 269 2045; [www.sintbaafskathedraal-gent.be](http://www.sintbaafskathedraal-gent.be)) is being renovated, but it's still an unmissable sight. Its greatest treasure is Van Eyck's Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, regarded as one of the 15th century's finest works of art. Depicting a medieval view of heaven, it's a strange, mesmeric altarpiece of astonishing imagination and detail. The picture was stolen by Napoleon and then seized by the Nazis (who hid it in an Austrian salt mine, where it was very nearly blown to bits), so it's a miracle it's survived at all. Sint-Baafs also boasts a sublime Rubens, plus various equally arresting artworks by painters from the Middle Ages right up to the present day. The cathedral is open daily, 8.30am-5pm (Sundays from 9.30am). But the hours in which Adoration of the Mystic Lamb can be seen are more restricted: 10.30am-4pm Monday to Saturday, and 1pm-4pm on Sunday, admission €3 (£2.30).

### **Take a ride**

Tram 1 (00 32 3218 1411; [www.delijn.be](http://www.delijn.be)) runs from Korenmarkt (3) through the suburban backstreets to the Dr Guislain Museum (24) at Jozef Guislainstraat 43 (00 32 9 216 3595; [www.museumdrguislain.be](http://www.museumdrguislain.be)), a fascinating museum of psychiatry, housed within Belgium's oldest psychiatric hospital. It opens 1-5pm at weekends, 9am-5pm on weekdays, admission €5 (£3.80).

### **Write a postcard**

Buy a colour postcard for only €0.25 (20p) from Ghent's elegant Design Museum (25) at Jan Breydelstraat 5 (00 32 9 267 9999; [www.designmuseumgent.be](http://www.designmuseumgent.be)), a striking modern building ingeniously hidden behind a pretty 18th-century façade. It's a treasure trove of Jugendstil (Art Nouveau) furniture and porcelain. Open 10am-6pm daily except Monday; €2.50 (£1.90).

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