

ANTWERPIAN EXTRAVAGANCE

Whether it's chocolates, diamonds or fashion, Belgium's historic city, Antwerp, ensures you indulge in all your cravings, be they sweet, sparkling or sartorial.

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The stunning Brabo Fountain and the ostentatiously decorated Guild Houses in the background are the central attractions of Antwerp's city square known as Grote Markt. One of the quintessential souvenirs from Antwerp—the Antwerpse handjes or Antwerp hands—is inspired by Brabo Fountain. According to legend, Roman soldier Brabo defeated a giant named Druon Antigoon by cutting off his hands and sparing the city's inhabitants from his tyranny. To commemorate this, Brabo's statue, in the act of throwing the giant's hands in the Scheldt River, was placed in the square in 1887. Ever since then, the hand is an important symbol of Antwerp—appearing on the city's coat of arms and in the form of biscuits and chocolates named Antwerpse handjes.

Feast

Antwerp has been positioned by Flanders Tourism as the 'so cool it's hot' city. And rightly so. Visitors to Belgium largely ignore this town, which is overshadowed by the more picturesque Bruges and Ghent. The next time though, be sure to make a pit stop at Antwerp, to take in its wealth of heritage, art and most importantly, shopping options.

Unlike some other European cities like Paris and Rome, Antwerp is understated and reveals its charms rather slowly. However, it is definitely a city for the lover of all things sensuous. So make up your own chocolates, diamonds and fashion tour and get going. Your best bet would be to stroll along Meir, Antwerp's main shopping street and follow it up with a splash at the diamond district. End your exploration at Antwerpen-Centraal, regularly counted among the most beautiful railway stations in the world. Here is our guide to the best shopping in Antwerp.



Koral Bhatta, Jochen Tack / magister / magister / Droua



Above: Chocolates get the royal treatment at Dominique Persoone's The Chocolate Line which is housed inside the Palace on the Meir and adorned with gilded interiors, floor-to-ceiling paintings and crystal chandeliers.

Top: Although not as popular with tourists as Paris or Vienna, Antwerp is by no means lacking in understated charm, quaintness and romance that is so typically European.



Clockwise from above: Milk and white chocolate pralines from one of Belgium's oldest chocolatiers, Neuhaus; The national obsession with chocolate in Belgium is nurtured in Antwerp with chocolate shops on practically every city block and chocolate walking tours for sweet-toothed tourists; Antwerp's diamond district is the largest diamond centre in the world. Promise of the best quality diamonds at competitive prices draws thousands to Antwerp daily.

YEN FOR YUMMY

In Antwerp, as in the rest of Flanders, cleverly displayed desserts tantalise you from shop windows. And from experience, I have realised it's futile to resist.

Chocolate lovers (and that means all of us) will be spoilt for choice in this elegant European city that offers some of the best-loved brands in the world. Pick up some 'chocolate diamonds' from the true artist, Chocolatier Burie, and if you are in the city around Easter, Christmas or Valentine's Day, drop by the store just to stare at Lieven Burie's stunning chocolate sculptures displayed in the windows.

Find something quirky to take away at self-styled 'shock-o-latie' Dominique Persoone's The Chocolate Line. Whether it is chocolate with a hint of cola or bacon, chocolate-flavoured lipstick or a unique sniffer that sends some fine and heady chocolate powder up your nose, Persoone has it all in the renovated Royal Palace in the Meir shopping district.

And definitely don't leave Antwerp without buying some of the famous Antwerpse Handje—chocolates in the shape of hands—recognised by the European Union as a 'guaranteed traditional speciality'. These



chocolates celebrate the myth of an evil giant defeated by a local hero.

SETTING IN STONE

Although Antwerp is known for its high-quality diamonds, it is best to look for certification from The Diamond High Council before you splurge on these sparklers. Take a walk along the 'diamond square mile' at Appelmansstraat and Vestingstraat close to the train station for your pick of shops with their glittering window arrays.

Diamond Land is Antwerp's largest jewellery store and known for its reliable quality and reasonable prices. The store offers short guided tours of the workshop where visitors (and potential shoppers) can watch artisans at work.

Another recommended seller is Katz Diamonds & Jewellery, who has been around for over half a century. Their founder J Katz was the founding member of the Antwerp Diamond Jewellers Association. For antique jewellery, the best source is Adelin owned by Salomon Wijnberg, whose vintage diamonds are praised as poetry in stone.

Also pay a visit to the Diamond Pavilion at the MAS museum, set up by the Diamond Museum Province Antwerp and the Antwerp World Diamond Centre. This exhibition explains the journey of the diamond from its original rough state to the smooth and gleaming precious stone. There is also a small shopping area here for last minute diamond souvenir hunters.

STYLE DOMICILE

Antwerp's fashion scene is dominated by the celebrated Antwerp Six, a group of avant-garde designers who took the world by storm after their display at the London Fashion Fair in 1988. Graduates of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (which shot to fame upon their success), the designers now have their own labels.

For elegant minimalist styles in shades of white and black, head to Ann Demeulemeester's shop stricking



Opposite: iStockphoto; Milk & White Chocolate; Neuhaus; T. Neuzil; iStockphoto

WHEN IN ANTWERP...

Also shop for:

- Olive oils (Tuscan herbs and Virgin oil with white truffle come highly recommended)
- Exotic vinegars (try the asparagus and tomato flavours) at the fabulous 'Oil and Vinegar' shop with branches in several countries.
- Tintin memorabilia at Mekanik Strip comics store at Sint-Jacobsmarkt, or indulge your inner child with a set of Tintin covered packs of chocolate from Neuhaus.



in its stark white spaces. Others from this band of six include Dries Van Noten who comes from a family of tailors, and Walter Van Beirendonck whose work is known for its unusual colour combinations. Also visit Coccodrillo, the exclusive shoe boutique of Geert Bruloot, acknowledged as the mastermind behind the promotion of the Antwerp Six.

And to get a true sense of Antwerp's dedication to fashion and design, make your way to the ModeNatie building—literal meaning 'Fashion Nation'. Along with the Flanders Fashion Institute and the MOMU (Museum of Fashion), it also houses the boutique of the popular Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto, said to look more like a museum than a store. ■

Clockwise from above: Girl window shopping outside one of Antwerp's celebrated designers Izumi Hongo's boutique Van Hongo; Women on a shopping spree near Huidevettersstraat—one of Antwerp's most fashionable streets comprising big-name designer stores; Exhibitions inside the Fashion Museum or MoMu feature dynamic themes and installations that convey the story of both vintage and current fashion.



Images courtesy: V&A Flinders, Chae Lucas/Amu/Agf/Oliveto

QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways has daily direct flights to Brussels from Mumbai and Delhi. From Brussels, the Brussels Airlines Shuttle Service drives passengers to and from Brussels Airport to the centre of Antwerp (Keyserlei and Crowne Plaza), every hour from 05:30 am until 23:00 pm.

ACCOMMODATION

Being a major city in Belgium and Europe, Antwerp offers a range of accommodation options for tourists that include hotels, hostels, B&Bs, guest houses, apartments and inns.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to www.visitantwerpen.be