Antwerp in 3 days | The Rubens House

Rubens was a man of many talents. Besides being the gifted painter we all know, he was also a diplomat, a devoted family man, an art collector and an architect. Where better to begin this immersion in Rubens's city than the house in which he lived and worked?

Rubens as an architect

When Rubens returned from Italy in 1608, at the age of 31, he came back with a case full of sketches and a head full of ideas. He purchased a plot of land with a house near his grandfather's home (Meir 54) and converted it into his own Palazzetto. Take an hour to visit the Rubens House and to breathe in the atmosphere in the master's house before setting off to explore his city. Rubens's palazzetto on the Wapper was not yet complete when the artist was commissioned to work on the Baroque Jesuit church some distance away, at Hendrik Conscienceplein.

The St Carolus Borromeus Church at Hendrik Conscienceplein is the epitome of Italian grandeur. With his knowledge of Italian architecture, Rubens undoubtedly contributed ideas for the façade, but his greatest achievements here are to be seen in the interior. Rubens designed the richly decorated chapel and its impressive marble high altar. Sadly, all that remains of the master's 39 ceiling paintings are the sketches that are preserved in the church. The paintings themselves perished in a huge fire in 1718. The high altar merits particular attention: behind the enormous painting – it measures 4.0 x 5.35 metres – other works are concealed. An ingenious pulley system is used to rotate the works at fixed intervals. The visible painting is detached and stored away vertically, after which the pulley raises and installs the new one. This unique spectacle has been going on for 400 years! Another feature that deserves attention on the exterior of this remarkable church is the tower, based on a design by Rubens. You will need to go round the block in order to admire it in all its glory.

St Carolus Borromeus Church

After your visit to the church it is time for lunch, at the Hendrik Conscienceplein with its glorious Italian ambience. Especially in the summer months you might easily think that you have arrived in the warm climes of southern Europe. Relax in one of the outdoor cafes and imagine yourself in the company of Rubens, who used to come to this very spot 400 years ago to look at his work.

Hendrik Conscienceplein

At home in all corners of the world

Behind the façade adjoining the St Carolus Borromeus Church lies a public secret: the Nottebohm Room, part of the Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library. The Nottebohm Room is one of the most beautiful and oldest libraries in Belgium. Besides its one and a half million books, this atmospheric room contains a celestial and terrestrial globe, each one 68 cm in diameter, made by Willem Jansz. Blaeu, a contemporary of Rubens. Access to the Nottebohm Room is restricted. A guided tour of the heritage library – with the Nottebohm Room as its high point – takes two hours, and can be booked through a link on the site. This visit should be planned carefully in advance; alternatively, it is well worth a return visit!

The Nottebohm Room, part of the Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library

After lunch and before going to see the master's final resting place, you have an opportunity to explore the heart of Rubens's city.

At Groenplaats, take a moment to greet your host. Rubens gazes out proudly from a high pedestal from which he has been keeping an eye on his fellow townspeople since 1841.

The Groenplaats and the statue of Rubens

As you go from Groenplaats to the entrance of the Cathedral, don't forget to look into Papenstraatje on your left. Brasserie Appelmans now stands on the spot once occupied by the Latin school that Rubens attended from the age of twelve, when he and his mother first settled in Antwerp.

You must certainly take your time to visit the Cathedral of Our Lady (Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal) on Handschoenmarkt, which has an astonishing four world-famous works by Rubens to enchant you – one of which, The Raising of the Cross, he actually painted on the spot. From the summer of 2016 onwards, the cathedral gardens are also open to visitors. They are highly recommended to anyone desiring a little peace and quiet in the middle of the bustling city centre.

Passing through Suikerrui you will arrive on Scheldekaaien, from which you can stroll along the promenade that starts at the Steen – the old fortress – and runs upstream, in a southerly direction. Antwerp owes its existence to this river, which has been carrying ships, goods and people into the city centre for centuries.

Promenade

Beneath the church tower

Before allowing free rein to your shopping instincts, we would suggest you visit St James's Church (St Jacobskerk) in Lange Nieuwstraat. This robust building dooms up rather unexpectedly among the houses, but its interior presents a perfect harmony between Gothic and Baroque: the elegant Middle Ages and the flamboyant style of the 17th century go hand-in-hand here. This was Rubens's parish church; he lived only a few hundred yards from here. It is clear from the pomp and ceremony of the altars and chapels that this church had quite a few wealthy parishioners. Rubens would be buried here, as would the rest of his family. The painting above the tomb is by the master himself.

St James’s Church

Then it is time for Meir. This spectacular shopping boulevard runs parallel to Lange Nieuwstraat, where you were walking just a moment ago. In between the outlets of the best-known retail chains, which will quicken the pulse of every keen shopper, you will find, at number 54, the house of Rubens’s grandfather, Jan Pijpelinckx. When the Rubens family returned to Antwerp after a period in Germany, they briefly moved in here. Be sure to look up at the frieze on the top, where you will see a famous name on the façade.

As you carry on to the station, you can enjoy the 19th-century and 20th-century architecture, for which you will need to look up above the shop fronts.

You will not have any difficulty finding Central Station: it is known – not just to the people of Antwerp! – as the most beautiful station in the world. Go and have a look – both outside and inside!

Central Station

A profusion of styles and cultures

At the station we would advise you to get a bike from Vélo and to cycle to Dageraadplaats. This pleasant square in the middle of the Zurenborg district offers a wide range of restaurants and cafés. The multicultural character of Antwerp – a quality that applied to the city in Rubens's day just as it does today – is clearly in evidence here.

Dageraadplaats

From Draakplaats you can easily reach your final stop for the day. Although the Cogels-Osylei street was built centuries after Rubens, the master would certainly have admired its eclectic architecture. The literal meaning of ‘Belle Epoque’ is ‘beautiful time’. Each of the houses in this street is an architectural tour de force. This is a perfect picture to keep in your mind as you fall asleep.

Close friends

After breakfast, let us start by visiting a few friends. Rubens did not work alone in his studio, but sometimes enlisted the assistance of his friend Jan Brueghel the Elder. Painters often collaborated, especially if they complemented each other as well as Jan and Peter Paul. The Mayer Van den Bergh Museum has dedicated one of its rooms to the Brueghel family. Jan Brueghel the Elder was a friend of Rubens, but Rubens also greatly respected the work of Jan's father, Pieter Bruegel the Elder. To see some of the latter's paintings in Flanders, you will need to visit this museum. There you will find one of his best-known works, Dulle Griet (also known as Mad Meg), of which – in contrast to many of Pieter Bruegel's other paintings, no copy exists. Given our principle that 'Rubens's friends are our friends', we cannot leave this museum out.

Mag meg by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

After your museum visit, if you go through Elzenveld you will end up in the city's botanical gardens. Over the past two hundred years the city has collected over 2,000 plant species here, selected for their medicinal or other unique properties, to be used in the adjacent Elisabeth Hospital. Although Rubens never visited Antwerp's herbal garden, he did study a great many gardens during his Italian trip – examples that helped him plan the gardens of his Palazzetto. You will be struck above all by the meticulous planting and an air of sublime tranquility.

Botanical gardens

All those herbs and plants have probably made you hungry. There is no better place to stop off for lunch than the Bourla Theatre or the surrounding area. This heart of the theatre district or Quartier Latin was already the trendiest area for artists in the 16th century. Jan Brueghel the Elder also had his studio in this district. Is there something about the air here?

Bourla Theatre

After lunch we carry on exploring the neighbourhood and visit one of Rubens's boyhood friends at the Plantin-Moretus Museum on the lovely Vrijdagmarkt square. At the Latin school the young Peter Paul met Balthasar Moretus, and the two would be lifelong friends. Balthasar was the grandson of the printer and publisher Christophe Plantin, whose printing works would also print and distribute prints by Rubens. Well worth looking at in the master printer's museum is one of Rubens's sketchbooks, in which he made 44 pen-and-ink drawings, based on the Danse macabre, a series of drawings by the famous 16th-century painter and printmaker Hans Holbein.

Plantin-Moretus Museum

If you happen to visit the museum on a Friday, Vrijdagmarkt has an added spectacle for you in store. Every week there is an auction here, with household effects collected by bailiffs being sold to the highest bidder. Although much of the merchandise is of little value, it is sometimes possible to pick up real treasures here.

Old and new

More treasures can be found on Kloosterstraat. This is a street with a special place in Rubens's heart, not only because it was where his father-in-law, Jan Brant, lived – in a house where Rubens and his bride Isabella lived for a while after their wedding. He would certainly also have enjoyed visiting the street's many antique dealers. Rubens was a great art lover and collector. Anyone who has space in their suitcase may try to strike a bargain with one of the numerous dealers who sell their wares in the street here from Wednesday to Sunday.

The Kloosterstraat

For those who prefer fashion to antiques, there is the fashion museum, the Modemuseum, just round the corner. Careful scrutiny of the Rubens statue at Groenplaats and of his self-portraits reveals that his appearance was anything but slovenly. Still, Antwerp's place on the world map of fashion owes more to the modern designers known as the Antwerp 6, although the connection with the 17th-century Old Masters is never very far away. Dries Van Noten draws inspiration from Rubens and Van Dyck. The Modemuseum is the temple of fashion in Antwerp and a modern ode to the metropolis.

ModeMuseum

Tunnel with a view

Let us spend the waning hours of the afternoon on the other side of the river that we strolled along yesterday. You can get there by tram, but it would be much more energetic to walk there – under the water. From St Pietersvliet you descend into St Anna's pedestrian tunnel in and walk for 572 metres. Then you emerge on the other side of the Scheldt, with the skyline of Rubens's city stretched out before you. After admiring the view you may go straight back, take a riverside walk to the beach at St Anneke, or roam a little further and discover the Galgenweel, where you can have a picnic beside a serene stretch of water, go for a bracing walk, or indulge in water sport activities. An added bonus that Antwerp has to offer.

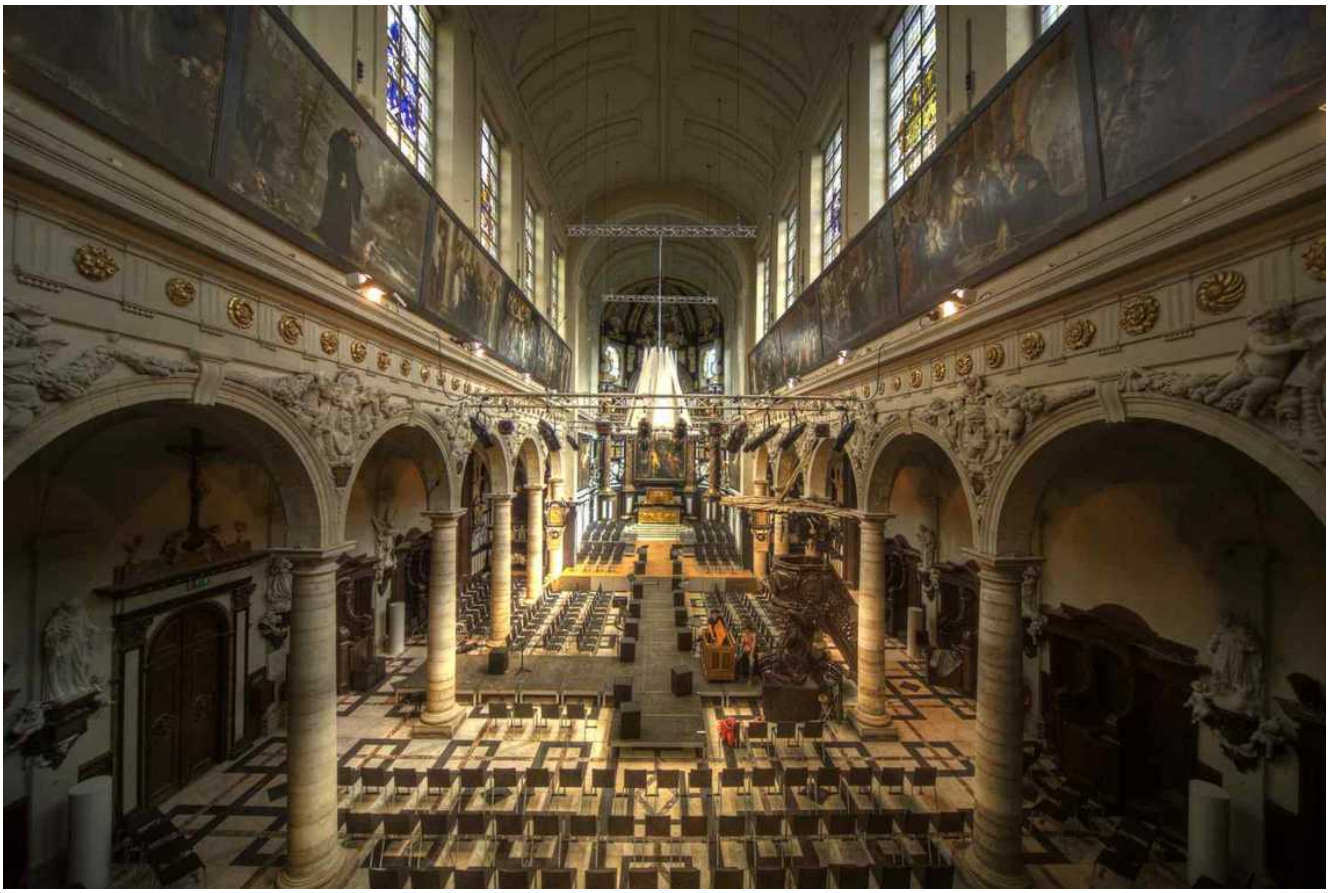
For dinner we head to Antwerp's southern district. The Museum of Fine Arts (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten) is closed for a face lift until 2019, but we have come here for the numerous restaurants in one of Antwerp's trendiest neighbourhoods. If you walk to Vlaamse Kaai you will find the water gate, a monument built after a design by Rubens and once an entrance to the city. Enjoy the atmosphere and the wide range of choices. And enjoy the city.

A tip for those who may feel like doing something after dinner: look on the site www.lastminuteticketshop.be. Every Friday and Saturday from 9 a.m. onwards, this site offers tickets at 50% off the box office price for all sorts of shows and performances in Antwerp that same evening. Definitely worth keeping an eye on.

Culture for foodies

If you went to a show the evening before or stayed up to enjoy the city's night life, you will want to start your last day a little later. You may make your way to the 19th-century foyer of the international music centre AMUZ, which serves brunch on Sundays between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m.. Besides the original programme

offered by AMUZ, the centre's location – the former church of St Augustine – is simply stunning. If you have the time and the inclination, a concert in this glorious building is a must. The programmers often choose music from Rubens's time, which harmonises perfectly with his oeuvre. Give your eyes a rest, but get your ears to work! NB You should make a reservation if you wish to have brunch or attend a performance here.



The international music centre AMUZ

After a restful brunch, you can walk towards Rubens's back garden. In the theatre square and Oude Vaartplaats there is a bird market on Sundays. In the 16th century, poultry and small livestock were sold on Meir, but in the early 20th century the market moved to its present location. Small livestock is no longer traded here, but you can find goods from buckles to chickens. If you are here on Saturday you can visit the Exotic market. Its wealth of fragrances and spices from distant lands will delight every foodie.

An inhabited island

We go further towards the city's north district. We have already noted that Rubens was also an architect. He had a highly individual vision of architecture, working on numerous architectural projects within the then city walls. Indeed, when plans were made for the expansion of the city, Rubens was eager to play a role. Some of his ideas came from Genoa; he displayed them in detail in his print collection 'Palazzi di Genova'. But the economic decline that followed the closure of the Scheldt led to the cancellation of the expansion plans. Still, although the plans were not executed in the 16th or 17th century, they were carried out many years later in the same place. The district that we are discussing here, the Eilandje, has enjoyed a great revival in recent years. Its residential, recreational and commercial functions are all integrated harmoniously. The most eye-catching sight, without a doubt, is the Museum aan de Stroom, or MAS. If you have time you may want to visit its diverse exhibitions, but we would advise you above all to climb right up to the top for a superb view of

the city, the Scheldt, and the marina.

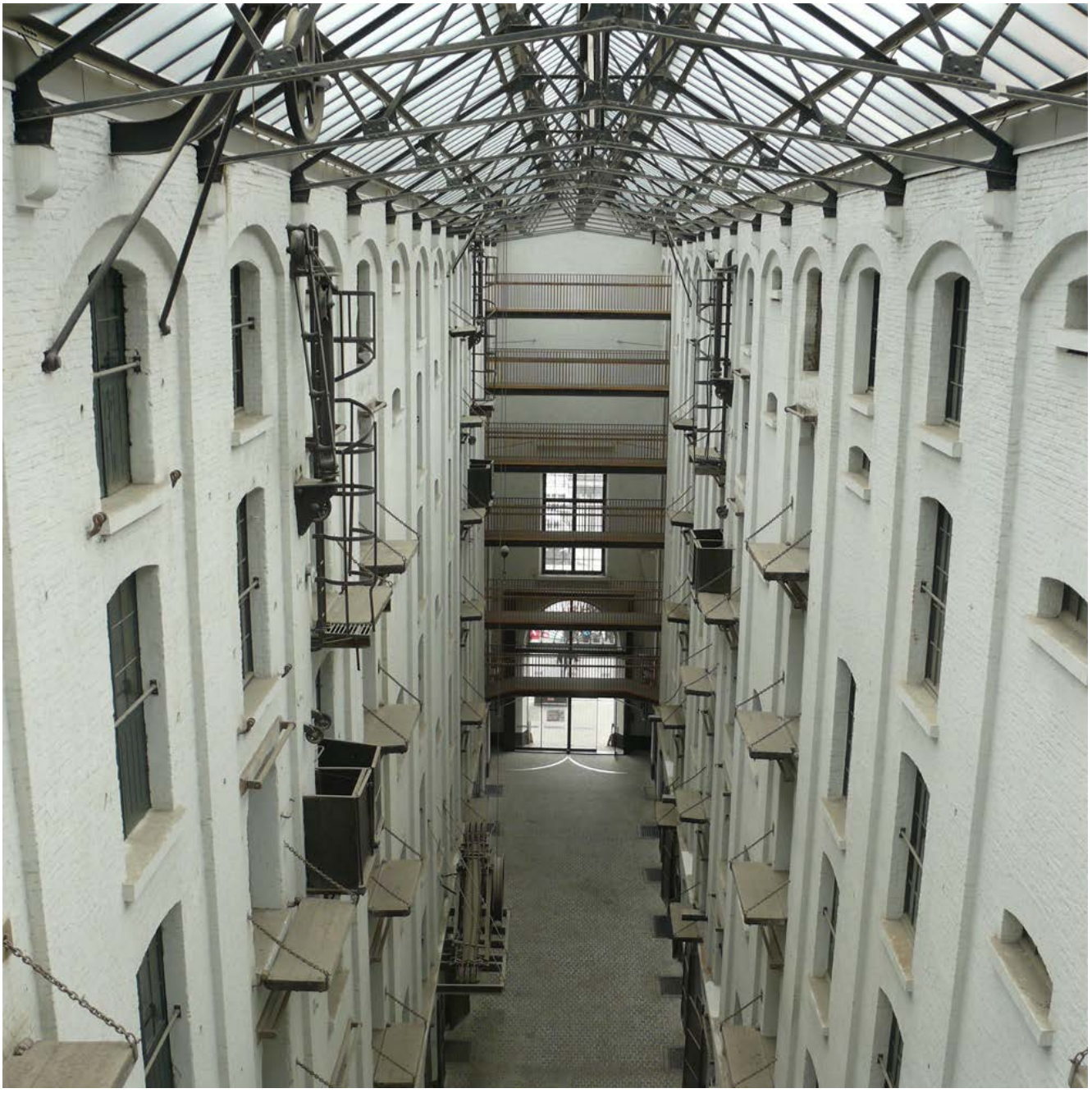
Museum aan de Stroom, photo: Sarah Blee.

From this high vantage point you will also see the splendid Red Star Line Museum, which overlooks the Scheldt River. From here two million people departed to seek their fortunes in the United States, pursuing their dreams. The museum that documents the migrants who left at the end of the 19th century does not lie on the Rubens route, but it is certainly worth a visit for anyone staying for an extended period or returning.

Red Star Line Museum, photo: Filip Dujardin.

With its numerous restaurants and cafés, the Eilandje is an ideal place for anyone who is feeling hungry again after a late breakfast. From the top of the MAS you can spot the outdoor cafés and free tables.

You should certainly not leave the Eilandje without taking a peek inside St Felix Pakhuis. Although the building was given a new function a few years ago, since its renovation it now contains Antwerp's archives, among other things, it still breathes the atmosphere of the great bonded warehouses of the 19th century. Although commercial firms and the Felix Archief have their premises here, the grand interior walkway is open to the public.



St Felix Pakhuis

A little fresh air

Before concluding your visit to Antwerp, we'd like to take you to a spot a little further from the city centre. Park Spoor Noord is a landscape park in which the development of Antwerp and the re-use of its empty spaces are very conspicuous. A celebrated team of Italian architects converted the disused railway yards into a green oasis with space for sport and recreation. Perhaps the architects shared Peter Paul Rubens's vision, with its Italian origins. A present-day Rubens would certainly have encouraged this project.

Park Spoor Noord

To conclude these three days with Rubens as our guide, we shall descend below the ground. Like Amsterdam and Bruges, Antwerp was dominated by water in Rubens's day. Covered canals and other waterways took care of the defences of the growing city and facilitated the transport of goods. With the passage of time, however, they also became open sewers, in which all the city's waste gradually collected. Since the tides moved the water back and forth in these canals, low tide would often spread a foul odour around the city. To escape from the stench, Rubens went off for daily rides on his horse, either on the city walls or beyond them. There he could breathe in some essential fresh air, which was so scarce in Antwerp's seething inner city. When the canals were later covered over, the entire network of waterways continued to exist under the ground, out of sight and no longer offending people's noses. If you would like to get an idea of how the city looked to Rubens, you will need to go below ground. From the Ruihuis on Suikerrui you can descend into the underground network. Either alone or with the aid of a guide, you will discover the mediaeval counterpart of the city you have been exploring above ground for the past three days.

Network of waterways under the ground, photo: Jan Crab.

The most beautiful farewell sight

We have left the city's most beautiful sight to the end. Behind the gate on Oude Koornmarkt 16 opens up another, secret world. The city's poorest inhabitants once lived in Vlaeykensgang. Today, this mediaeval alley is an oasis of peace in the city centre and a perfect place from which to listen to the carillon. We might ponder whether the great Peter Paul would ever have wandered through here: in his lifetime, the alley would certainly not have looked as charming as it does today. There are two exits from the alley aside from the one through which you entered.

Vlaeykensgang

When you pass out of the alley into the busier streets beyond, it is time for dinner. Choose at leisure, wandering around the small streets, across Grote Markt or Suikerrui. Once you have relaxed into an appealing spot with your favourite aperitif, you may want to propose a toast to your new friendship with Peter Paul Rubens. Rubens loved Antwerp so much that he settled here and did not return to Italy. We hope that the many treasures you have seen during this tour have persuaded you too of the magic of Antwerp.

The Grote Markt

We hope to see you again in Antwerp!

Suggested visits during this walk

- Rubens House - Wapper 9-11 – Open daily except Mondays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed on Mondays and on New Year's Day, 1 May, Ascension Day, 1 November, and 25 December. - www.rubenshuis.be -

€8/6 - Combiticket Rubens House and Museum Mayer van den Bergh costs €10.

- St Carolus Borromeuskerk - Hendrik Conscienceplein – Open daily except Sundays from 10 a.m. to 12.30 and from 2 to 5 p.m. On Sundays and public holidays, open only for services. - www.mkaweb.be - admission free of charge.
- Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library / Notebohm Room – Korte Nieuwstraat - www.consciencebibliotheek.be.
- Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal – Handschoenmarkt – Open Monday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., and on Sundays and public holidays from 1 to 4 p.m. – www.dekathedraal.be - €6/4.
- St Jacobskerk – Lange Nieuwstraat 73/75 - Open 7 days a week from 2 to 5 p.m. Closed from 1 Nov. - to 31 March. - www.sintjacobantwerpen.be - €4.
- Museum Mayer van den Bergh – Lange Gasthuisstraat 19 - Open daily except Mondays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed on Mondays and on public holidays - www.museummayervandenbergh.be - €8/6 – Combiticket Museum Mayer van den Bergh and Rubens House costs €10.
- Botanical Gardens - Leopoldstraat 24 - Open 7 days a week from 10 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. – admission free of charge.
- Bourla Theatre – Komedieplaats 18 – www.bourlaschouwburg.nu.
- Museum Plantin-Moretus – Vrijdagmarkt 22 - www.museumplantinmoretus.be. Open daily except Mondays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed on Mondays. - €8/6.
- Modemuseum – Nationalestraat 28 - www.momu.be - Open daily except Mondays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed on Mondays - €8/6/3.
- The Galgenweel – Beatrijslaan 92.
- AMUZ – Kammenstraat 81 - www.amuz.be.
- Markets – Oudervaartplaats/theaterplein – Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Sundays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.– For other markets, see: www.visitantwerpen.be/markten.
- MAS - Hanzestedenplaats 1 – expo: Open daily except Mondays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed on Mondays and on New Year's Day, 1 May, Ascension Day, 1 November, and 25 December – walking boulevard and panorama: Open daily except Mondays from 9.30 a.m. to 10 p.m. or midnight. - www.mas.be - expo: 10/8 - walking boulevard and panorama: admission free of charge.
- Red Star Line Museum - Montevideostraat 3 - Open daily except Mondays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed on Mondays and on New Year's Day, 1 May, Ascension Day, 1 November, and 25 December - www.redstarline.be - €8/6.
- Felix Pakhuis - Godefriduskaai 30.
- Park Spoor Noord - Ellermanstraat.
- Ruihuis – Suikerrui 21- Open Tuesday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and on Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed on Mondays - www.ruien.be - €16/10.
- Vlaeykensgang - Oude Koornmarkt 16.