

The following piece was published in *The Sophisticated Traveler*, a supplement to *The New York Times*. Subsequent assignments from the magazine have been for places closer to home: Chicago and, last spring, a piece about the Glass Flowers at Harvard, literally two blocks from where I live.

### **Antwerp**

I'd heard that Antwerp, less than forty miles north of Brussels and Belgium's second largest city, was considered one of the hippest spots in Europe. With London prohibitively expensive and Prague passe, it had become, I was told, a favored haunt of the young and beautiful, the fashionable and fabulous, a magnet for aspiring artists and haute couture hopefuls. It was information that gave me—pulling forty and unambiguously unhip—pause. Good food, I thought, but a lot of self-consciously bad haircuts. In anxious preparation for my trip, I bought black pants and cut off my hair.

And so, arriving by train with my friend, Sebastian, one overcast December morning, I found the city's Centraal Station a welcome surprise. The platform hall is a soaring vault of iron girders and glass panels darkened by age, and the station itself is an immense granite structure with the sooty, decaying atmosphere of an untended cathedral. In the café off the waiting room—tarnished gilt on the walls and sullen waiters in white—a handful of people sat at small tables smoking unfiltered cigarettes and pondering the dregs in their coffee cups. I'd recently passed through the uninspiring train stations of Brussels and Berlin, both buffed, polished, and facelifted into bland anonymity, and it was a pleasure to see that one city, no matter how happening, respects the importance of old-world character and, at least for the moment, knows how to preserve it with benign neglect.

As it turns out, the train station was a telling introduction to the city. There is, indeed, a great deal of fresh air and new money blowing down the cobble-stoned streets of Antwerp. Brussels, an easy commute, is the recently-minted capital of the European Union, and Antwerp's port, the third largest in the world, is rapidly gaining ground on Rotterdam. The fashion houses of Paris and Milan might not be losing sleep over Antwerp, but the city has become one of the stopping points for serious shoppers touring Europe for next season's wardrobe. Yet for all of its forward momentum, what I found most powerfully appealing about Antwerp is the way much of the new, the stylish shops and restaurants and the swank cafes where the chic linger to display their thousand-dollar sweaters, is solidly anchored in the past.

Look closely at the stunning silk-screened clothes of Martin Margiela, some with loose threads and exposed seams, and you'll see the designer's reverence for the classical training he received at the rigorous fashion department of Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Or lunch (if you can afford the two-hour wait for a table) at Horta, one of the city's newest and most shamelessly trendy restaurants, just off the Shutterhofstraat in the middle of what is undoubtedly the smartest shopping district in Flanders. Although housed in a brand-new shimmering glass box of a building, closer inspection reveals that the edifice is an homage to Victor Horta, one of Belgium's greatest art nouveau architects, and is constructed around the resurrected ribs of the Maison du Peuple, his 1899 Brussels masterpiece, torn down in one of those "urban renewal" frenzies of the early 1960's.

By the time my friend and I had finished soaking up the atmosphere at the Centraal Station, a wet, heavy snow was falling. We would be in Antwerp for five days,

and impressions of the city would be dominated by the weather, some of the most changeable I, an inveterate New Englander, have ever experienced. Prevailing winds from the west funnel down the Scheldt River from the North Sea bringing low gray clouds one minute, blue skies the next, and then, without warning, drenching rain and a brief period of sleet. Snow, we were told, is a rarity; but rarity or not, it made several appearances.

Because ATMs are hard to find in Antwerp and my friend and I had arrived without Belgian francs (heavy suitcases and light wallets, the trademarks of inept travelers) we decided to walk through the snow to our hotel. Fortunately, distances are deceptive in Antwerp. What, on a map, appears to be a long cab ride frequently turns out to be a brisk twenty-minute stroll, providing you don't get caught in the city's tangle of crooked streets, many of which change names suddenly, as if on a whim. At first disorienting, I gradually came to enjoy this aspect of the city; I have only a vague sense of direction and was constantly tripping over the happy discovery of museums and shops I'd assumed to be miles away.

We made our way down the Meir, the wide pedestrian boulevard that's home to department stores, fast food outlets, and multinational chains. ("What is it," my friend asked, "about the sight of Foot Locker in a foreign land that makes the heart sink?") In short order, we found ourselves standing in the Grote Markt, the center of old Antwerp and the point of reference for most directions to other parts of the city. Along one side are the imposing 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century guild halls, step-gabled, gold-ornamented, and, in their tall splendor, evidence of the historic wealth and power of trade guilds in Belgium. At this time of year, the Markt was ringed with traditional holiday stands selling beer,

roasted nuts and Belgian frites, those wonderful miniature fat delivery systems, twice deep fried, heavily salted and served in cones of rolled up white paper with great dollops of thick mayonnaise.

Looming over all is the 400ft tower of Antwerp's gothic cathedral, Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal. This masterpiece of gothic architecture was built over the course of almost two centuries and completed in 1532, and has survived the ravages of assorted fires, ideological assaults, and revolutionary outrages. Despite an ongoing renovation, the dark interior still bears the scars of history in many of its side chapels and pitted, peeling knaves. Among many other works, Our Lady contains two remarkable paintings by Pieter Paul Rubens: The Raising of the Cross and the passionate Descent from the Cross.

Rubens, it should be noted, moved to Antwerp in 1608 and is still very much a resident of the city. Whether you get in line with busloads of tourists to visit his house in the center of town, or spend a morning at the Plantin-Moretus House, an improbably fascinating and beautiful museum dedicated to the history of printing, or drop into any number of churches and museums, you can't escape Rubens. He turned out canvases with the help of a sizeable staff of painters (someone to do the apples, someone to do the birds), and thus produced more than 2,500 in his lifetime, an awful lot of which seem to have remained in Antwerp. After a few days, I grew tired of all the luminous flesh and abundant food that he specialized in and cleared my palate at MUKHA, the city's modern art museum. There, an arresting and irreverent show by Wim Delvoye focused on the digestive process and its inevitable end product.

Our hotel was a block from the river, undoubtedly a selling point at any other time of the year. Housed in a neo-rococo building that was once a soap factory, 't Zandt is one of a number of small designer hotels in Antwerp that cater to style conscious travelers and feature individually decorated rooms and attentive but informal service. The most lovely of these is De Witte Lelie, a recently renovated 17<sup>th</sup> century building that's a favored spot for celebrity guests and fashion photographers. All the rooms at 't Zandt are optimistically labeled suites, and our suite turned out to be a small single room stuffed with a mixture of impressive antiques (a polished walnut armoire) and undistinguished new furniture (a wicker desk crowded into a corner). Sebastian, who suffers loudly from claustrophobia, rearranged the furniture, piling chairs and a vast ottoman in the hallway outside our door. The freshly denuded corner room was suddenly spacious and, with its four tall windows, bright and cheerful. In fact, the entire hotel was airy and, even in winter, infused with light. The youthful staff, like almost everyone in stores and restaurants throughout the city, was friendly and garrulous in many languages. The roomy courtyards and roof decks, now covered in a fine dusting of snow, promised sunny charm in better weather.

We had as a guide to the city Catherine, an old friend of my friend. A striking, soft-spoken French woman with purple hair and an encyclopedic knowledge of things Antwerpian, she'd moved to the city ten years earlier, and, like many people we'd meet during our stay, had fallen in love with the place for reasons she couldn't quite articulate. There was just something about the manageable size of the city (population roughly half a million), the beauty of its buildings and safety of its streets, and, perhaps most importantly, the air of quiet tolerance that welcomes the city's sizeable community of

fashion students, filmmakers, and gay men and women and seems, in general, to nurture artistic sensibilities.

She explained all of this over dinner at La Rade, a bastion of traditional Belgian cuisine: complex sauces complimenting heavy game and just-caught fish. Housed in a 19<sup>th</sup> Century mansion near the river, the family-owned restaurant showcases décor that manages to be both gaudy and elegant at the same time—marble fireplaces, golden mosaic ceilings, blood-red wallpaper, lines from Dante etched into the back of a marble throne—and the kind of formal, nearly ossified service that left me fearing I was going to have my fingers rapped for eating my sturgeon with the wrong fork.

(The perfect after-dinner antidote to this restaurant is a stroll through the city's red light district, a few blocks north. Antwerp's prostitution and pornography quarter might not be as expansive as Amsterdam's, but it was bustling on the night I visited. Inside the tiny storefronts, women of all ages, races, and shapes chatted on cell phones, read magazines, or posed suggestively. Many were strikingly beautiful, and most, apparently health conscious, had large bottles of spring water beside their stools. A steady parade of men wandered through the pedestrian district, laughing in small groups or making deals with the women through the windows. A slim, dark-eyed woman rapped on her glass and gestured as I passed, and for a moment, I made the embarrassing mistake of feeling flattered by the attention.)

La Rade added to the overall impression I'd form in the days to come that Antwerp has some of the most beautiful restaurants in Europe. A world away from this gilded mausoleum, but just down the street, is the Zuiderterras. Designed by architect Bob Van Reeth, it features polished zinc floors, heated glass walls, and stark black and

white tiled bathrooms with windows shaped like immense portholes. It's perched over the banks of the Scheldt, near a pedestrian tunnel under the river, and looks, from a distance, like a spaceship hovering over the water. I was there at twilight, and for one moment, the sky and the river turned the same shade of murky olive and the patrons looked up from their coffee and salads in hushed appreciation. De Drie Fluwelen is located off the Grote Markt in the house of the late Josette Tanssens, a fashion designer and costumer for the opera. The interior has been left largely as it was when Tanssens lived in the house, the walls of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-Empire drawing room still the same calming shade of gray-blue and hung with the designer's crisp paintings and portraits. It's hard to imagine a more intimate or romantic place to dine than in these small rooms or in the covered courtyard with its burnt-ochre walls. Lunching at De Foyer on the second-floor of the Boursales Theatre is like dining in the rose-colored dome of a cupola. And for more cool, stark beauty, there are scores of new restaurants and cafes such as Hippodroom, Hangar 41, and Cargo where minimalist décor (think polished wood, buttery leather and acres of glass) is complimented by the jutting cheekbones, hand-rolled cigarettes, and artfully deconstructed clothes of the pretty patrons.

Our friend told us that to truly understand the city, you have to visit the diamond district, and dutifully, I went. Diamond cutting came to Antwerp in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and has been a major part of the city's economic life since. By some estimates, 83 percent of the world's diamonds are traded through Antwerp. But for me, it was wasted energy. I have no appreciation for precious gems, and the rows of narrow storefronts west of the Centraal Station, with their glittering wares and morose merchants, left me cold. The diamond trade is a closed world within the closed world of the Orthodox Jewish

community. I meandered around the store fronts, but it wasn't until I walked into Del Ray, a chocolate shop on the outskirts of the diamond district, that I felt as if I'd discovered something rare and valuable: thin medallions of dark chocolate with fresh cream centers flavored with Cognac, champagne, walnuts, cinnamon, and tea, artfully decorated with edible gold leaf. These were the best I sampled in Antwerp, and I left with several boxes of the stuff which I'd ask to have wrapped, as if I were planning to give them as gifts.

The best method for furtively eating chocolates is to plead a sudden urge for solitude and go for a long, sugar-fueled walk. In this way, I happened upon one of the great treasures of Antwerp, Wijk Zurenborg, a small neighborhood of Art Nouveau townhouses a few blocks from the Berchem train station. Brussels was one of the capitals of the Art Nouveau movement in the late 1800's, and the architectural impulse spread throughout Belgium. In this neighborhood, you'll find houses in varying stages of renovation, all rounded windows and wrought iron balconies, cobalt blue window casings and decorative mosaic panels. The sinuous lines of the houses, inspired by leaves and the stems of flowers, seem to give the facades motion, as if you're looking at a reflection on the surface of a pond. (This hallucinogenic effect is especially powerful if you've just consumed a half-pound of Grand Marnier truffles.) The ornamentation on many of the houses is organized around a single image—swans, sunflowers, irises, dawn—and some houses relate to each other thematically. At one intersection, you'll find each of the four corner houses named after a different season, with colors and embellishments that mirror seasonal moods.

Perhaps it says something about the ubiquitous and somehow unintimidating presence of haute couture in Antwerp that after three days in the city, Sebastian, who buys most of his clothes at yard sales, was convinced that the majority of his problems could be solved by purchasing a simple, sleek Dries Van Noten suit.

Van Noten is one of six designers who put Antwerp on the fashion map in the 1980's, a group that became known internationally as "the Antwerp Six." Since then, fashion has become so important to the economic life of Antwerp, and such a boost to tourism, that the city purchased an expansive building off the Nationalestraat for the Flanders Fashion Institute. Set to open in September of 2001, the Institute will house the fashion department of Royal Academy of Fine Arts, several stories of archives, a fashion museum, a restaurant, bookstore and more. Celebrations for the opening will start in May with an exhibit at MUKHA called Mutilate? (an historical perspective on body modification) and run throughout the summer at venues around the city.

Sebastian discovered that a fashionable wardrobe, like an appreciation for diamonds, isn't something you can acquire overnight, even in Antwerp. And Dries Van Noten, like the rest of the Antwerp Six and the dozens of new Academy graduates who've followed in their wake, is a designer you have to work your way up to, sock by sock. A perceptive clerk in a shop suggested he try Francis: International Art Development, a store that features vintage 50's and 60's modern design furniture and previously worn designer duds at remarkably reasonable prices. In the end, he discovered a thrift shop run by OXFAM and purchased a clunky winter coat of no particular pedigree to replace the one he'd foolishly decided to leave at home. But somehow, in Antwerp, it looked more stylish, and that night in café where we sat tasting

Belgian beer, a woman in many layers of soft dark clothes tapped him on the shoulder and asked where he'd bought it.

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