

Culture in Ghent



Houses along Graslei reflected in the canal

One of Belgium's oldest cities, Ghent has a wealth of medieval and classical architecture, as well as areas of urban renewal populated with quirky art galleries and contemporary museums.

Belfort (belfortgent.be; **Sint-Baafsplein**)

Ghent's Unesco-listed 14th-century belfry (91m) is topped by a large dragon weathervane: he has become a city mascot. You'll meet two previous dragon incarnations on the 350-stair climb to the top; there are lifts up some of the way. Enter through the Lakenhalle, Ghent's cloth hall, left half-built in 1445 and only completed in 1903. Hear the carillon at 11.30am Fridays and 11am on summer Sundays.

Design Museum (designmuseumgent.be; **Jan Breydelstraat 5**)

A vast toilet-roll sculpture humorously indicates the back side of this museum, where the collection focuses on furnishings including Baroque,

Art Nouveau, 1970s psychedelic and 1990s furniture-as-art. It's hosted in an architecturally eclectic building that catapults you from the 18th century into the 21st, then drags you back again.

Gravensteen (gravensteen.stad.gent/en; **St-Veerleplein 11**)

This quintessential 12th-century stone castle comes with moat, turrets and arrow slits. It was converted into a cotton mill in the 19th century, but has been meticulously restored since then. The interior has the odd suit of armour, a guillotine and torture devices. The relative lack of furnishing is compensated for by a handheld 45-minute movie guide, which sets a tongue-in-cheek historical costume drama in the rooms and battlements.

Korenmarkt (**9000 Ghent**)

Ghent's best-loved waterfront square, Korenmarkt (wheat market) is where you'll find some of the city's best architecture, including the former post office (now shops and 1898 The Post boutique hotel) and the imposing Sint-Niklaaskerk, a Tournai bluestone church started in 1200.

MSK (mskgent.be; **Fernand Scribbedreef 1**)

Styled like a Greek temple, this superb 1903 fine-art gallery introduces a veritable A-Z of great Belgian and other Low Countries painters from the 14th to mid-20th centuries.

Sint-Baafskathedraal (sintbaafskathedraal.be; **Sint-Baafsplein**)

This cathedral's towering interior has some fine stained glass and an unusual combination of brick vaulting with stone tracery. The cathedral's numerous art treasures include an original Rubens opposite a stairway that leads down into the partly murralled crypts. However, most visitors come to see just one magnificent work – the Van Eyck brothers' 1432 masterpiece, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*.

Sint-Pietersabdij (sintpietersabdijgent.be; **Sint Pietersplein 9**)

Once the country's biggest abbey, St-Pieters was the original centre around which Ghent grew. Its fabulous wealth evaporated after French revolutionary armies stripped its interiors. At the heart of the complex, its vast Baroque-fronted church survived. You can stroll among ruins, vines and apple trees in the abbey gardens.

Stadhuis (visitgent.be/en/town-hall; **Bottermarkt 1**)

Ghent's magnificent and flamboyant city hall was started in 1519 but not finished until 1600, by which time it had been transformed into a Renaissance-style palazzo. It's a prime spot for weddings, but visitor access is limited to one-hour guided visits which can be booked online or through the tourist office.

STAM

(stamgent.be; **Godshuizenlaan 2**) Shoehorned into a 17th-century former nunnery and hospital, this fabulous, striking museum does a very thorough job of explaining Ghent's evolution from prehistory to the present. A giant satellite image vividly illustrates the vast extent of the docks; you could spend hours clicking between interactive map views of Ghent in different eras. City treaties and treasures are interspersed with choose-your-own film clips and a chance to peer into the future. Begin your city visit here.

Universiteit Gent Botanical Garden

(ugent.be/we/en/services/garden; **K.L. Ledeganckstraat 35**) The greatest treasures of Ghent's 2.75-hectare botanic gardens – home to more than 10,000 species – are its glasshouses, which contain an impressive collection of tropical, subtropical and succulent plants, and offer shivering winter travellers what's effectively a free sauna.

Werregarenstraat (ghentizm.be; **Werregarenstraat**)

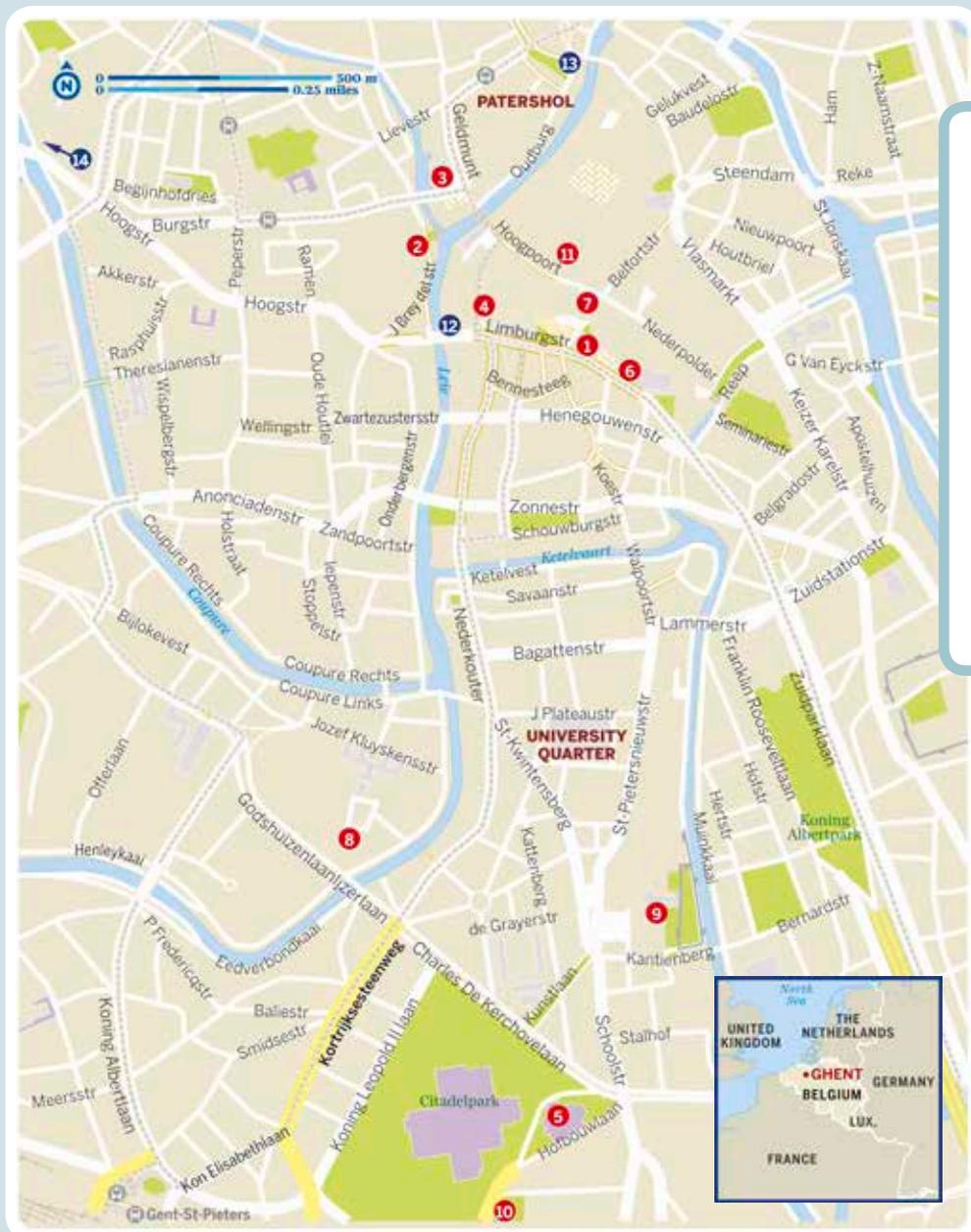
Ghent's attachment to graffiti as an art form began in this central alley, known locally as Graffitistraatje. The website has a live map showing the locations of many graffiti sites around town.

Don't miss

Canal cruises are a great way to see some of the aspects of Ghent you would otherwise miss. On fine days, **Rederij De Gentenaar** often adds an extra 10 minutes to cruises along Ketelvaart, and then tunnels under François Laurentplein to emerge briefly outside the Geeraard de Duivelsteen castle-house (rederijdegentenaar.be).



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🛏 Sleeping

Treck Hostel

Best for a characterful stay (treckhostel.be; Groendreef 51) Treck earns bonus points for creativity and originality: indoor camping. Choose from nine seriously cool vintage vans with themes such as 'graffiti', 'retro' or 'zen'. There are also large or small dorms on offer, and you can pitch your own tent. This is absolutely the best novelty stay you'll find in the city; rest your weary head or meet friendly, like-minded travellers at the bar.

£ Simon Says

Best for coffee people (simon-says.be; Sluizeken 8) Get in quick to snap up one of Simon and Christopher's two fashionably styled guestrooms located above their popular, super-chilled coffeshop in a fabulous part of town. You can't miss it: it's the brightly coloured Art Nouveau house on the corner. You can expect cheery hosts, excellent breakfasts and strong organic coffee brought straight up from the shop.

££ 1898 The Post

Best for an incredible conversion (zannierhotels.com/1898the-post/en; Graslei 16) This beautiful boutique offering is housed in Ghent's spectacular twin-turreted former post office. The property's common areas, guestrooms and suites are dark and moody in a wonderful way, with elements of great design at every turn (though the standard rooms are compact for the price). The hotel also offers fine dining and an ultra-atmospheric bar.

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FURTHER READING

Our *Belgium & Luxembourg* guide (£14.99) includes Ghent in its chapter on Bruges & Western Flanders. Download it separately as a PDF for £2.99.