Belgium’s second city and biggest port, easygoing Antwerp is the country’s capital of cool, with a slew of drinking dens to suit every taste. Read on to uncover the best places to get a beer, wine or genever.

Bakeliet
(facebook.com/BarBakeliet)
On the ungentrified central edge of Borgerhout, in a square facing a lumpsome brick church, this bar is a gem of a neighbourhood local, with old enamel beer signs, a 1964 jukebox, Corsendonk among the brews on tap, and plenty of terrace seating. Plus there’s live music on Friday nights from 9pm.

Bar Leon
(barleon.be)
Backed onto a park and playground, the ever-busy Leon could be the ultimate locals’ local, shape-shifting its way from family afternoon haunt, through early-evening catch-up spot to late-night DJ-led party venue for a younger Borgerhout crew. It’s also an ideal place for those looking for a beer before or after a gig, theatre performance or film at nearby De Roma.

Bar Zar
(zarantwerpen.be)
The decor is a mad mix of voodoo, Caribbean, Pacific and Japanese elements, and piranhas cruise in the centrepiece fish tank. The list of premium rums is impressive, and there are home-infused fruit gins. But Bar Zar’s party trick is excellent fresh cocktails, on draught and swiftly served.

Baravin
(Minderbroedersrui 31)
This wonderful little wine bar combines 19th-century plasterwork, murals and parquetry with a gallery space and a fine range of excellent French, Spanish and Italian wine.

Brouwerij Cafe de Seefhoek
(seef.be/brouwerij-cafe-van-de-antwerpsse-brouw-compagnie)
Antwerp’s new kid on the beer block is reincarnated Seef. To taste its full range of offerings head directly to the fashionably dishevelled brewery café where you can sit amid the Inox brew vessels or outside on a mass of orange plastic chairs at the rough benches that spill onto the post-industrial courtyard.

Cafe Beveren
(facebook.com/cafebeverenantwerpen)
The very antithesis of Antwerp cafechantant is dominated by the city’s last remaining 1930s Decap dance organ, a splendid creation that springs into action with a €1 coin in the slot. Filling the gaps is a Wurlitzer jukebox playing sweetly unfashionable tunes that have all the boozy regulars singing, dancing and spilling beer in unison.

De Vagant
(devagant.be)
More than 200 types of jenever (gin; €3 to €20) are served in this timeless, bare-boards local café decorated with posters and enamel signs. If you can’t decide, try for the jenever of the week. There is a beer selection, too.

Mombasa
(cafemombasa.be)
Overlooking one of Antwerp’s most underrated architectural glories (Borgerhout Town Hall) this superb bar stocks well over 100 beers (including excellent Saison Dupont on tap). It’s doubly exciting for cycling fanatics. The central portrait is of champion racer Stan Ockers, Eddy Merckx’s inspiration and once rider of the bike that hangs from the bar’s ceiling. There’s even a selection of bike-related beers (‘Koersbieren’).

Oud Arsenaal
(dorstvlegel.be)
There is a beer selection, too. Exceptionally reasonable beer prices, brews of the month and occasional party/art space.

Plaza Real
(plazareal.be)
This brilliantly unpretentious shop-room pub is owned by Klaas Janzoons of Antwerp indie-band dEUS. Beers are cheap and Saturday nights can see folks still dancing at 4.30am. Next door, Klaas owns a recording studio and occasional party/art space.

Unusual beers

- Oerbier A stealthy dark ale from Eser near Diksmuide.
- Alpiaide stout Proves that Hoegaarden can go beyond white beer.
- Brugse Zot Bruges’ merry jester.
- Moinette Bio Organic ale.
- Lupulus Excellent hoppy ale from eastern Ardennes.
- La Chouffe Achouffe’s blond, elf-branded beer.
- Vaudrée Blonde Powerful but great-tasting.
- Liefmans Goudenband Strong Flemish sour brown, care of the first female brewmaster of Belgium.

Wijnbar Kloosterstraat 15
(Kloosterstraat 15)
It’s only open 10 hours a week, but this place is a ridiculously atmospheric spot for an afternoon glass of wine, facing onto the courtyard of the 16th-century Mercator-Ortelius House. Named for the map-makers who once lived nearby, the house also hosts a photographic gallery and shop, all with limited opening times.
DRINKING IN ANTWERP

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Sleeping

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<tr>
<td><strong>AB Hostel</strong></td>
<td>£</td>
<td>Best place to make new friends (abhostel.com) This adorable family-run hostel in Borgerhout is a great place to meet fellow travellers while making breakfast in the kitchen-bar, or relaxing in hammocks in the small garden. Helpful staff are a mine of info to help you make the most of the oddball location's opportunities and hot spots. The hostel is on a street 20 minutes' walk east of Antwerpen-Centraal station.</td>
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<td><strong>Bed, Bad &amp; Brood</strong></td>
<td>££</td>
<td>Best for character (bbantwerp.com) In a 1905, Belle Époque-era house near the vast Gerechtshof (former courthouse), this B&amp;B impresses with wooden floors, high ceilings and eclectic furniture. The three rooms are remarkably spacious and comfortable for the price, and rates include breakfast. Prices assume a minimum two-night stay, though last-minute one-night stays are sometimes possible for an extra €10.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hotel Julien</strong></td>
<td>£££</td>
<td>Best for slick digs (hotel-julien.com) In two 16th-century buildings with lots of designer detail, this discreet 21-room boutique hotel has a suave, understated elegance, impressive lounge and bar spaces, and a staff attitude that hits the sweet spot between friendly and professional. Every room is different. Choose pricier ones for high ceilings and exposed beams. The view from the roof terrace is a well-kept secret.</td>
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FURTHER READING
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