

# FLEM FATALE

## Belgium's underrated Antwerp now serves up trendy sights and bites

By JENNIFER CEASER

WITH its perfectly preserved medieval buildings and ancient cobblestone streets, Antwerp might seem content to rest on historic Flemish laurels. In fact, Belgium's second-largest city is a vibrant, cosmopolitan place where avant-garde fashion, cutting-edge architecture and progressive cuisine flourish. In recent years, urban renewal has come to the gritty docklands of the north (Eilandje) and to the former down-at-the-heels neighborhood (Zuid) in the south. Here's how to make the most of two days in one of Europe's coolest under-the-radar destinations.

### EILANDJE

Over the past five years, this derelict industrial area north of the city center has become a hub for innovative contemporary architecture. Start at the **Museum aan de Stroom** (*MAS.be*), a blocky red sandstone-and-glass tower designed by Dutch architects Willem Jan Neutelings and Michiel Riedijk in 2011. Inside are exhibits relating to Antwerp and its maritime history, and on the top floor is **'T Zilte** (*TZilte.be*), a pricey, two-Michelin-star restaurant. It's free, though, to soak up panoramic views from the museum's rooftop — 196 feet up — of the surrounding port and the Scheldt river.

Cross the street for lunch at the 10-month-old **Roest** (*Roest.be*), which serves



Plein Publiek

a simple but well-executed menu of sandwiches, soups and salads in a brick-walled space overflowing with greenery. Beneath the tables, a glass floor reveals old nautical artifacts in the basement below. You may spot Belgian fashion designer Dries Van Noten at one of its reclaimed wood tables — his atelier is just down the street at Godefriduskaai 36.

Ten minutes away by foot is the **Red Star Line Museum** (*RedStarLine.be*); the defunct shipping

company's headquarters was transformed by NYC architecture firm Beyer Blinder Belle in 2013. Some three million migrants passed through this building on their way to America in the early 20th century, the vast majority Eastern European and Russian Jews escaping the rise of Nazism in Germany. Among them was Irving Berlin, née Israel Isidore Baline.

Next, hoof it about 15 more minutes north to the mouth of Antwerp's port, where you can't miss its

newest architectural star: the glittering **Port House**, from late architect Zaha Hadid. The multi-faceted glass structure resembles both a diamond — because the city boasts the world's largest diamond district — and the bow of a ship — for obvious reasons — as it juts out into the harbor (*PortOfAntwerp.com*). Admire it from the outside, or sign up (at least three months in advance) for a 90-minute guided tour by emailing [info@visitantwerpen.be](mailto:info@visitantwerpen.be).



Super Mercado



M HKA

Antwerp is for design lovers, from Zaha Hadid's Port House to contemporary art mecca M HKA. End a day at Plein Publiek, a vacant housing lot that's been transformed into a hip nightspot.

Wind down at the restored warehouse **Felix Pakhuis** (*FelixPakhuis.nu*), which houses a bar and multiple restaurants — including an outpost of Belgium's famed meatball joint **Balls & Glory** (*BallsNGlory.be*).

### ZUID

Zuid (which literally means south) is a former residential area that's become a hub for art as well as trendy new bars and eateries. Start by delving into its museums: **FOMU** (*FotoMuseum.be*) is the premier gallery for international photography; while **M HKA** (*MuHKA.be*) offers a look at Belgium's contemporary art scene.

Antwerp's proximity to



Fiskebar

the North Sea means the city knows a thing or two about seafood. One of the best places to indulge is **Fiskebar** (*Fiskebar.be*), a spare all-white space that is ideal for lunch and offers fresh local catches from crab to Belgium's famed mussels.

Time to shop — window or otherwise. Starting in Zuid and stretching north toward the fashion district are the flagship stores from members of the **"Antwerp Six,"** a collective of the city's most famous fashion designers, who all graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in the early 1980s. In less than half an hour, you can pass the boutiques of **Ann Demeulemeester** (Leopold de Waelplaats, 2000; *AnnDemeulemeester.com*), **Dirk van Saene** (Schuttershofstraat 9; *DirkVanSaene.com*) and **Dries Van Noten** (Nationalestraat 16; *DriesVanNoten.be*). Don't have cash for couture? Ogle the designs of the Antwerp Six, along with those of current fashion students at their alma mater, at the **Mode Museum** (*MoMu.be*).

Rest your shop-weary feet and grab an afternoon drink at one of Zuid's many watering holes. The seven-month-old **Bar Burbure** (*BarBurbure.be*) is a chic, cozy spot that serves seasonal and classic cocktails, along with its own line of spirits called Forest. Free small bites are served on Friday and Saturday. They're delicious — Bar Burbure's owner also runs one-Michelin-starred restaurant **The Glorious** (*TheGlorious.be*) across the street.

For dinner, head west toward the riverfront promenade where **RAS** (*RAS.today*) occupies an iconic building designed by Antwerp architect Bob van Reeth. Dine on seasonal, artfully presented dishes — much of the menu is culled from the sea — while taking in gorgeous waterfront views.

Late-night revelers can make their way to the city's hippest new hangout: **Plein Publiek** (*PleinPubliek.be*), a vacant housing block turned

all-night party spot. A glassed-in courtyard hosts DJs and dance parties, while the ground-level **Café Congé** serves food and drink to Antwerp's cool crowd.

### DON'T FORGET

While Antwerp's outlying neighborhoods are on the up-and-up, visitors shouldn't miss the medieval city center, even during a short stay. The **Hilton Antwerp Old Town** (from \$120; *Hilton.com*) could use a refresh, but the hotel's location can't be beat — right in the center of the city, on the historic Groenplaats square. Across the square, an abandoned post office that dates from 1509 has been given a new life as Belgium's first indoor food hall, **Super Mercado** (*Super-Mercado.be*). Feast on international street food and sip Belgian beer or craft cocktails beneath the original glass ceiling; upstairs, shop at pop-ups from young designers or pick up locally made gin and vodka. There's also nightly live music performed by local bands. Super Mercado is open through May 2017.