

GHENT, SPARKLING AUTHENTIC WALKING TOUR



The old centre of the city of Ghent is known as the ‘kuip’, and this walk will take you around most of it in two hours. You will catch a glimpse of the most interesting buildings and get a quick taste of the many delicacies the city has to offer. It is a treat for the taste-buds, or rather for the eye! Do enjoy it, but don’t leave it at that!

St Bavo’s Square is to Ghent what Trafalgar Square is to London: the heart of the city. It is here, on this island, near the confluence of the rivers Scheldt and Leie, that the city of Ghent was born. And its name actually derives from Ganda, the Celtic word for confluence.

Three powers are represented in this central square: the citizenry by its mighty **Belfry 1**, the intellect by the stately **Civic Theatre 2** and the church, by its impressive **St Bavo’s Cathedral 3**.

The **cathedral** was once no more than a small parish church. But nothing remains of the original chapel consecrated in 942. The oldest parts of the cathedral are two Romanesque aisles in the crypt. They date from 1150.

When, in 1540, Charles V had the nearby **Abbey of St Bavo** demolished to build the Spaniard’s Castle, both the monks and their relics (including a bone from St Bavo’s upper arm) took shelter here in this church. When the diocese of Ghent was established in 1561 the church automatically became a cathedral (‘cathedra’ means ‘the bishop’s seat’).

Inside the cathedral you will find dozens of art treasures to captivate you. In addition to such delights as the overpowering 1745 rococo pulpit and a superb Rubens, this cathedral is privileged to be the home of the most important work in the history of Flemish art: The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb by the Van Eyck brothers.

Opposite the west door of the cathedral **the Belfry** reaches towards the heavens. At the top of this noble watchtower, the dragon keeps guard over both the inhabitants of the city and its freedoms, which it acquired in 1180. This dragon is already the third identical copy of the original 400 kilo copper colossus, and the 1377 original is on display in the watchman’s room.

Since 1999 the belfry has been on the UNESCO World Heritage list of protected monuments. The city’s Tourist Office (where you undoubtedly received both this leaflet and a smile) is in the Cloth Hall that adjoins the Belfry.

From the top of the Civic Theatre, the god Apollo, flanked by his muses, looks down on this superbly renovated square. While water flows from the fountain, it is beer that flows in abundance on the many lively pavement cafés around the square.

So you could spend many happy hours on this magnificent open space, which is where all the roads into Ghent meet. But we shall continue on our way, through Biezekapelstraat, and after only 50 metres find ourselves in a haven of tranquillity. It is as if a hidden musician were playing the soundtrack for your walk, but in reality it will be a student at the academy of music, housed in **the Sikkel 4**. The tower indicates that the house used to belong to an extremely wealthy family that even had its own well (in the 15th century, Ghent had a total of only 5 wells for 65,000 inhabitants!).

We carry on, passing under the wooden shoring (not a bridge!). This brings us to what was once the main street: to the right Nederpolder leading to the Scheldt harbour, to the left Hoogpoort leading to the Leie.

We choose the second and pass the front of the Sikkel (with its torch extinguisher) on our way to the junction with Belfortstraat.

On the left-hand corner of this crossroads is the **Sint-Jorishof** (Cour St Georges) **5**, the oldest hotel in Western Europe, where Maria of Burgundy stayed in 1477. Opposite is the imposing **Town Hall** **6**. One is immediately struck by two of its many architectural styles: on the right is the flaming Gothic of the early 16th century, on the left the much later Italian Renaissance style. The interior has witnessed 600 years of history. Groups can visit it on request.

Now we turn right into Belfortstraat and pass the headquarters of Ghent's police force (familiar from a popular TV series) and head for St Jacob's, epicentre of the Ghent Festivities, a popular festival held every summer. The 12th-century **St Jacob's Church** **7** is well worth a visit, but for now we turn left into Kammerstraat.

The centre for the gay community on the left offers more proof that the people of Ghent have an open mind and a big heart. And the fact that they have a poetic soul is reflected in the Poetry Centre, housed in the Toreken, the oldest building on the **Vrijdagmarkt** (Friday Market) **8** and once the house of the tanners' guild. In this case it is not a dragon that keeps watch over the people of Ghent (and indicates the direction of the wind) but a mermaid.

All the other buildings on the Vrijdagmarkt date from the 18th century or later, and the **socialist 'house of the people'** (Ons Huis, Bond Moyson) was only built in the early twentieth century. Although it is the large Art Nouveau window and horseshoe arch that attract the attention, the whole building is an example of the mixture of styles called eclecticism. It was once the home of Ghent's first people's hospital.

Jacob Van Artevelde is pointing in the opposite direction, however, towards England to be precise. His opportunistic support of the English king meant that in the 14th century Ghent, and by extension the whole of Flanders, was able to remain largely neutral and continue to thrive during the Hundred Years War. Thanks to the 'Wise Man of Ghent', the cloth industry flourished as never before. 660 years after he was murdered by rivals, Ghent is still called the city of Artevelde.

We now leave the Vrijdagmarkt, once the city's most important square, via Meersenersstraatje, where clothes by renowned Flemish fashion designers are to be found. From the Zuivelbrug that crosses the River Leie you can see on your left **Dulle Griet** (Mad Meg) **9**, an impressive cast-iron cannon that was for a long time used as a rubbish bin and a dormitory for stray drunkards, which is why its mouth has been closed up. It has graced this very site for 425 years and has never fired a shot.

Once you have crossed this bridge you are no longer in the 'kuip' but have entered the 'domain of the Counts': this area was originally the property of the count and so did not belong to the city. The first thing you see is two extraordinary houses. They date from the 17th century, a period when very

little was built because the city was anything but prosperous.

The house on the left (Kraanlei 79) is adorned by the Six Works of Mercy. Six? Historians are gradually starting to agree that there was a seventh, burying the dead, which is left out because it is too sombre. Feeding the hungry is at any rate no problem, as this house is a shop full of typical Ghent specialities such as cuberdons (a cone-shaped sweet gum).

The house on the right (Kraanlei 81) pictures the five senses, and also a flute-player, a flying deer and, at the top, 'faith, hope and charity'. If you now went straight on, you would be entering one of the oldest parts of Ghent. Nowadays, this wonderful area with its authentic mediaeval layout, called **Patershol** **10**, is the gastronomic heart (or stomach) of the city.

But we turn left here and walk down Kraanlei to the **Alijn Hospice** **11**. The inviting doorway leads us into a quiet courtyard. It looks like a beguinage, but it isn't. Nor has it ever been one. It was a house of God, built in atonement for the murder of Hendrik and Seger Alijn, and was used as a refuge for women in need. It is now a museum of folklore and appeals to the imagination of young and old. For those who get a thirst from museums, the café on the courtyard offers assistance.

We continue on to Sint-Veerleplein, but stop for a moment opposite The Waterhouse on the Beerside. Isn't that a typing error? Not at all: the house stands in the water and in the distant past all the wine and beer were unloaded along the side. A Mexican tapas bar is now to be found in the house of the wine inspectors guild (their task was to check the alcohol content). Ghent's very own Manneke Pis seems to be looking on with hunger in his eyes. Or has he already had a bellyful?

Looking left, over the bridge, you can glimpse the **Great Butcher's Hall** **12**. Nowadays it offers you the whole range of East Flanders' specialities, from Ganda ham to cuberdons. But for original Ghent mustard you would have to go a little further on, to **Tierenteyn's** mustard shop, where this pungent delicacy is still made on the premises. Did you know that Charles V considered mustard indispensable to the enjoyment of a piece of ham?

Now we continue our walk and approach the next sight with bated breath. The imposing **Castle of the Counts** **13**, built in 1180, now looms up in front of you. Nowhere else in the world will you find such a massive fortress in the centre of a city. Anyone who visits Ghent without going inside deserves the thumbscrews, the dungeon or perhaps even the guillotine (last used in 1861), all of which are on display inside.

While you stand looking at the castle from the count's bailey, you might almost forget you were in the 21st century. But Ghent is a living city that not only preserves its historical heritage, but also has an eye to the future. One example is the giant spider's web, a remnant of an international art event, and like the fortress itself made to stand the test of time.

As we move on, we leave behind us, above the entrance to the **Old Fishmarket** **14** (which in the future will be turned into a multipurpose visitors' centre), Neptune flanked by the Rivers Scheldt (male) and Leie



(female) and walk across the bridge over the River Lieve. To your left you can see the only remaining wooden house in Ghent, while further along on the right we can delight in the splendid facade of 'De Gekroonde Hoofden' (The Crowned Heads). Charles V is the third from the left in the bottom row.

Halfway down Jan Breydelstraat you can stop to enjoy a moment of supreme bliss: the little **Appelbrugparkje** is one of the many hidden gems in the city centre. Opposite is the **Design museum Gent** 15, which combines an unrivalled permanent collection with exhibitions of international allure. It's worth visiting just for the gigantic vase in the courtyard!

But the most attractive sights are yet to come. Only a few metres further on, the view of the **Graslei** and **Korenlei** 16 opens out. From the 11th century, they together made up Ghent's first trading harbour. The buildings to the left and right of the Lieve are unique in their timeless beauty. In many tourist guides this is – quite rightly – classed as one of the finest city views in Europe.

We stay on the Korenlei and walk right up to **Sint-Michielsbrug** 17. If you look out over the water from here, you catch the whole of the skyline of old Ghent in a single glance. Take your time to let this picture imprint itself on your memory. Or at least on that of your camera.

We go up the steps and find ourselves on the bridge itself. The tower of **St Michael's Church** 18 was intended to be 138 metres high, but was never completed. Officially it was a question of safety, but in fact the plans were those of a megalomaniac and the purse could not keep up. Along the waterside behind the church extends **Het Pand** 19. This former Dominican friary and hospital is now the property of Ghent University and is used as a cultural and congress centre.

Walking towards the centre of the city we encounter its commercial heart; the shop-lined streets stretch out to left and right. But we resist the temptation and carry straight on, passing the **St Nicolas' Church** 20, a superb example of Scheldt Gothic, to the **Metselaarshuis** (house of the masons' guild) 21. The facade of this 16th-century building remained hidden for a long time behind workman's houses built at a later date. Now its singular beauty can be appreciated once again. And to cap it all, the Ghent sculptor and folk-singer Walter De Buck, the initiator of the Ghent Festivities, has added six dancing devils that appeal to the eye and the imagination. The East Flanders Tourist Office has now taken up residence in the building.

And so we gradually return to the place we started from. But we pause for a moment at the **Grote Triomphante** 22, a bell cast from the remains of

Klokke Roeland, notorious in its day but smashed to pieces in 1659. It hopes one day to be allowed to return to the Belfry as the 55th bell in the unique carillon. Are you reading this on a Sunday morning? If so, it is quite possible you are at this very moment listening to a splendid carillon concert.

De Bron der Geknielden (The Fountain of the Kneelers) 23, rather disrespectfully referred to by the people of Ghent as 'the pissers', is a masterpiece by Georges Minne, a contemporary of Rodin. These five young men have been staring into the water for more than a hundred years, in the hope of finding the answer to who they are. Unfortunately it is not the answer that rebounds back at them, but the question.

And this brings us to the **Mammelokker** 1, a bas-relief above the entrance to the old warder's house. It depicts the legend of Cimon, who was condemned to death by starvation but was kept alive by his daughter, who breastfed him. In your case, such desperate measures will not be needed: only a few steps away there is a table waiting for you at one of the many agreeable pavement cafés. Cheers!

You can also do this and other walks (some on a particular theme) with a guide:
the Guides Association of Ghent and East Flanders
(Gidsenbond van Gent en Oost-Vlaanderen)
T. +32 9 233 07 72 - www.gidsenbond-gent.be

Tourist Office / Inquiry desk, Belfort (Raadskelder)
Botermarkt 17A - T. +32 9 266 56 60
visit@gent.be - www.visitgent.be

