

## OK, let's make a beer-touristic trip through the old town of Antwerpen

We start - for obvious reasons, at the station *Antwerpen-Centraal*. Recently totally renewed, the old historical part remains a truly superb building, and no place better to observe it as in the central ticket hall. For the little history, part of the funds used are *supposed* to have come from the international refunds China had to pay after the end of the Boxer-rising, but I have some doubt about the veracity of this urban legend. If you come from the tracks, and face the ticket-booths, the main entrance is behind the ticket-salespoint, but the square behind it, *Astridplein*, is still an eyesore, even after its recent "refurbishment". For your info, on the other side of the square begins the "Chinese quarter" - to an American a huge word for a couple of Chinese and Thai supermarkets and restaurants - whilst on your right hand, a dead end is furnished by a great gate, the entrance of the world-famous *Zoo*. Unfortunately, when it was built, both station and zoo were in the middle of nowhere. Today, they're cramped in a seriously busy town...

Better to take the exit on your left hand, which gives on the central Antwerpen road, connecting the "new centre" to the old town. Called *De Keyserlei*, it was once a showcase, but the years have taken their toll, and I find it rather sad. Again worthy of interest, to your left there, starts the Jewish quarter - in Antwerpen better known as the diamond quarter. Antwerpen is still a world centre for diamond trade, and "Jewish quarter" is not an Antwerpener exaggeration, as the *Chassidim* (strictly religious Jews) community in Antwerpen is only bested by that of New York, anywhere outside Israel. Oh, and in the little shops in & around the station and beyond, you find everything golden and diamond you can imagine. Beware, some of the streets are under permanent surveillance with machinegun-armed coppers and CCTV galore...

The right hand side of *De Keyserlei* is of lesser interest, unless you're hungry. In the streets behind the movie halls, there's a truly amazing selection of ethnic restaurants, a bit from all over the globe. Some of them indeed very good, others... more basic. There's also a Russian shop, *Matrjosjka*, where sometimes beers from Lithuania, Georgia or Armenia have been found, as well as the classical Baltika's from St. Petersburg.

But we go on, until, at the end of *Keyserlei*, we cross the "Leien", actually a ringway *avant-la-lettre*. Underneath, there's a metrostation, and it might be interesting to cross underground, only to come up via the escalator at *Leysstraat* (more a square in reality, than a street) and have a literally mounting look at the buildings on both corners of *Leysstraat*, showing best how Antwerpen must have looked at the turn of the 19th century, as they are more or less contemporary with the station, and everything in between was then plain field. They look great, IMO, even if it can be called *kitsch*.

You go straight on, walking on a pedestrian road to a round point, where *Antoon van Dijck* (in England "*sir Anthony van Dyck*") is on a huge pedestal. You go on, following the main Antwerpener shopping street, called *Meir*. It makes a gentle curve, with in the "armpit" of the curve the former city exhibit hall, now a grandiose shopping mall. Well, grandiose, opinions are divided, but I must confess to take to it. The second opening on your left, is called *Wapper*. This street is rather broad, with a fountain and greenery behind. You turn into *Wapper*, and halfway, on your left, is the *Rubenshuis*. IMO, if you visit nothing else, visit this. It is the former house and workshop of the famous baroque painter *Pieter Pauwel Rubens*, and nothing compares to it, to get an impression from Antwerpens' Golden Age, the 17th century. Unless you're there on Monday, because the only thing of interest opened on Mondays in Antwerpen are pubs. Rest is shut.

Buy your tickets in the permanent, hyper-modern stall in the middle of *Wapper*, BTW. After your visit, you're thirsty. Exit *Rubenshuis* going on in the same direction you came (= turn left), and cross one small street (BTW, take a look at that street to your right. This is

"*Schuttershofstraat*", and the groundprices there are nowhere higher in Antwerpen. Exclusive shops come and go - but even for the main producers of *foie gras* in France, this street was too expensive. Apart from a Mediterranean delicatessen, all foodshops are gone.) But you want a beer, and you'll find it at *Oud-Arsenaal*, a couple of bars past the corner on your right hand side. NOT open on Thursdays! Excellent beerchoice, let your choice be determined by one of the blackboards. Beware, if you're averse to cigarettesmoke, however. If you're really hungry, an option is on the left hand-side corner of *Maria Pijpelincksstraat*, *Grand Café Horta*. Owned by Palm Breweries, this restaurant often has unfiltered Palm or Boon lambic on handpump, but its main interest is food. Expensive food...

Horta designed this as the *Volkshuis* for Brussels. Brussels destroyed it, but parts were recovered by a consortium, aided by Palm, and now enrich this superb place, showcase of *Art Nouveau*. But I first wanted to point you to *Oud Arsenaal*, as, if you have to look at Horta's piece, you cannot avoid to look at the *Theater* building behind it. "Designed" (if that word could be used...) in the sixties-seventies, this must rank amongst Europe's most insanely ugly buildings. Less important, but good to know, if you would follow your steps from *Oud Arsenaal* onwards, a couple of decametres to the right is a small square. At the end of the square, the old opera - a jewel... for contrast. Oh, and on the right side of the square are a couple of restaurants and one special pub: *De Duifkens* (the Pigeons), where you'll find the *beau-monde* of artists, actors, operasingers from Antwerpen... And the "*bollekens*" *De Koninck* on draught are always top. The square behind the horrible theatre, left, houses on Saturday the "strangers- market": the best place to buy fresh coriander, hot Vietnamese springrolls, handmade pasta, *halal* mutton or olives on 100 different ways. Only Saturday, unfortunately.

So, we've had our drink @*Pijpelincksstraat/Graanmarkt*, and we retrace our steps to the *Rubenshuis*, and further until we reach *Meir* again. I suggest you halt for a moment, and contemplate the building on your left hand side. The building itself is right on the corner from *Meir* (where the entrance is), behind (on *Wapper*), there's a garden and finally a backpart. The main building is the former royal residence. Inside, not much is left, but the building itself is a nice classical building. The former Be king (Baudouin) left it to the town of Antwerpen, but the probable next king took the furnitures with him. Since thinking is not his forte, I wouldn't be surprised he thought it normal - but that's only my opinion.

Turn to your right and diagonally across *Meir*, there's a small street. The cornerhouse is in the same style as the royal residence, but even nicer. This is called *Osterrieth*-house, and was a project from the former director of the bank "*van Parijs en de Nederlanden*", now a part of the BNP group. He furbished it with art and extraordinary paintings; including two originals by *Rubens*. Where they are now, is anybody's guess. The little street just in front of it, *Eikenstraat*, is the one you need. You go to its end, and arrive this way on the side entrance of the *St. Jacobschurch* This is the first one of the five main historic churches. It is pure gothic, and hence, it never was ended as intended. It ought to have become the largest gothic church in the world, but by the time the money ran out, Renaissance had come and gone, and other churches were already Baroque! It is still a beautiful building, anyway, and it contains the tomb of *Rubens*, some painting by him, and it's a heaven of peace. You have to exit the church via the same way, and then turn right, and right again, so you're in *St. Jacobsstraat*. This one ends perpendicular on *St. Jacobsmarkt*. The pub on the corner, under the church and with the same name, is one of Antwerpens' oldest. In fact, when the megalomaniac *St. Jacobschurch* was started, the town ended just to the other side, and the pub had already that name, probably because here started the pilgrimagetrack to Santiago (= St. Jacob) de Compostela in Mediaeval times. The pub, owned by *De Koninck*, was totally rebuild in the eighties. *Stephen D'Arcy*, main British critic on all things Belgian, loved it, and made it an example for British architects. I'm less over the moon, seen that they put the new bar in the

length of the building, instead of perpendicular, which is the way the pub has been conceived. Oh well.

If you haven't had a "*bolleke*" by now, this might be the moment. Otherwise, you cross *St. Jacobsmarkt*, and follow through *Prinsesstraat*. Pass one small street on your right (take a peek, couple of blocks away is a beautiful tower and building, which, until the day of now, I haven't been able to penetrate. Which makes it all the more tantalizing). Go on to the next corner, where you'll find "*The Highlander*". You've guessed it, Antwerpens' Scottish pub. Great choice of malts, some good beers, very good atmosphere. When it is too crowded ground floor, the cellar (a former butchers') opens.

Opposite, left hand side, is part of the University of Antwerpen, with their most magnificent buildings of "*Het Hof van Lier*". Take a look inside, and you'll have your first glimpse of what makes Antwerpen's inner town so special: the inner courtyards. *Hof van Lier* has at least two. They have a beautiful chapel too. Once somebody chases you out, go to the entrance gate again, and before you turn right, take a look at the beautiful old houses on the other side of the street. On the next corner, turn right again, into *Venusstraat*. Go until the first street on your left, and there, you'll come up yet another inviting square - the *Stadswaag*. In translation, that gives "city scales". Once, that was exactly what was done there. Now, it's a quiet (well, until Friday night...) spot, and in the opposite left corner, you find yet another archway, and, of course, an inner courtyard. You've found 't *Waagstuk*. The name is, of course, a wordplay: Babelfish would probably translate it as 'a piece of the scales', but really it means 'risky business'. Seen its long list of landlords, one would start to believe it. The last change terribly frightened me, but it would seem it is still a good beerpub; then again, the two owners of the buildings are big beerlovers, so...

An idea here might be "*Zeppelin*", brewed expressly for this bar. But it was better once, change of brewer willing. The buildings are very old, and if you happen to chance upon one of the two owners (not: landlord), *Pieter* and *Hans Bombeke*, ask for a tour, with my compliments. Once you've risked enough, go onto *Stadswaag* again, and follow the same direction you had been taking before (meaning: turn left, left again), and you're in *Mutsaartstraat*. This one ends on a kind of square, formed by a couple of streets meeting. On your left hand side, there's a garden. If weather is nice, and schools are on, maybe hop in through the portal, and find out that the Antwerpener Academy has a true little arboretum: most trees are specially searched. Retrace your steps outside, cross the square in still the same direction (*Ambtmanstraat*), which ends in a T on *Keizerstraat*. Probably no street in Antwerpen has so many beautifully preserved, and yet unknown buildings. The absolute top is just in front of your eyes, left hand: the *Rockockxhuis*. Today a private museum (well worth visiting), it used to be the house of a friend of... *Rubens*, but also former Lord Mayor of Antwerpen.

Out of *Rockockxmuseum* (nice courtyard, made a drawing of it, long ago), turn left in *Keizerstraat*, then immediately left again, on *Minderbroedersrui* ("*rui*" means it used to be open water, once - same word as "*rei*" in Brugge, where they still are open, mostly). At the trafficlighs, right onto a pedestrian zone. Go on the little square with fountain, and on your left hand side, admire the Baroque facade of the *Carolus Borromeus* church, designed by... *Rubens* (yes, there's a lot of *Rubens* in Antwerpen...). The guy behind the fountain is a romantic writer, more or less our Flemish Byron. The back of the square is the city library. Cross the square, and go under the archway and turn right. If you would go straight on, on your left would be *Molly Blooms* - once the first and true Irish pub in Antwerpen. Had *ceili*'s there with 20+ musicians - all gone. Beer forgettable. So walk up a bit (in fact, here you see that Antwerpen isn't all flat. Antwerpen, according to the Antwerpeners (or *Sinjoren*, as we're known affectionately) is built upon 7 hills - just as, surprise, surprise, mighty Roma. In reality those 'hills' were some dunes...)

Go left, cross, right - in 10 metres. Oh yes, by this time you know better than to think Antwerpen has no small cobblestone roads... On corner of *Moriaanstraat* and *Leeuw van Vlaanderenstraat*, there's "the" *Quinten Matsys*", Antwerpens' oldest pub, staunch property of De Koninck. Here you might choose a De Koninck beer on draught, that is NOT an amber "bolleke" - maybe a Tripel, a Blonde, a *Winterkoninkske*... Whatever, avoid the fruity summerconcoctions!

Next corner (up) used to be a very basic pub, with a superb counter and bar, and very friendly to strangers - but I fear this one has gone to the big sky for pubs... If it's still there... again a bolleke, I'm afraid. Cross *Wolstraat* onto yet another pedestrian street, *Coppernolstraat*, and follow it until you reach *Minderbroedersrui* again. Now you follow this in opposite direction, going straight on to the stream. *Minderbroedersrui* changes into *St. Paulusstraat*, indicating we're nearing yet another of the big churches; it's at the end, near a... YES! GUESSED! square, but the entrance is before that, on your left hand. Magnificent entrance, with a Calvary. *St. Paulus* church is, with *St. Andries*, the least well-known of the five major churches, and therefore, usually very quiet. Go out again, and now - decisions, decisions. Either you turn back into *St. Paulusstraat*, retracing your steps. In fact, if this is late hour, I vividly recommend aborting your mission, and turn onto the *St. Paulusplein* (the square), and head for the very town centre and bars. Or, turn back into *St. Paulusstraat*, until the next corner, and turn left or right (get yourself a map, now). But if it's broad daylight, and you're adventurous... go out the church left, and turn right into *Oudemansstraat*, then right *Leguit*. Best take your wife with you, because you've just entered the seediest red lights district you'll ever witness. Knocking means not just friendly invitation, but paying dearly... I haven't tried, so far; *Leguit* broadens and leads onto *Falconplein*. A couple of decennia ago, this was Russian maffiaterritory, but it has calmed (died?) down seriously. Turn left on *Falcon*, and, at the lights, cross *Brouwersvliet*, and turn left into *Giststraat* (yeaststreet...). In front of you dooms up a beautiful pub, but the main interest is immediately on your left at *Adriaan Brouwersstraat* (no - that guy was a painter...), were the *Brouwershuis* is. Don't take the meaning wrong: rather than a guildhouse, this featured a pumping mechanism (horsepower), for getting clean water for brewing from the north of Antwerpen into the town, in the 17th century - an imaginative *tour-de-force* from a project developer *avant-la-lettre*, *Gilbert van Schoonhoven*. He had no official status, but virtually owned the town, lord mayor included... Even in those times! *Brouwershuis*, however, is a sadly neglected building, in dire need of repair. There's group of people, beerlovers included, that are trying to save it - maybe give a ring, and tell them tourists would love to visit (if somebody pointed it out to them). Now you have to make a decision - do you want to see everything, or are you getting tired? You could go back into *Falconplein* until its end, turn left, on *Falconrui*, and go to *Hessenhuis* - a 16th century warehouse for the then port, and the *Hanze*-traders - today a cultural centre. Or you could walk even more north, reach the *St. Algondiskaai*, go over the bridge to "*t Eilandje*" - the little isle. This is now yuppie territory, once the most derelict area in Antwerpen. But my gut feeling is, that it won't last. It needs a real marina, and that won't happen. I don't like *t Eilandje*, I confess.

For the die-hard searchers of hidden nooks; from *Hessenhuis*, turn your back to it, and go into the street opposite (*Hessenbrug*), and turn left on *Paardenmarkt*. Follow this until *Rodestraat* (third to the right). Nearly at its end, you'll find yourself following a blind wall on your left hand side. At the far end, there's an entrance with opening hours. Behind that gate, you'll find Antwerpens' beguinage. As to what that is, this needs more in-depth search than I can give here. Afterwards, if the time is for dinner, get yourself a treat, go on the square in front, *Ossenmarkt*, and find yourself *Yamaya Santatsu*, the first and truest sushi/sashimi restaurant in Antwerpen. Oh no, you were tired already at *Falconplein*, and thirsty. In that case, you followed *Adriaan Brouwersstraat* to its end, at the quay on the river, the *Schelde*.

If you're inclined, you can have a look over the water (from here, the bend towards the west, as well the beginning of the international port is very visible), but there's better opportunity later, so I suggest you walk upstream, until you reach "*Koolkaai*" on your left, turning into the town again. This street has become famous the last couple of years, because of a "soap" series on an imaginary pub there, situated around and during WWII. A bit like *Eastenders*, but less long, and more humoristic. Just before *Koolkaai*, you pass a yuppie bar, called *Docks*'. Unless you insist on oysters and Champagne, don't go in, whatever you might have heard about it. Even O&C can be had cheaper elsewhere, I daresay. At the end of *Koolkaai*, take a look at the northern cornerhouse. It has been restored with a lot of aid from the archaeological services of the town, and they are inordinately proud of it. To me, however, it has a feeling of "reinterpretation", despite all its historical value. Don't go that far, turn immediately right into *Gorterstraat*, whilst passing on your left, *Mie Katoen*. Once, this was a beerbar too, exploited by one of Antwerpens' first and most colourful figures in the craftbeerworld, *Louis Verhaeghen*. As most of his ventures, it went down after some time. I fear that beerwise, not much of interest remains, but the courtyard is inviting, and the building itself - well, it's completely out of place; in the very midst of the old town, here's a barn, a huge cowshed from a century or two, three ago - and yet, it's genuine. Amazing.

First corner, turn left, going straight on the side entrance of *St. Pauluskerk*, on *Veemarkt* (that's a square for you), turn right, then left around the church, and go into *Zwartzusterstraat*. This name refers to the "Black Sisters" (their gowns, not their souls), who have their magnificent cloister there (left hand side). Beautiful, but you don't enter - I got in, once, with the then N°1 official cityguide - something like thirty years ago. Since then, *nada*. Don't go this to its very end, turn into *Stoelstraat*, more or opposite the cloister. If you see some flowers next to a house on the pavement of *Zwartzusterstraat*, don't be bewildered. This place was the sad theatre of a murder, a couple of years ago, out of racist motives from a deranged young man. It was a true tragedy, all the more as it has since been exploited to death (unintended wordplay) by the righteous left and more correct-thinking opinion enforcers for their own motives. Well, that's modern life. Go into *Stoelstraat*, to your right. In its gentle bend, you'll see what was long thought to be Antwerpens' only remaining mediaeval wooden facade. Just when it became famous, and restored, the same man I mentioned above discovered two adjoining wooden fronts - backfronts, I ought to say - hidden somewhere (but I have to admit being clueless as to their whereabouts). Whatever, it is a special sight, even when its (restored) newness gives it a slight... Swiss chalet-like feeling, IMO.

Pass the house, and the street ends on a T, on *Zirkstraat*. Virtually in front of you is a true Antwerpener institution: the Spanish shop. And also the first example of two things as typically Antwerpens as the courtyards. Once, next to the normal and smaller streets, old Antwerpen was riddled with small alleyways, dead-ending slops etc. There's several of those, and in fact, if you did the tour as written so far, you've passed a few. Alas, most of those are privately-owned these days, and for security reasons, kept closed. A loss, for everybody genuinely interested in the old town. This one, for a change, is only closed by a fence, so you can look inside. The second thing so typical is the... Spanish character. You can believe me, Antwerpen, for as Brabant-Flemish as it is, is a Spanish town. Despite the terrible misdeeds the Spanish occupants (in the 17th century) did (mass murdering, plundering, arson, persecution, etc...), the Spanish conquerors' ways appealed to the self-conscious, exuberant Antwerpeners; hence the nickname "*Sinjoren*" - nothing but a corruption of the word "*señores*"...! The Spanish shop has been there for as long as I remember, and any real Antwerpener will know it, most even will have purchased there something, some day.

With your face towards the Spanish shop, turn right, and next corner to the left. The restored house on the corner used to be the house of the famous cityguide I told you about earlier. You're now in *Hofstraat*. On your right hand side, there's some open space, and a refurbished

old pub. This place (not the pub) is one of the other few places where you can see that there is some relief in town indeed. On your left hand side, however, at N° 15 – if you're there during working hours (the place is the centre of the town education), you find yet another spectacular courtyard – but with an extra, a tower on the building, not quite correctly called *Pagaddertoren*. These towers are equally typical for Antwerpen as the courtyards - but much less in view. Historically, they were built by the rich merchants in Antwerpens' Golden Age, to have a view over the river, in order to watch out for their ships coming in. The name, however, refers to one particular tower, which housed the *pagador*, the Spanish excise man, whom they had to pay... Go on, and turn right into *Oude Beurs*. On the other side of the street, there used (is? not sure any longer) one of Antwerpens' best Italian restaurants (*La Terrazza*), and in fact, if you would have gone on instead of turning, the Japanese restaurant there serves the best teriyaki, but their classical sushi etc; leaves to be desired. If you're in for a healthy snack, two houses further on *Oude Beurs* than the corner, there's *Sjalot & Schanul*, a vegetable restaurant, which was done by a couple of sympa girls that used to be my opposite neighbours.

Keep going, until the next corner, and diagonally on your right, is one of Antwerpens true gems: the *Vleeshuis* (Butchers' Guildhouse). It's a marvel of Brabants' *speksteen*, bricks and sandstone - and we're talking 13th century, now! It has a number of museum collections, these days, including a musical instruments' section. If you've got the time...

Facing *Vleeshuis* keep the building to your right, and descend the steps. You're in *Repenstraat*, and I want to draw your attention to a little door on your left hand side, in a totally unassuming, nay, ugly concrete wall. Only the sign near the door might tell you more is behind it. This is the *Poesje*, arguably one of the oldest puppet theatres in the world. The puppets, still used today, and repaired a zillion times, are true antiques, and so are the plays. More's the pity, but one cannot visit - the place is only open when the plays are going on, and, traditionally, they are only held ON COMMISSION. Their schedule, I'm told, is reserved for at least a year... Mind you, even with a little Dutch you might have taken up on your travels, attending would be a very strange experience, as you would only understand a word in three, not even mentioning the wordplays, dirty and political jokes... all told in the worst, commonest Antwerpener dialect. People not understanding are bewildered, whilst we Antwerpeners have problems staying on the benches - we're rolling over the floor laughing (I know, I've had once the opportunity to attend a performance - experience of a lifetime).

At the back of the *Vleeshuis* you'll remark a little archway. This gives you an idea about the level Antwerpen had in older times, since then, it has been heightened quite a lot. I'm not sure where (left or right), but you will easily see a piece of wall, made with truly big blocks, and very uneven-masoned. This is the only part left of the oldest townwall of Antwerpen, and in front of you, though the buildings are much newer, is the very oldest part of the town. What you see today, however, are very early 20th century buildings, one housing a truly great Thai restaurant (*Sombat*). Go past it, and you find yourself on the quay again. On your left hand side, opposite the road, is the *Steen*. A little part of the lower wall is genuine, the rest totally rebuilt. On the right of the *Steen*, you see, in the front, the waterprotection wall - for Northwestern storms at springtide - behind it the 19th century protected dockside hangars, and above that, the *Noorderterras*, a walkway amongst the riverbank. Very good to have a look there, but I suggest you keep that for its pendant, the *Zuidtererras* (I don't think translations are needed). Despite being rebuilt, the *Steen* definitely is worth a visit. You go over the waterprotectionwall (mind the cyclists!), and turn left around the castle, to reach the steep ramp that leads to the archway. On your left, is the statue of *Lange Wapper*, the vicious fantasyfigure out of old Antwerpen legends, that played pretty sadistic pranks on his fellow citizens (the two small figures at his feet, are two drunks that went for the sound of a crying baby...). Go up the ramp, and halt just before entering, looking at the top of the arch: there is

an indistinct little statue in bas-relief. This is *Seminis*, a truly ancient image of a pagan fertility God. It isn't intact as - IIRC the 18th century - the Jesuits had him... castrated. Go in, and on the cobblestones, you find yourself in a very cosy-looking part - on your right a Calvary, on your left the entrance to the courtyard of the castle itself. If you go any further in, they'll ask you to pay - maybe worth it, as the castle houses a quite interesting Nautical museum. But look around outside as well, and try to set yourself back a couple of centuries. To my dismay, Antwerpeners have voted labour for the city council for as long as I know, but maybe this indicates some reason: this cobblestone street is the last vestige of the *Steenwijk*, aka *de Burg*, the oldest, once most derelict and densely populated area of Antwerpen. On the turn of the century (19-20th), the last time liberals reigned the city, the riverbank has been straightened, whilst before, it was a twirling bank, with little canals, open docks going in, amongst dirty, small, but utterly beautiful houses. All gone forever, in the name of "progress". Idiots. Retrace your steps downwards (unless you first want to take a peek up the *Noorderterras*), and go on the *Steenplein*. Nice walking area, and it gives, at its other end on the *Zuiderterras*. Climb on the ramp, take a look at Minerva, guarding the Schelde, turn 180° around, and take the best view on the Cathedral, and then start walking the terrace southwards. On your right, the Schelde is about 500m wide, on your left, in the bend at the distance, 1 km. Behind the bend, you can see the grain silos of the port. Just on the other side of the river is the left bank, with the marina in front of the left bank quarter - utterly uninteresting to visit.

I suggest a leisurely stroll on the terrace, now. As it is raised above the hangars, you have a good panorama on the town. The southernmost end of the terrace ends on a spacious, windowy restaurant (pretty good, expensive), and a perpendicular bridge takes you over the quay onto the street again. The building you're facing (on a square, of course) is the right bank entrance of the pedestrian tunnel under the river, opened in 1932. The escalators (if they're still working...) are industrial archaeology. But as I already indicated, the tunnel itself is more interesting than its destination, so instead of entering, we turn left, on the very next corner, marked by a nice old pub, called *'t Zand*. I spoke about *Molly Blooms*, as the original Irish pub, but in reality, this one predates it - just, it didn't START as an Irish pub (or English-spoken, really). But somehow, it figured for years as the place where all visitors from the Isles, planning on extended stay, ended up for info. For ages, it was the only place in Antwerpen, featuring draught (Irish) Guinness. Then, when the UK and Éire joined the EC, and regulations weakened, not only an influx of Irish migrant workers happened (this was BEFORE the Celtic Tiger renaissance), but also a bloom of Irish pubs; which lasted for about 1 1/2 year. Then Belgian Economic Inspection had made it clear, that ANYBODY working in Belgium falls under Belgian Social Protection, and has to be payed and taxed accordingly. Hence, dried-up influx of Irish... and a lot less Guinness around. It's still available at *'t Zand*, as well as in the fake Irish pubs in the town, as there are anywhere in the world.

OK, the street left of the pub is also named "*Zand*", and you follow it, turning back on the quays, but you don't go that far. In fact, you cross one (very narrow) street, and then keep a very keen eye on your right. The street ends on a makeshift square, but just before you reach that, there's a small passage, leading on a courtyard (of course). Just before reaching the courtyard itself, there's a door at your right hand side... and now, there's a snatch. If it's broad daylight, you've nothing lost there. But, if the clock has passed 5PM, you might want to go inside. In fact, in the weekends, you still go in there at 3 AM!

I told you before: Antwerpen is a Spanish town. The best proof is here. When I visited this pub with Tim Webb, for (his) first time, he just raved about it, telling his fellow Brits: "You will find Spanish pubs in Britain. They're obviously fake, the kind of "theme" pub you find everywhere. This is different. This is the real thing. The people eating *tapas*, are eating *tapas* because that's the kind of thing they've always eaten. The vats on the wall, lending the pub its name *De Negen Vaten* (the Nine Barrels), contain the real drinks a Spaniard would like to see

in his pub, Jerez, Tarragona, Madeira, etc. - as well as the tap providing pilsner, since that is what is available in any Spanish bodega. And De Koninck, since they've learned that has more taste."

If you hit *De Negen Vaten* at the right moment, you're in for an experience, an *ambiance* you'll seldom have equalled. Some of the people are Antwerpeners, other are Spanish (just as in Antwerpens best *Tapasbar*, but we haven't reached that yet).

In fact, this is the kind of thing to do on an extended visit, and choose your time accordingly. On our tour, we go out again, and turn with the street from *Zand* on *Vlasmarkt*. Only a couple of years ago, I'd pointed out two interesting pubs. Now, I don't - gone glory. But, apart from a pleiade of superb historical houses, it houses one thing you have to peek in, as well. You're walking UP again, and, just before you reach an intersection with a pedestrian street (*Hoogstraat*), you have a whitewashed building on your right, probably adorned with the white-on-blue Greek cross. This is the Greek house of Antwerpen. Not only the premises are nice, the back is even more spectacular. In clement weather (AND at night, too) this yard - one cannot call this a courtyard any more, this is a true garden - and the terrace is a heaven. Drink some Retsina, eat some horribly sweet Greek pie or just nibble some *mezze*, coming with the drink. I've done that, on a summer's night, well past 3AM, believe it or not. Out again, cross *Hoogstraat*, and find yourself in *Reyndersstraat*. On your right, after scant meters, is an alley onto a courtyard, of course, and on the left side of that courtyard, a nice facade of the former *Jordaenshuis*, once the home of another Baroque painter, *Jacob Jordaens*. Go out again, follow for a short while *Reyndersstraat*, until you see a small pedestrian street on your left. Take a look: left corner is a shop with a lot of bottles, right corner a pub, called *Vagant*, and your back is to a magnificent 16th century burgers' house, known as *De Groote Witte Arend*, today pub, restaurant, concert hall, meeting point and much more besides. All three are linked together. They all were started by the same man, *Ronald Ferket*. Ferket is especially known as the man who started *Vagant*, the jeneverbar *par excellence* in Antwerpen, and that pub has always been an assembly-point for the intellectuals having a good (or drunken) time. The shop sells... jenever (Belgian gin), but also whisky, brandy, beer. He wrote the first book on jenever in Belgium, and is rightly consider THE expert. After *Vagant*, he started the superb *Groote Witte Arend*, featuring classical music in a house that has its own chapel (one can take a look), and more courtyards behind it (not visitable, usually). It's unbelievably large and even when you don't drink something in there, have a look. GWA was the first pub where Hoegaarden white was served in Antwerpen (talking about the very early seventies, mind you!), and one of the first outside Hoegaarden/Leuven. Ferket then sold the place, but bought it back a couple of years ago. The *Vagant* has an upstairs restaurant for cuisine with jenever. My honest opinion: to be avoided. The regular fare in GWA is (was) pretty good, but Ronald's son, would have started now with *cuisine à la bière* there, and it is supposed to be pretty high-brow. Haven't had the opportunity to try, so no opinion given... Go on, on *Reyndersstraat*, until the very next corner, to the right. On the other side of the street, there's *De Herk*, not a bad pub either, and - as *Vagant* - a late opener - this is the area, you understand. However, the house on the corner you're standing, is called *'t Fornuis* (the kitchen furnace), and is Antwerpens' top-restaurant (2 Michelin stars, IIRC). If your wallet is up to this kind of thing, hotly recommended, but they take reservations MONTHS in advance...

So, we turn right around the *Fornuis* restaurant, into *Leeuwenstraat*, and follow its leisurely winding until we see a square on our right: the *Vrijdagmarkt*. Literally, this means Fridaymarket, but the name has a special ring: every Friday (indeed), there's a public auction - of things seized, confiscated, etc.; this for the longest time. If you say about an Antwerpener that he's gone to the *Vrijdagmarkt*, it means he's at his financial wits' end. But for us, tourists, Fridaymarket is much more important for the buildings, which are facing you opposite the

square. The one on the right corner, is the *Prentenkabinet*, a museum of drawings, early prints, etc. Now, to my utter shame, I must confess never have entered it... Unlike the one, 25 metres to the left, which is the *Plantijn-Moretusmuseum*. With the *Rubenshuis*, this is the one to visit: I daresay it is UNIQUE in the world. It houses the virtually pristine, untouched (if restored) and genuine first printing/editing house in the entire world, contemporary machinery included, which was run by *Christoffel Plantijn* and his descendants (*Jan Moretus* was, IIRC, his son-in-law). It is breathtaking. One little remark on the *Prentenkabinet* - though just for info, if you are lucky. If you walk up there, there's a little alley next to it, and opposite, in that alley (*Heilige Geeststraat*), a rather big-looking entrance gate. Behind that gate is not only the umpteenth courtyard, but also the original *Pagaddertoren*. If you can get a peek - the portal is pretty obvious, but I do not know the exact house number.

Turn back, pass the *Plantijn-Moretus* entry, in a very narrow passageway, and look, coming out, on your left: the shop there is worth a closer look. It's the *Cognatheek*, selling exclusively (and exclusive) cognacs and *Pineau des Charentes* from independent, small growers only. Pricey, of course. Opposite this, is another pedestrian street, *Korte Ridderstraat*, which I urge you to follow until just before the next crossing. On your left, is the entrance to another of those back, dead-ending alleys, with one difference: to the best of my knowledge, it is always visitable, always open. If you missed the others, now's the moment. Cross, and enter *Lange Ridderstraat*, but only for a scant 10-15 metres, there, on your left, is a passage, and it gives out on the entrance of the smallest of the five main Antwerpen churches: the *Sint Andries*-church. That it is the smallest, is no wonder, as the St. Andriesquarter is historically the poorest of Antwerpen's original quarters; but it is still a beautiful church. In fact, my wedding mass was in there.

Exit the church to your right, into *Augustijnenstraat*, turn left at *Nationalestraat*, and go all the way to the *Groenplaats* (whilst, around you, discover a lot of shops, selling exclusive clothing, as well as the museum of fashion - this is the area which placed Antwerpen on the map of international fashion. Not my forte, alas.) On *Groenplaats*, two things will draw your attention. Certainly the unequalled gothic Cathedral, and, in the midst of the square, the statue: *Pieter-Pauwel Rubens*, him again. BTW, the Antwerpeners have a saying: "*he falls like Rubens*" - by which they actually mean the statue, not the man. When they tried to erect this statue, they managed to make it tumble down twice, before he actually kept on his pedestal. Never, mind, go up to the cathedral. The entrance is actually further, at the back, on another, much smaller square. You reach it by walking around the church, keeping it to your right. Beware, the pubs all around you are to be forgotten. The smells, however are less easy to ignore. Mind again, most of them sell pretty uninteresting international snack fare, though some are definitely better. The square you reach is known as *Handschoenmarkt*, and apart from the entrance to the 123m high-spined church (third in the world, bested by Köln and Ulm, and equalled by Salisbury, just not by Brugge), you can find a very nice iron-wrought waterwell, attributed to *Quinten Metsys*, another famous (early) Antwerpener painter and craftsman. There's also the *Paters' Vaetje*, a pub that wins the palm of most interesting pub around the cathedral hands down.

The *Onze-Lieve-Vrouwen* cathedral - well, enough is published about that. Two main paintings by *Rubens* (his most famous ones), two organs, several side-chapels with interesting murals and paintings, etc. That, I leave to the official guides.

Exit again on *Handschoenmarkt*, and turn right, just before the well, into the cobbled street, going up to the *Grote Markt* (why this would be more difficult to understand for Anglophones than *Grand Place* beats me, but there you are). The whole of the central square (triangular, as *Handschoenmarkt*, as any old Germanic market), is one breathtaking sight of burgher houses from Antwerpen's golden age, especially the golden pinnacle statues striking the eye. Yet, they are all dwarfed by the imposing town hall, *Stadhuis*, locally aka '*t Schoên Verdiep*, a

scathing translation of the French *Belle-Etage*. This has the particularity to be the first town hall in Renaissance style, built anywhere north of the Alps. Strange, as the middle section is already suspiciously Baroque-esque. For once, it wasn't *Rubens* responsible, but *Cornelis De Vriendt*. If the striking façade wouldn't be enough, they usually adorn it with hundreds of national flags from all over the world – colourful is the word.

For attention, the only thing to rival the town hall on this spot, is the towering statue of *Brabo*. OK, some explanation is needed. Legend will have it that, on the spot of the *Steen*, a giant named *Antigoon*, dominated the Schelde in ancient times. He exacted a cruel toll from the boats passing. He was then challenged and bested by a Roman centurion, going by the name of *Brabo*. The statue depicts a pretty nude *Brabo* throwing the hand of his victim in the River – which is the legendary explanation of the name “*Antwerpen*” as *hand-werpen* (= to throw a hand). Reality will have it different, but it's a good tale.

In any guide to Antwerpen, AND in every beer guide, you will find the pub *Den Engel*, right next to the town hall, mentioned as probably the most typical *café* anywhere in Antwerpen to be found. I beg to differ. It is certainly quite pretty original, very ‘*Antwerps*’, and its claims on perfect *bollekes*, as well as on the fact that every Antwerpener has been in there once in his life, are probably founded.

But my problem with this place is, that everybody wants to come in to gape, as well that during daytime, it is overwhelmed with the *colleagues* with political importance from the *Stadhuis*. And at any time of the day, busy or not, the pub is filled with cigarette smoke, thick enough to be cut. Whether you go in or not, make it dependent on your mood and thirst. Go past it, going anti-clockwise around the town hall (giving a peek to your right, into *Braderijstraat*. A former restaurant-*traiteur* housed there in a spectacularly beautiful building, known as *In St. Jacob in Galicië*. Turn left again, and you're in *Gildekamerstraat*. In the midst of this street, there's the former entrance of the *Volkskunde Museum*, later the Ethnographical museum. For reasons unbeknown to me, they have removed this museum somewhere south, and I've lost contact. At the back of this (former) museum, you can spot the buildings in *Kaasstraat*, which must be the 17<sup>th</sup> century equivalents of modern towerflats.

On the last (south)side of the Town Hall, you will find the statue of the *Buildrager* by *Constantin Meunier* (second only to *Auguste Rodin*) depicting a former worker in the port. You continue left, away from the river, onto *Oude Koornmarkt*. If you're not hungry, the smells will make you, but I suggest you wait just that little bit. This street, which narrows more and more you go further away from the river, houses some spectacular buildings, including one of the eldest, *De Cluyse*, reproduced in the national outdoor museum of Bokrijk, and until a couple of years, housing a subterranean beerbar. Why, I do not know, but the bar's gone... Don't fret – even before reaching this one, there's already something else. Ever been in a snackbar, where they serve *Haute Cuisine* food? Well, try *Popoff*, with a very modern-looking window (though it is actually an old butchery), and see if it would fit your bill. *Popoff* makes a corner, with an entrance: here starts the *Vlaeykensgang*, one of Antwerpens' least-known gems: a corridor (formerly considered streets!) through an amass of genuine old houses. The one you face, upon entering, houses the *Sir Anthony Van Dyck* restaurant. Once the first restaurant in town with a Michelin star, it has wilfully lowered its aspirations, but still offers top-cuisine for absolutely unbeatable prices. Recommended! *Vlaeykensgang* must have had several pendants in history, but most of them are levelled, turned into Godknowswhat. That very nearly was also the fate of *Vlaeykensgang*, which was to be turned into a... parking lot!! But it was saved by the effort of an antiquarian, *Alex Vervoordt*, who turned it into an exhibition place for his wares, and for Antwerpen. Don't think he was ever thanked for it. *Vlaeykensgang* makes too many turns to be described, but I suggest you keep turning left, so you exit on *Pelgrimstraat* (if you find yourself in *Hoogstraat*, retrace your steps). In front, slightly to the right is, once more, one of those

scandals any normal person wouldn't deem possible. In the midst of a series of splendid old houses, restored, is a lukewarm would-be modern façade, in bathtub green, crying its misery over the place. Close your eyes, and look for the pub two houses to the right. *De Pelgrom*, in itself a small place, has a cellarbar downstairs, that defies imagination. Well, if you're not used to them, as actually the whole lot of old Antwerpen is double-cellarred, the lowest level partly being the former (open) sewers; very recently those have been completely restored, cleaned, and opened to the public. The *Pelgrom* once was one of the first beerbars (after *Vagant* and *Kulminator*) but today, is but a sad tourist trap. Whatever, take a look into the cellars (plural), and decide you don't like what's offered (or do...). On your further left, just before you'd reach *Vagant* again, there's *Tapasbar* – another real one. Evenings, *flamencomusic* is played, including *cante jondo*.

Retrace your steps into *Pelgrimsstraat*, turn right into *Oude Koornmarkt* again, towards its end (lots of restaurants, BTW), cross into the *Drukkerijstraat*. This gives onto a crossing with no less than 6 roads. Choose the one most straight in front of you, called *Kammenstraat*, since a couple of decennia the punk-newwave-gothic-whateveryhypestreet of Antwerpen. About midway, you find the façade of a church (formerly *St. Augustinus*), today a centre for old music. Take a peek. Just left of it, restaurant *da Mario* vies for the best Italian food. But hang on, don't go that far yet, and turn, just before *Mario* into *Everdijstraat*. Try not to look at the mastodon insecthive behind the church. Not only it's an utter eyesore, it houses a nasty kind of insects, known as *flikken*. *Everdijstraat*, for nearly its entire length, is old and beautiful on the left side, and ugly on the other. You arrive on *Korte Gasthuisstraat*. Now's a time for decisions. Are you thirsty – or hungry? In case of the latter, and feeling like buying your own stuff, rather than dining at the restaurant, turn left. Immediately on the right, Antwerpens' most legendary bakery. Also the smallest, but great stuff. Go on, and arrive at a little square, known as the *Wilde Zee*. Yes, that's right; *Wild Sea!* What's so wild, I do not know, but the best biscuits and gingerbread, are to be had at *Philips' Biscuits*, the best fish at *Van Bladel*, the best chocolates at *Buries*, the best tea at the *Tea Collection (Wijngaardstraat)*. And the best Italian takeaway north of the Alps, is less than 100m further up *Wiegstraat*, at *Pastaiolo*. NOW you're thirsty, and retrace your steps through *Korte Gasthuisstraat*, until you reach where you entered it (or turned left already, if you where too thirsty above), persevere, and follow the tramlines, who come to meet you for a short while. On the other side of this street, *Lange Gasthuisstraat*, there's, however, another stop: the *Mayer van den Berghmuseum*. Rather than *Rubens*, it's *Pieter Brueghel den Ouden* here, and contemporaries. Stunning, as are the *Maagdenhuis*, and the hospital with the *Elzenveld* centre and chapel, a further bit away. The back of the hospital is bordered by Antwerpens' *Kruidtuin* (a huge herbgarden), quiet in the midst of town noise. But... - just before the hospital, you give in, turn right on *Boogkeers*, immediately right again into *Vleminckveld*. On the left, about 60metres, there's Antwerpens candidate for best beerbar in the world, the *Kulminator*. Named after a super-strong German beer, owner Dirk used to import, it has found its way in the hearts of all beerlovers worldwide. OK, I'm going to give you a couple of hours... days... nights???

Beyond *Kulminator*...

For the die-hard beerlovers, turn right to go to reach *Maarschalk Gerardstraat*, *Terninckstraat*, *Vrijheidsstraat*, *Karel Rogierstraat*, go (and visit? the *Museum voor Schone Kunsten* (fine arts)), and on the diagonal corner, *Verschansingsstraat*, to turn left, and find, on *Vlaamse Kaai*, 't *Pakhuis*, Antwerpens' sadly only brewpub. Look sharp, as it is hidden in an old warehouse, behind a portal entrance. This extremely large open space, at *Vlaamse*, and opposite, *Waalse Kaai* offers a good choice on decent restaurants as well. Or, at *Kulminator*, keep more left, and go via *St. Jorisstraat*, *Mechelse Steenweg* (after

crossing the *Leien* again), for a couple of kilometres, at the very end of former Antwerpen, the main brewery, De Koninck.

Don't for a moment think I've given you but more than a scratch at the surface. It took me 50 years, and I'm still learning. And, if you aspire to drive the Tourist info (on *Grote Markt*) nuts, insists on viewing the *Burgundian Chapel (Lange Nieuwstraat)*, as it is a unique remainder of early Antwerpen. It exists, it exists...

Joris P. Pattyn  
January 2010