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GOING TO

Antwerp

By **SETH SHERWOOD**

WHY GO NOW

Because you're missing the party. Though long known as the center of the global diamond trade - four in five of the world's rough diamonds pass through this Belgian city of a half-million - the medieval-era Flemish port on the River Scheldt has emerged as the top stop on the clubbing circuit between Amsterdam and Paris and an avant-garde fashion capital clipping at the heels of Milan and New York.

Credit for the city's ascent starts with the so-called Antwerp Six, a group of young designers who burst onto the heady London fashion scene of the 1980's. These days, creations by many of them (Ann Demeulemeester, Dries van Noten, Walter van Beirendonck, Dirk van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs and Marina Yee) ignite the international catwalks and dazzle on the racks of their flagship Antwerp boutiques. Cutting-edge clothing is wasted without cutting-edge places to flaunt it, so dance clubs and seductive lounges are rising to the challenge.

At the same time, the Old World charms of the former mercantile and art center - Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck and the Bruegels were all residents - remain well intact. Tolling bells from Renaissance-era churches reverberate off the leaded windows of gabled town houses. Sweet smells from chocolate shops and waffle houses fill narrow, cobbled lanes. Whooshing blue and red trams, like caterpillars imagined by a Japanese toy maker, deliver people to cafes and restaurants in historic squares. Brussels may wield the power in Belgium, but Antwerp supplies the style.

WHERE TO STAY

Not since Isaac and Gopher ruled the Fiesta Deck of the Pacific Princess on "The Love Boat" has slumbering on a ship promised such revelry. Built in the 1950's as a postal vessel, the former Hakon Jarl was tied up to Bonaparte Dock in the late 1990's and rechristened as a hotel-bar-nightclub hybrid called the Diamond Princess, **(1)** St. Laureiskaai 2, (32-3) 227-0815; www.diamondprincess.be. Cabins start at \$96 for doubles, at \$1.24 to the euro. The disco operates Thursday to Saturday.

De Witte Lelie, **(2)** Keizerstraat 16-18, (32-3) 226-1966, www.dewittelie.be, is the city's top boutique property. Tucked inside three adjoining 17th-century town houses, the hotel's 10 rooms and

suites feature white fabrics, dark wood floors, heavy exposed beams and a combination of antique and contemporary furnishings. Historical Antwerp is steps away. Doubles start at \$329, breakfast included.

Down the street from De Witte Lelie is the Hotel Prinse, **(3)** Keizerstraat 63, (32-3) 226-4050; www.hotelprinse.be. With 35 simple, modern rooms and an almost equally central location, the Prinse is a good, moderately priced option for travelers eager to be near the old city center. Doubles from \$152, including breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT Named for the Art Nouveau architect Victor Horta and constructed partly from fragments of a building he designed in Brussels, the Grand Café Horta, **(4)** Hopland 2, (32-3) 232-2815, www.grandcafehorta.be, is a stunning glass-and-steel space down the block from Rubens's old house. The menu updates traditional Belgian dishes like eel, asparagus and meats cooked in ale. Smoked eel terrine gives the white meat a light, buttery sweetness; duck breast in cherry beer sauce is tangy-sweet. Two can eat for \$95, without wine.

For refined dining in an equally arty quarter - across from the neo-Classical Royal Museum of Fine Arts - try Hippodroom, **(5)** Leopold de Waelplaats 10, (32-3) 248-5252. In an airy white dining room with a parquet floor and crimson velvet banquettes, the restaurant serves elegant contemporary food that's slightly adventurous - scallop carpaccio with algae tartare, baked cod with gnocci and fowl gravy - without being gratuitous. A three-course dinner for two, without wine, is about \$100.

The notion of consuming a meal in an industrial wharveside pumping station probably doesn't conjure visions of glamour for most people, but Het Pomphuis, **(6)** Siberiastraat, (32-3) 770-8625, is in fact Antwerp's most aesthetically impressive restaurant. Built between 1918 and 1920, the vast railway-station-style space underwent an extensive restoration a few years ago, and now diners can sit among shining strange machines and contraptions that recall H. G. Wells. The menu is refined surf-and-turf - sole meunière, entrecôte béarnaise, beef tenderloin-complemented by a Bordeaux - and a Burgundy-friendly wine list. Dinner for two runs about \$110, without wine.

WHAT TO DO DURING THE DAY Stroll around Antwerp's Oude Stad (Old City), starting in the central square, the Grote Markt. Surrounding the stony expanse are stately 16th- and 17th-century edifices, gabled and gilded, that once housed Antwerp's powerful merchant guilds (and now hold touristy restaurants serving pots of steamed mussels). Also note the flamboyant 1560's Town Hall, **(7)** a blend of Flemish and Italian Renaissance architecture.

Follow the fluttering noonday chimes a few steps and you'll find the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal (Cathedral of Our Lady), **(8)** completed in 1521 after more than a century and a half of work. Its tapering tower rises over the Antwerp skyline like an intricately carved Gothic stalactite. Inside the church's studded wooden doors lurk some major Rubens paintings, including the triptych "The Descent From the Cross" (1612). Admission: \$2.50.

For a fuller survey of Flemish masters, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, **(9)** Leopold de Waelplaats, (32-3) 238-7809, has works by Rubens, Van Dyck, the Bruegels and others. Admission: \$7.45. Closed Monday.

The three-year-old ModeMuseum, **(10)** known familiarly as MoMu, Nationalestraat 28, (32-3) 470-2770, has been much ballyhooed in fashion-forward Antwerp but is a bit disappointing: it lacks a permanent collection, and its exhibition area is poorly lighted and laid out. "Beyond Desire" (through Aug. 14) analyzes how Western and African styles have influenced each other. Admission: \$7.45. Closed Monday.

WHAT TO DO AT NIGHT Head to the happening Zuid (South) district, cruise through the stylish 20- and 30-somethings at Mogador, **(11)** Graaf van Egmontstraat 57, (32-3) 238-7160, www.mogador.be, and absorb the minimalist-cool décor as the D.J. spins mellow soul and funk (Wednesday to Sunday). Splurge for a bottle of Veuve Clicquot champagne (\$93) and let the preparty begin.

Then hit the clubs. In an ever-shifting night-life environment where many nocturnal experiments have a shorter shelf life than sushi, Café d'Anvers, **(12)** Verversrui 15, (32-3) 226-3870, www.cafe-d-anvers.com, is the bedrock option. Outfitted with faux Medieval décor, the club put Antwerp on the European party map in 1989 and still rules most night owls' agendas. Its top challenger is Club Industria, **(13)** Indiestraat 8-10, (32-3) 234-0992, www.clubindustria.be, a former Docklands warehouse done in a moody, vaguely "Twin Peaks" style.

More populist is the well-attended Café Local, **(14)** Waalsekaai 25, (32-3) 238-5004, www.cafelocal.be, a huge dance joint decorated like a Mexican border town. The crowd is a mix of collegiate types and young professionals. The most popular spot on Antwerp's extensive gay night-life circuit is the Saturday night men-only party at Red and Blue, **(15)** Lange Schipperskapelstraat 11-13, (32-3) 213-0555.

Fans of Belgium's famous beers should try Kulminator, **(16)** Vleminckveld 32, (32-3) 232-4538. The rustic-inn-meets-suburban-rec-room look is abysmal, but with some 700 styles of suds available, few clients are in the condition to notice.

WHERE TO SHOP Bring empty garment bags, because Antwerp can make you rethink your entire wardrobe. Clotheshorses should charge immediately to the fashion district, a playground of top local and international clothing stores concentrated to the south of Groenplaats.

Most famous is Het Modepaleis, **(17)** Nationalestraat 16, (32-3) 470-2510, which flaunts the men's and women's wear of the Antwerp Six star Dries van Noten. Rich colors and patterns from the Far East, North Africa and India infuse his tasteful clothes.

Almost antithetical is Walter, **(18)** St. Antoniusstraat 12, (32-3) 213-2644, a showroom for the aggressively strange, envelope-pushing inventions of Walter van Beirendonck, another "Sixer," and

selected fellow subversives. If you're buying a dress for Bjork or something to assure an exemption from your draft board, the clashing colors and bizarro pictorial emblems of these sinister garments will do nicely.

The pioneering boutique Louis, **(19)** Lombardenstraat 2, (32-3) 232-9872, showed Ann Demeulemeester's first line in the 1980's and has since launched careers of many top Antwerp designers. The discreet shop, where subdued and quietly daring styles predominate, still showcases Ms. Demeulemeester's work, as well as that of Raf Simons, Martin Margiela and other international stars from Antwerp.

Cocodrillo, **(20)** Schuttershofstraat 9A/B, (32-3) 233-2093, is to the toes what Louis is to the body. The hip footwear institution stocks shoes by Mr. Van Noten, Mr. Margiela, Ms. Demeulemeester and other Antwerp-based phenoms.

HOW TO STAY WIRED In the city center, 2Zones, **(21)** Wolstraat 15, (32-3) 232-2400, offers Internet access for \$5.60 an hour.

YOUR FIRST TIME OR YOUR 10TH Navigate the narrow city center streets, hit no-frills Frituur No. 1, **(22)** Hoogstraat 1, and devour some classic Belgian fries with a dollop of mayonnaise (\$4.25). For dessert, sit on the brick terrace at Désiré de Lille, **(23)** Schrijnwerkersstraat 14-18, (32-3) 233-6226, with a waffle topped with whipped cream and ice cream (\$7.35).

GETTING AROUND Antwerp's historical center is compact, so walking around is a snap. Key nearby neighborhoods are easily reached by tram (1 euro). The No. 8 heading south will take you to the Zuid district and the Royal Museum of Fine Arts; the No. 4 heading north goes near the trendy Docklands area. Catch them at the Groenplaats.

Getting There Antwerp is best reached via Brussels (it's 29 miles from the Brussels airport), or Paris. Continental Airlines' Web site, www.continental.com, has fares for its daily nonstop flights from Newark Liberty Airport to Brussels in July starting at about \$925. American and Delta (www.delta.com) offer nonstop flights from Kennedy International Airport to Brussels. American Airlines has daily flights from Kennedy to Paris in July starting at about \$1,000, if booked through the Web site, www.aa.com.

Trains from North Station in Brussels to Antwerp Central Station, **(24)** a 40-minute journey, generally leave four times an hour between 5 a.m. and 11 p.m. A round-trip ticket costs \$14.40. Information: www.b-rail.be or (32-2) 528-2828. The Thalys train makes the two-hour trip from Gare du Nord in Paris to Berchem Station just outside Antwerp up to seven times a day. Standard tickets are \$94.40 each way, though buying them more than two weeks in advance can get you cheaper fares. Information: www.thalys.com or (33-8) 2584-2597.

