

Welcome to Ghent!



Why Ghent?

Ghent is one of Belgium's most vibrant and historically rich cities. Once one of the most powerful cities in Europe during the Middle Ages, Ghent was a major trade hub and the second-largest city north of the Alps after Paris. Today, it is a dynamic cultural and economic center, home to one of Belgium's largest universities and a thriving innovation scene. Ghent is also known for its well-preserved medieval architecture, a lively arts and music scene, and its reputation as the vegetarian capital of Europe.

Starting point: Poel -> Sint-Michael's Church

A little history:

The earliest settlement in this area dates back to Roman times. In 630, a priest chose the confluence of the Leie and the Schelde to build an abbey. The Latin word for confluence is Ganda, from which the word Ghent is derived.

Ghent is known as the birthplace of Emperor Charles the 5th, the Holy Roman Emperor. Until the year 1550, Ghent is one of the most important cities in Europe, with only Paris and London being more important.

Emperor Charles is known to have said: "Je mettrays Paris dans mon Gandt," which is a French word play on the word Gand for Ghent and gant for glove. What he is saying is that he would put the city of Paris in his glove, or the city of his birth, Ghent. A subtle play on words, since the French do not hear a difference between "Ghent" and "glove".

A few centuries later, the French writer Alexandre Dumas arrived in Ghent by train, and after seeing the industry, he called it the "Manchester of Belgium".

1. St. Michael's Church



Saint Michael's church

The brewers' guild wanted to build the largest church in Flanders (15th century). The goal was to build a tower of 130 m high, but due to financial problems they had to finish at 24 m. (at the time of the Tower of Babel it was communication problems, in the 15th century it was financial problems).

2. St. Michael's bridge



On Saint Michael's bridge

⇒ Go down to the Korenlei, look towards the Graslei.\$

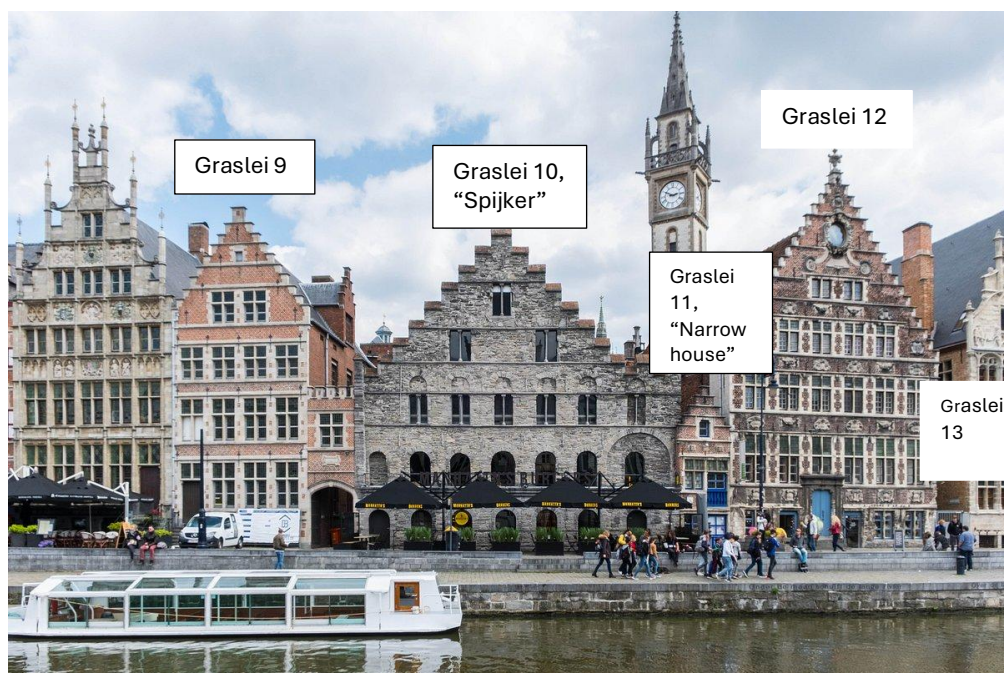
(Public toilets at "Pakhuisstraat")

3. Graslei



This part of the Leie, between the 2 bridges, is one of the oldest parts of the city. It was already a busy port in the 11th century. Ghent did not produce wheat itself, but it was imported from France. The city had the right to store the wheat for 2 weeks after its arrival, so that in case of famine or war, they would always have a supply of wheat at hand.

When the wheat arrived, it first had to be measured.



- ⇒ Take a look at Graslei 9, the first house where wheat was measured (1435). (Where the sacks of grain were weighed.)
- ⇒ The guild house of the grain measurers, is Graslei 13 (1698).

- ⇒ Graslei 10, is the oldest remaining house on the quay. It was built in the year 1200 and is called "Spijker", which today means nail. But originally it came from the Latin word "Spicarum", which means grain store (Spica = wheat).

This building was used to store the sacks of grain. If you look closely, you will see that the front wall is slightly bent over. This was done to make sure that the sacks of wheat that were lifted up to the higher floors would not damage the front wall. So the front is slightly crooked.

Between the houses there were small streets, which served as a direct way from the water of the Leie to the Korenmarkt in case of fire. After the wheat was stored for 2 weeks, it was taken to the "Korenmarkt" (grain market) to be sold. The grain was transported through these small streets.

Later, as more and more houses were built of stone, the fire hazard diminished, and tiny houses were built to fill the gaps between the existing buildings.

But not all the houses you see here are the original ones. In 1913, Ghent hosted the World's Fair. In order to beautify the city, a team of builders was sent to the city to find the most beautiful facades, which they then copied on Graslei.

4. Boat trip

5. Grass bridge



- ⇒ Continue to Vegetable market (via Pensmarkt)

6. Vegetable Market



Groentenmarkt (vegetable market)

The vegetable market was used for public executions, with the gallows placed in the middle of the square. Convicts awaiting execution, as well as those who had committed crimes but were not on death row, were placed in the stocks above the gallows. (Above the 'Galgenhuisje') You can still see the iron rings that were put around the necks of these convicts.



Galgenhuisje (Gallow house)

Originally, this square was the fish market (from 1366 to 1689), where the fishermen came to sell their goods. The original height of the ground is at the level of the Gallow House, which is up to where the river came and the fishermen sailed their goods to the docks.

When the Meat Halls were built, the fishermen demanded direct access from the river to the market, so passages were built under the building where they could sail their low flatboats up to the square. You can still see the remains of these passages.

Later (17th century), the "Vismijn" (fish market) was built on the other side of the river and the market changed to a vegetable market. Farmers continued to use the passageways to reach the market from the river.



Oude Vismijn (Old Fish market)



In the meat market only high quality meat could be sold. The "Gallow House" was used to sell intestines and leftovers to the poor. After the tour, if you want to buy typical local food, you can go back to the Groot Vleeshuis or buy original mustard at Tierentyn (Groentenmarkt 3).

7. Cross over the bridge towards Gravensteen

If anyone wants real Belgian fries, in an original paper cone, come back here, to Frituur 't Puntzakje.

8. Gravensteen



In the 10th century, a Count of Flanders used this natural high dune to build a medieval bastion. After some time it was rebuilt in stone. The castle served as the residence of the Counts of Flanders until they moved to the more comfortable palace at Prinsenhof.

But even in recent years, the castle has seen some remarkable events. It all began on Wednesday, November 16, 1949. The price of beer had been raised by 1 franc (4 instead of 3 fr). The students of the University of Ghent did not agree. They decided to occupy the castle until their demands were met.

At 2:30 p.m. the students gathered in this square. Some of them entered with tickets. Once inside, they caught the tour guide and cleared the way for all the other students to enter for free with a pushcart filled with rotten fruits and vegetables.

The students lined up on the battlements and began throwing rotten fruits and vegetables at the crowd gathered in the square. But the bystanders just laughed and waved at them.

Suddenly 2 policemen came by on their bikes. At first they waved, but when one of them got a rotten projectile on his head, they called for reinforcements and the fight began. The fire department had to come and tried to scare them off with the fire hose.

By 10 p.m., the police had found the weak link in the defense system: an unprotected tower. They were able to reach it with their new fire department ladder. Many students were arrested, but some managed to escape. The price of beer remained the same.

The event was so spectacular that even the New York Herald Tribune reported: "The students of Ghent are the greatest in the world, though they are not American."

Every year, the students commemorate the event by retaking the castle. And now the police won't chase them away. (Memorial at the entrance of the castle)

⇒ Pass the Old Fish Market

9. Bridge of Heads



Bridge of heads

The name Head Bridge, built in 1274, meant as much as the most important bridge into the city. But because this bridge was the place of executions by beheading, it was also called the Beheading Bridge.

In 1371, a wealthy father and his son were sentenced to death by beheading for rebelling against Count Lodewijk of Malle. This evil count was curious to see which kind of love was greater: the love of parents for their children, or the love of children for their parents.

So the Count decided that the one who would cut off the other's head would be granted mercy and live. A heartbreaking, impossible choice.

In the end, the father was able to convince his son: "I am old," he said. "You have your whole life ahead of you. If we cannot agree on a decision, we will both be beheaded. Why not save one life, the most precious one?" He continued to plead until his son agreed.

Both were brought to the place of execution (this bridge). The son, who was brought forward first, waits emotionally for his father. The father is then brought forward, prepared for execution, his neck exposed.

Both father and son shudder at the pain and hurt they know will follow. Finally, the sword is handed to the son. With all his might, the son lifts the sword. And the blade falls out of the hilt!

The blade fell and stuck its tip into the wooden floor of the bridge. This was seen as divine intervention and the Count himself immediately ordered their release.

To remember this remarkable event, a statue of the father and son was placed on this bridge in 1406, until 1799, when it was renovated. The last execution by beheading took place in 1585.

In the STAM Museum there's a painting by Pieter Pieters depicting this scene. In 2011, a scene of hope was transformed from the painful history of this area.

10. The monumental gateway

⇒ dating from 1689. It shows Neptune watching over the Scheldt and the Lys.



11. Veerleplein



Veerle-plein (Square Veerle)

The Italian artist Alberto Garutti created the installation "Ai Nati Oggi", which literally means: to those who are born to us today.

There is a direct link from this square to all the maternity wards in the hospitals of Ghent. In the maternity ward, there's a big red button that proud parents can press to announce the arrival of their newborn child. The lights on the square will flash!

(Public toilets at Sint-Veerleplein 9)

12. Kraanlei

The name Kraanlei literally means "wharf with crane". It was probably so named because of a wooden crane that was used to lift heavy goods from the boats that docked there. The crane was operated by Kraankinderen, who were actually small adults who used their own physical strength to lift the crane.

13. House Alijn



This is an almshouse, a form of housing provided for the poor, elderly and sick people of the community. This particular almshouse was built as a reconciliation after a blood feud of many years between two families of the Ghent nobility. The Rijm and Alijn families.

Hendrik Alijn, a young fuller ("volder", someone who works with wool, cleaning and treating it so that the fibers are closer together, making it waterproof), had fallen in love with Godelieve, the daughter of a rich weaver.

Her father refused to allow the marriage because he had already given his daughter in marriage to a man named Simon Rijm. Simon was a rich nobleman, also a weaver.

But Godelieve had fallen in love with Hendrik Alijn and refused to answer Simon's proposal. Simon's pride and feelings are hurt, and he angrily seeks revenge on the young fuller.

Together with his brother Goswin and some companions, they plan to murder Hendrik Alijn. They went to the church of St. Jan (now St. Bavo's Cathedral) and murdered Hendrik, his brother Seger and an altar server in 1354.

Hendrik was a magistrate, so his murder was not only an offense against the dignity of magistrates, but because it took place in a church, it became a double offense.

The Rijn brothers were declared outlaws and their houses were immediately demolished. They managed to avoid capture for several years. But in 1361 Simon asked for pardon, which was granted, but only if he went on a pilgrimage of penance and made an annual payment to build and maintain an almshouse on this wharf.

The parents of the murdered Alijn brothers offered to use their house on Kraanlei to build the almshouse as a sign of their mercy.

⇒ Continue on Kraanlei to number 79, House Temmerman.

14. House Temmerman

A great place to buy typical Ghent sweets, cookies and other delicacies. The house is called "The 7 works of mercy".

Now we all know that Jesus only mentioned 6 works of mercy.
Can you help me point them out on the facade?



⇒ Continue over the bridge and turn left towards Dulle Griet.

15. Dulle Griet cannon



16. Friday Market



Since 1199, there has been a market here every Friday. To put that in perspective, that was 300 years before Columbus arrived in America. The square is about 1 hectare. In the middle you can see a statue of Jacob van Artevelde.

Ghent is often called "Artevelde stad" after Jacob. He played an important role during the 100 year war between England and France in the 14th century. Flanders was under French rule, but dependent on England for wool and textiles. Jacob worked out that Flanders gained a neutral position and thus did not lose its economy.

The statue points to England. But the legend says it points to the house of his murderer. He was stabbed in the back while giving a speech from one of the gables of a house here on Friday Market.

(Public toilets at "Vrijdagmarkt")

17. Het Toreken

This building was the guild house of the tanners. You can see the market bell (original from 1511), which rang the start and end of the weekly markets. The iron ring around the tower was the storage place for the rejected cloth.



⇒ Turn left into Serpentstraat.

18. Serpentstreet



In the past, this street was called the 'Walking Passage'. On the corner of the Vrijdagsmarkt there used to be an inn run by a terrible woman. She was called the “serpent”, the Viper.

Over time, people came to call it the Serpentstraat. Many people passed through it every day, as it was the link between the Friday market and the town hall. However, when the larger parallel street (now: Belfortstraat) was built, it lost its importance.

For the architects and historians among us, this street has some original buildings, from the traditional 16th century houses to the plastered 18th century ones.

On the right side of the house at Serpentstraat 6, you can see an ancient “firewall”. In the late Middle Ages, most houses were made of wood, so to minimise the risk of fire in the often very narrow streets, these brick firewalls were built to prevent fires from spreading to other parts of the street.



⇒ At the end of Serpentstraat turn right into Onderstraat, and take the first left into Werregarenstraatje. Also called the “Graffiti street”.

19. “Graffiti street”.



When you think of graffiti, you often think of modern teenagers ruining the city. But think again. The first graffiti artists were the Romans!

The word graffiti comes from the Latin word “graffiari” which means “to carve”. Roman soldiers used to carve their names and ranks into the walls of the places where they had been.

About 20 years ago, the mayor of Ghent decided to give this street to the graffiti artists (he even gave them some pots of paint, showing how little he knew about graffiti, as it is sprayed, not brushed).

20. “Hof van Ryhove”

In Flemish, to describe someone who is very wealthy, you say they are 'steenrijk'. Literally: rich in stone. This word came into use at a time when only the incredibly wealthy families could build houses of stone.

A good example of this is Hof van Ryhove, which you can see on your left. The foundations date back to the 13th century, when a "stone-rich" family decided to build their mansion here. If you look closely at the garden, you will see that it is divided into four parts, each dedicated to a season.



In those days, gardens were not for sitting in, but to look at from inside the house. Lords and ladies liked to show off their gardens, but always from the inside.

The daring lady who wanted to enjoy some sunshine would go out for short periods and sit in the garden. As there was no lawn or deckchairs, grass was planted along the low walls so that she could rest comfortably in the sun.

The owner of the family, Lord of Ryhove, was one of the key figures in the founding of the Calvinist Republic of Ghent. He used his own cellar to imprison Catholic priests and nobility. The house as it stands today dates back to 1518.

In the 19th century, this street, like many others between our starting point and here, were "rendez-vous houses". Houses filled with ladies of easy virtue. It's clear that the graffiti is a better use of the street.

⇒ At the end of Werregarenstraatje (graffiti street) turn left onto Hoogpoort.

21. Town hall (Hoogpoort)

The people of Ghent had big plans for their town hall. They were rich and wanted a building that reflected that. This town hall would be the envy of the whole province. So, at the beginning of the 16th century, they started planning and building. The popular style at the time was late Gothic, as you can see on this page.



This went well until 1540, when the Emperor Charles began to interfere.

Although he was born in Ghent, he was so annoyed by the rebelliousness of the 'Ghentenaars' that he decided to punish them by making them walk through the city in their pyjamas with a noose around their necks. This is why the Ghentenaars are also called "noose-bearers".

As if this humiliation wasn't enough, he demanded all the money the town had saved for its town hall. So construction had to stop. It took more than 40 years of fundraising before they were able to continue this epic building.

But by then the popular style of building had changed, to Renaissance. So they continued in that style, the site of the Hoogpoort.



Who remembers the names of the different pillars?

- ⇒ The bottom ones are Tuscan, the middle ones Ionic, and the top ones Corinthian.

22. Belfry



Construction of the Belfry began in 1313. It was used to store the city's privileges and important documents. The dragon was the symbolic guardian of these documents, but also watched over the city.

Until 1442, the church of St. Nicholas was used as a watchtower, with lookouts on its tower. But when the belfry was finished, they moved here. But more about this profession later.

The city had to be watched over from the watchtower by guards and trumpeters to warn of invasion, but more importantly of fire. For this purpose they used the Klokke Roeland, the storm bell, which began to ring in 1325.

Below the belfry are the 'Lakenhallen', which means 'Cloth Hall'. All the cloth, wool and linen produced in Ghent had to be brought here for quality control and storage.

The fencing guild still meets here. Later it was used as a prison, and the entrance to the jailer's house is right there.

This is now the Tourist Information Centre, where you can get city maps and tickets for all the museums. There are free toilets in the basement.

23. St. Bavo's cathedral



Transmarus, bishop of Tournai and Noyon, is said to have dedicated a small church to St John the Baptist on this site in 942. A Romanesque church followed in the middle of the 12th century, traces of which can still be seen in the crypt with its mural paintings.

In the Middle Ages, Ghent became a powerful city, which made it possible to build bigger and richer churches. In the 15th and 16th centuries, St John's Church was rebuilt in the Gothic style, and in the mid-16th century it gradually took on its present form.

In 1536, by order of Emperor Charles V, the centuries-old abbey of St Bavo was dissolved. After the Ghent revolt in 1540, most of the abbey was demolished and converted into barracks.

The abbot and monks of this abbey were secularised and given the title of canons. Their chapter was moved to the church of St John, which was then called St Bavo's Church.

In 1559, the diocese of Ghent was established and St Bavo's Church became St Bavo's Cathedral. In the long line of bishops of the diocese of Ghent, the figure of the seventh bishop, Antonius Triest, must certainly be mentioned.

The rich Baroque interior of the cathedral, as we know it today, bears the powerful imprint of his work.

24. St. Nicholas Church



St. Nicholas Church is a church in the Belgian city of Ghent, on the Korenmarkt.

It is no coincidence that St Nicholas was chosen as the patron saint of this parish church. The wealthy merchants around the medieval Graslei and Korenlei had financed the construction of the church, so they chose the patron saint of merchants and the patron saint of sailors, boatmen and bakers: St Nicholas of Myra.

Historical facts are not available, but St. Nicholas is said to have been bishop of Myra, a coastal city in Asia Minor, in the first half of the 4th century.

The church is a good example of Scheldt Gothic architecture. The unique feature of the church is the bell tower, a lantern tower that illuminates the transept. The tower is 76 metres high.

If you like, you can go inside the church and find the Tetragrammaton! When you enter, look for a painting in a side altar and you will see it. This will end the tour on a spiritual note.